



# FAKE DATING

*Zac Delavin*

CELEBRITY FAKE DATING - 2

SKYLA SUMMERS

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# BOOKS BY SKYLA SUMMERS

## **Celebrity Fake Dating Series**

[Fake Dating Adrian Hunter](#)

Fake Dating Zac Delavin

Fake Dating Zac Delavin  
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# Trigger Warnings

Though this book is intended to be a fun and steamy read, there are sensitive elements in the story involving sexual assault and stalking.

*To all of my readers who enjoyed the first book in this series. You encourage me to write more tropey, smutty books every day. Thank you for your love.*

# Chapter One

---

## Mina

It's three in the afternoon when I decide to call a spade a spade: Zac Delavin has stood me up.

I'm sitting alone like a loser at Bertolo's Café in Brooklyn, with the waitstaff constantly asking me if I'm ready to order food, and me constantly saying, "I'm waiting for someone." I kept my hopes high that Zac would show up, until a minute ago when an elderly waitress gave me a sympathetic smile and said, "I don't think they're coming, sweetie."

I drink the last of my coffee, which, in hindsight, was a terrible choice of beverage for my jittery nerves. Even on my best days, with the amount of energy I have, I shouldn't be a coffee drinker.

The coffee doesn't taste great but I can see why Zac suggested we meet here. The cafe is fancy with alfresco dining that is sheltered from the sidewalk with a lattice covered in ivy. Besides me, there are three other customers here. I get it—as a celebrity who's received a lot of mixed press due to his divorce, Zac wants to meet someplace secluded where people and photographers don't swarm him. What I don't get is how he can be so rude as to stand up his future colleague. We haven't been introduced yet, and this is not a great way to start our professional relationship.

Giving Zac one last chance, I open my phone to check if he has canceled. An empty email inbox stares back at me, like all the other fifty times I've checked in the last thirty minutes. As with all those fifty times, I open our email chain to see if I've misread the date and time of our meeting.

**From: Mina Midnight**

**Hey Zac!**

**This is Mina Midnight :) :) :) I'm SOOOO excited that we'll be working together!!! You are the epitome of musical theater. I cried tears of joy for an entire day when I got the call that I'd been cast as the lead female vocalist in *The Velvet Cigar*. This is the first lead role I've ever had, so I am going to bring my all and slay. And you as the male lead is just perfection! We're going to be amazing on stage together!**

**I'd love to meet you before rehearsals for the musical begin so we can get to know each other and discuss our characters. My schedule is flexible so let me know if/when you have time to meet. I can give you my phone number if it's easier to communicate that way.**

**Sending you my most exhilarated regards,**

**Mina.**

**Gah!!! I'm so excited!!! :)**

Next, I read Zac's scroungy reply, which came a week later.

**From: Zac Delavin**

**Monday, 2:30. Bertolo's Café in Brooklyn.**

**Sent from my iPhone**

That's literally all he said. No friendly banter or phone number exchange. I feel like a fool for how much excitement I expressed in my email to him. I can deal with Zac's lack of enthusiasm for emojis and exclamation marks, but at least give me the curtesy of a *Hi Mina*. Then there's the super professional and elite *Sent from my iPhone*. Come on, seriously? Zac couldn't spare the two seconds it takes to delete the automated text and replace it with his name?

Calling it quits to this meeting that has flopped, I thread my arm through my purse strap and stand from my table. Pissed off, I shove my phone into my purse, not looking where I'm walking, and yelp as I smack straight into something.

*Somebody.*

That somebody clutches my shoulders, steadying me from falling to the ground. When I look up at their face, of course the person is Zac Delavin. It's only natural that I embarrass myself in front of my soon-to-be colleague who



is... damn... way more attractive in real life than on screen. He's more handsome than when I saw him on tour in my home country of Australia, where I stupidly bought a five hundred dollar front-row ticket to see him play Raoul in *The Phantom of the Opera* because I was a die-hard fan of his.

Zac is far more attractive than the day I performed for him during that ridiculous masterclass he hosted for fourth-year students at the Sydney Conservatorium. I swear, I will *never* get that masterclass out of my mind. Zac didn't offer me the time of day while I sang a solo. His focus had been on his phone the entire time.

But unlike those two occasions when I saw Zac in the flesh, this is the closest I've stood to him. Close enough to see each individual strand of black hair, the hazel flecks in his blue eyes, and the strength in his clean-shaven jaw. I can even smell the hypnotic scent of his woody cologne. This close up, my fangirl ways are returning, making me forget how much I don't like him and how terrible his punctuality is. More importantly, his good looks are distracting me from the one rule I made for myself upon landing this job: be professional around Zac Delavin.

I step back from his grasp to clear my thoughts. There's no greeting or smile on his behalf. No sign of recognition. Standing in front of each other right now, I'm positive he has no clue we've met before. Which, I mean, fair enough. It was over three years ago that I sang for him during the masterclass and it's not like we even spoke. He actually walked out of the room mid-way through my performance, which I've spent years trying to understand and being offended over. But I at least thought he'd recognize me from the casting photos that all production members in *The Velvet Cigar* received.

"Sorry." Even that one word out of Zac's mouth is dismissive. He straightens his suit jacket while scanning the café, not bothering to meet my eyes as he apologizes for bumping into me—if you call this an apology.

With several Tony awards under his belt and having played the lead in multiple film adaptations of musicals, Zac is arguably the most famous male vocalist in the musical theater industry. It's clear that the fame has gone to his head. Note to self: when *The Velvet Cigar* becomes a big hit and I'm famous, don't turn out to be like Zac Delavin.

"I'm late for meeting someone," he says with the tone of a goodbye.

"Yeah. Me."

Zac's gaze shoots to me, narrowing in confusion. "Mina?"

"Yep."

He studies me for another long moment, his eyes lingering on my pink hair. The pastel color is a new addition to my appearance. *Cotton-Candy*, the box dye calls it. My roommate and I dyed my hair on a whim when I got the good news about landing this gig. I'll give Zac the benefit of the doubt and assume that's why he doesn't recognize me.

"Should we get this over with?" he asks.

Wow. He certainly has a way with words. I could scold him for being thirty minutes late. I have the greatest urge to walk out on him for the inconvenience he's caused me, but this musical is the most important thing in the world to me.

Since the age of ten, I've dreamed of being the lead in a hit Broadway musical. After graduating with a Bachelor of Musical Theater three years ago, I moved to New York with a hunger to make my dream a reality. And for the past three years, I have been a chorus girl with no other purpose than to look pretty in the background. It doesn't pay the rent. Waitressing does. The biggest role I've ever landed was the side character, Rumbleteazer, in *Cats*, which is still an accomplishment, but come on, it's *Cats*. That is the most memed musical in history. *The Velvet Cigar* is a breakthrough for me.

To be honest, I'm not even sure how I got picked for this role. I'm talented enough, I know that, but I'm a nobody in this industry. So, yeah, I want to tell Zac off for being disrespectful of my time, but I can't let my dislike for his behavior interfere with my career's success. Instead, I push down my pride and let my excitement bubble to the surface again as we take our seats opposite each other at the table.

The elderly waitress returns with a grin. "He's who you were waiting for?"

I look around the café, realizing everyone is staring at us. There aren't many people, considering Zac's arrival now brings the customer tally to five, but all the staff are peeking at us too.

"Can I have your autograph?" the waitress asks Zac. "My daughter loves you."

Without saying a word or even responding with a smile, he grabs a pen out of his pocket and scribbles on a napkin.

I order a cheesecake, which makes me feel ridiculous when Zac only asks for water. As soon as the waitress leaves us, Zac says, "Get used to the staring. Once a public announcement is made about *The Velvet Cigar* cast, you won't be able to go anywhere without people watching you and taking

your photo. And trust me, fame is not all it's cracked up to be. You'll wish you had your privacy back, especially when details about your personal life are leaked."

Ever the mood-killer, he is.

When I first accepted my role in *The Velvet Cigar*, my agent warned me about the influx of publicity I would receive. Honestly, I'm excited about the fame. I've waited so long for this moment in my career, and I'm not shying away from it. Unlike most musicals, *The Velvet Cigar* started off as a book. Its fandom is huge, on par with *Twilight*. People are so obsessed with the romance between the characters that the book was adapted into a movie. I remember lining up for the second book's midnight release when I was seventeen. Now, the first book is becoming a musical, and I can't believe I'm cast as the female lead.

Ignoring Zac's negativity, I give in to my excitement, my voice climbing a full octave. "Being cast as Seraphina is the best thing that has ever happened to me."

Zac's phone pings.

Without excusing himself, he retrieves his phone and busies himself reading a message. His brows crease and he groans.

"Is everything all right?" I ask.

"Divorce lawyers. I'm sure you've heard all about my divorce," Zac mutters, still preoccupied with his phone. "My private life seems to be anything but private."

Yes, I am aware. For the past year, all I've seen of Zac in the media are photos of him looking hungover, and not because he's been out partying all night. Gossip sites say he's barely left his apartment and hasn't been working because he had a mental breakdown when his wife filed for divorce. I would like to have sympathy for him, but I've heard rumors he cheated on her, and that's where I draw the line.

"Look, I can only stay for twenty minutes," Zac says while texting. "What did you want to talk about?"

Jesus Christ. "The musical. Obviously."

"I'm listening."

Coming into this meeting, I had been nervous, given Zac's reputation, but psyched myself up, knowing I'm good with people. Ever since I was young, my mother has always told me I have charm and charisma. From the number of friends I have, I know my mother speaks true. But this meeting is going far

worse than I had imagined. I didn't ask to meet with Zac so I could talk *at* him while he reads emails from his lawyer. We're co-stars and are supposed to be in this journey together.

"Listen, Zac." I try to be forceful with my tone, but it's an act that physically hurts and makes my insides shrivel up. I *hate* confrontation. "This musical is important to me. A job like this may be common for you but this is my chance at a breakthrough in the industry. I'd appreciate it if you could—"

My words are cut off by Zac's phone ringing. He answers the call, and a moment later he's growling into the speaker. "No. This divorce is costing me so much damn money. I want it over with *now*."

Wow, his temper went from zero to one hundred in a matter of seconds. I sit silently across from Zac like I don't exist, listening to him discuss what assets his wife will get in the divorce. It may be petty, but I thrum my fingernails on the table to give him the hint that I'm waiting.

He doesn't even notice.

After five minutes, when it's clear Zac has no intention of ending the phone conversation anytime soon, I stand from the table and head for the exit.

Zac doesn't call my name. He doesn't follow me. I can feel the blood boiling beneath my skin. What an insufferable human Zac Delavin is. And I have to work with him for the next several months of my life.

When I reach the street in front of the cafe, I come to a halt at an even worse realization. Not only do I have to work with him, but our characters in the musical are lovers. Once rehearsals begin, I'll have to spend every day *kissing* Zac Delavin.

## Zac

"It's good to see you're getting back on track," Darius says, helping me box the few belongings Penny left in our apartment before she moved out.

Barely any furniture remains. It was so generous of her to clear this place out and leave only our wedding photos, wedding china, and all our wedding gifts, as if she thought I'd want the memorabilia. All of it is going in the trash as soon as I get it in boxes. Our nine-year marriage is something I wish I could forget about.

I shove everything from the fireplace mantel into a box. Glass photo frames shatter in the process, so I rattle the box to assure extra breakage. "I'd

hardly say I'm getting back on track. This divorce is sending me broke."

"Yeah, but you're about to be working again. You didn't shave for a few months, wear anything other than a tracksuit, and barely left this apartment, so I'd say you're doing well for yourself."

Considering Darius looks like a male model with his dark hair always groomed to perfection and his wardrobe consisting only of designer suits, I know it's been a struggle for him to watch me in this slump.

On the outside, it may appear like I'm making progress. Seven months ago, Penny and I returned from the vacation in Australia that was supposed to save our marriage but had the opposite effect. And for seven months, I've been bitter and twisted inside. I'd still be doing all those things Darius mentioned if it weren't for this divorce forcing me off my ass with the need to earn money again.

Though I have die-hard fans, my public reputation has suffered tremendously since the divorce hit the media. People think *I'm* the one who cheated. My career has suffered because I've been too miserable to accept any jobs. And then when I did try to get a job, no one wanted to work with me, believing my current mental health and reputation makes me a wild card. I'm lucky to have secured the male lead in *The Velvet Cigar*, and it's only because I'm friends with one of the producers and convinced him of my dedication to the role.

"How long until your divorce is official?" Darius asks.

"Thirty-one days."

Soft laughter trickles in from the kitchen. I tilt my head to the side, peering through the doorway, and groan. Verena is sitting on the edge of my kitchen counter with her fiancé Adrian wedged between her legs, the two of them laughing between kisses.

"Stop it," Verena giggles, swatting Adrian's hands away when he grabs her ass. "Our friends are in the next room."

Adrian smirks, stroking a lock of brown hair behind Verena's ear. "They can't hear us. But fine, I'll behave. And just so you know, as soon as we get home, I'm spending the entire night fucking you."

"No complaints here." She gives him one final kiss, then slides off the counter and pours four glasses of wine.

I glance away the moment I realize they're returning to me and Darius in the living room. I should have looked away long before, not only to give them privacy, but to prevent this shit feeling of jealousy growing in my chest.

Verena and Adrian enter the room with the distance of a five-foot pole between them, pretending they're not desperate to touch each other. They put on this act for me. Darius confirmed it months ago. As Verena's personal assistant, he is constantly around her and Adrian, and he says they never stop kissing. They have no shame. So I know this whole act of not touching each other is for my benefit, to spare me the memory of being in love.

But the way they look at each other is all the reminder I need. Verena could be far across the room from Adrian, and I still catch him looking at her like he's counting down the seconds till he can be alone with her. And Verena... She's always smiling. Always stealing glances at him.

Don't get me wrong, I'm happy for Verena. She and Darius are my closest friends. I've known Adrian for seven months now—since the cursed Australian getaway we all went on—and I'm happy for him, too. He's a great guy. I just wish I could have what he and Verena have. I *did* have it once, with Penny. She was so kind and loving. My high school sweetheart. I don't understand how a person like that can turn so manipulative. You think you know someone, but you don't. I can't see how I'll ever trust another woman with my heart after Penny's cheating.

Verena passes me and Darius a wine, joining us with the packing. "It's such a shame you're moving out of this apartment. The city views are amazing."

Yeah, it's a shame. I did love this place once. I love living on the Upper East Side. And Verena is right, the glass walls are its prize feature, offering stunning city views. But I can't stay here. Not when everything about this apartment reminds me of Penny and costs the price of a kidney.

When I look at my surroundings, I'm reminded of the life I worked so hard to give Penny, but that she never appreciated any of it. I get angry whenever I walk into the bedroom, because all I can think about is how toxic Penny was and that she gaslighted me into believing *I* was the problem in our marriage. The woman who I once thought would be my forever is now nothing to me except a multi-million-dollar divorce fee. I was young and stupid when I got married and didn't sign a prenup.

"I need a new home. Some place that's mine and isn't tainted by Penny," I tell Verena while shoving more crap into boxes. "This divorce is costing me all my happiness and so much fucking money."

Verena swirls her wine. "New beginnings are good. But I'll lend you money if you're struggling. Say the amount and it will be in your bank

account tomorrow.”

I could say any amount and she would come through on the offer. Verena is a fashion designer with her own reality show. She’s on Kardashian level of fame, with bodyguards and private jets.

“I’m not taking your money.” My life savings will be flushed down the toilet and I’ll be living paycheck to paycheck—a very different lifestyle from what I’m used to, but I’ll survive. “Can we just... change the subject?”

“The offer is there if you need it.”

Adrian assembles a box and passes it to Verena. “So, now that you’re returning to semi-normality, you should join me and Darius in the gym.”

I should. I used to work out a lot. But I have no motivation anymore. These days, I don’t want to do anything. “I’ll pass.”

“Man, come on. Working out will do yourself some good. You’ve lost muscle definition. It will be good for your head too.”

I *have* lost muscle definition. But when you’re as big as I was and you lose muscle, you still have a ton of it.

“Not right now,” I tell him. “I’ve got too much to deal with.”

“Zac’s right,” Verena says to the other two in her supportive voice. “He’s making small changes. One step at a time is all he needs to focus on.”

For fuck’s sake. My friends are great, and God knows I haven’t been the easiest person to be friends with in the last few months, but the pity in Verena’s voice is one thing I can’t handle.

“Rehearsals for *The Velvet Cigar* start in three weeks. We rehearse for six weeks. The show will open in late September.” My subject change isn’t the least bit subtle and an equally bad topic to mention. I cringe, thinking about how my meeting with Mina went yesterday afternoon.

“What’s that look for?” Adrian asks, taping a box shut.

“I met with my co-star yesterday and—”

Darius cuts me off. “The hot one you asked for?”

“Hot one?” Verena gasps. “What hot one? Is Darius referring to a guy or girl?”

I glare at Darius, annoyed at him for steering the topic in this direction. “My female co-star. And I never said she was hot. Darius made that judgment when he asked to see a photo of her.”

Verena raises a questioning brow at him. “Since when do you think women are hot?”

He holds both hands up by his chest, surrendering. “Hey, just because I’m

into men doesn't mean I can't gauge a girl's attractiveness." Very few people know Darius is gay. Only his closest friends. "Verena, she is sex on legs. Zac, you need to sleep with her."

"Dammit, Darius," I groan. "Do you have any idea how unprofessional that would be? Not to mention, I'm getting divorced."

"Which means your cock needs someone to play with it."

"Verena, make him stop."

She laughs, placing more of my belongings in a box. "I kind of agree with Darius."

"Same," Adrian says. "When was the last time you had good sex? No, scratch the good part. Sex in general."

The depressing thing is I don't know the answer to either of those questions. "Mina is not my type. And she's young. Twenty-four, I think. There's like a six-year age gap between us."

"Six years is nothing," Verena says. "Let me see a photo of her."

"I'm not in the mood for this conversation."

"Show me a photo, then I'll drop the topic."

Knowing how persistent she is, I choose my battles and give in, opening my emails on my phone. I bring up a photo of Mina on the casting list and pass it to Verena.

Her eyes light up and a suggestive smile spreads across her lips. "Not your type, huh? Zac, this girl is everyone's type. I'm questioning my own sexuality looking at her. And you asked for her?"

I roll my eyes. "It's not like that. My producer friend showed me the top selections for the female lead. When I saw Mina was on the list, I told them to choose her. I heard her sing a few years back and her voice has stuck in my mind ever since. She's incredible."

Verena's smile grows wider. "Well, Mina is gorgeous. And you're going to kiss her."

"My God, it's like talking to a schoolgirl with you. Obviously I have to kiss her for the musical. But that had nothing to do with the decision. And besides, there is no chemistry between us. I didn't leave the greatest impression on her. I actually think working with Mina is going to be a challenge."

"Message her and make amends," Adrian says, winking at Verena.

They smile at each other, no doubt remembering how they were on no-speaking terms for seven years before they fixed their relationship during our



vacation to Australia. The vacation where Penny asked for a divorce. Ugh... *everything* reminds me of her. To make matters worse, I have to return to Australia in a few months, to the exact island in the Whitsundays where my marriage ended, because Verena and Adrian decided it's the perfect location for them to tie the knot.

Darius tilts his head back to finish his wine, then rests the glass on the fireplace mantel. "Can we back up a minute and get to important details? Zac, you said you'll be kissing Mina."

"As actors," I explain.

"What kind of kissing are we talking about?"

## Chapter Two

---

### Mina

“Zac and I will have to do every kind of kissing you can imagine,” I rant to Jordan as we walk side by side on a pair of treadmills at the gym. “Pecking. Making out. We even have a goddamn sex scene.”

“Okay, but a sex scene with Zac Delavin?” Jordan says in between gulps of water. “You have to admit, that’s hot. I’m totally jealous. I’m surprised you’re not more excited. You’ve had a crush on him for as long as I can remember.”

“He’s hot, but he’s also a jerk. He cheated on his wife.”

Jordan turns up the speed on her treadmill, advancing to a brisk walk. “You don’t know that for sure.”

“Regardless of the cheating thing, I told you about that time I sang for Zac in uni. He was being paid to give me advice, but he was on his phone the whole time and left during my performance.”

“I’ve heard this story a thousand times,” she drones, wiping her forehead with a towel. “You’ve also complained about the cafe meeting with Zac a thousand times over the last two days.”

“So? Isn’t this what best friends are for, to listen to each other’s problems on repeat?”

“True.”

Jordan and I know every detail about the other’s life. We met in high school during our grade ten drama class and bonded over our love for the performing arts. When we graduated high school, she went on to train in dance while I studied musical theater. We made a pact that once I finished

uni, we would move to America and make all of our dreams come true: me, a Broadway star; Jordan, a burlesque dancer and the next Dita Von Teese. She looks a lot like her too, with pale skin and long black hair.

Three years we've been in New York together as roommates. We started as struggling artists, and still are to some extent. Some weeks it's a struggle to pay rent. She's a backup dancer at a burlesque bar and the pay isn't great. We both waitress at a restaurant called Canary Lounge as our main source of income, which I plan to quit as soon as I start earning from *The Velvet Cigar*. I'll be earning big money too, like wow-is-this-reality-or-am-I-dreaming kind of money.

Jordan clutches my arm and gives me an eager shake. "Babe, I still can't believe you'll be playing Seraphina."

Neither can I. I have been obsessed with Seraphina's character since I first read *The Velvet Cigar*. Her story is set in the 1920s. The time period alone has me so excited about the musical. I can only imagine how amazing the set and costumes will look. Seraphina is a sultry jazz singer at a speakeasy called The Velvet Cigar. She's so beautiful and plays the role of a damsel in distress, but is secretly the ultimate puppet master, using her sexuality to manipulate everyone around her. A true femme fatale. And her romance with Talon... Ugh, kill me now. It's perfection, filled with angst and lust.

"By the way," Jordan says, entering a jog. I don't know how she can hold a conversation while jogging. She's fitter than me, that's for sure. "My brother messaged me earlier today. He's flying to America and needs a place to crash for a few weeks. I told him he can sleep on our couch. That all right with you?"

"As long as he doesn't try to sneak into my bed, I don't care."

It will be nice to see Ryan again. Our relationship has never been defined in clear terms, but we've always managed to maintain a friendship. Ryan is the hot older brother I'd see when hanging out at Jordan's house as kids. I lost my virginity to him when I was sixteen. We've hooked up a few times over the years and he's fun to be around but isn't boyfriend material. I've never dated him, nor have I ever wanted to.

While I consider myself a free spirit, Ryan is on a whole other level of free spirit. There needs to be a definition in the dictionary that describes how carefree Ryan is. I can't count the number of times he's disappeared without warning, only to turn up a week later in a different country, partying or living

off the earth or finding a new faith. One time, I heard he was living in Tibet and studying yoga. It doesn't surprise me that he's turning up on our doorstep.

"What's Ryan doing in America, filming a travel vlog or something?" I ask. While I can't handle his free spirit, his millions of followers on YouTube love him for it.

"Who knows with Ryan. I can never keep up with him."

My phone vibrates from its post on the treadmill docking station. The screen lights up with a notification—and holy shit, it's an email from Zac. From his clear disinterest in me when we met up two days ago, I'm surprised he has anything to say. Needing all my concentration for this, I place both feet on either side of the moving treadmill belt and open the email.

**From: Zac Delavin**

**Rehearsals start in three weeks. We should meet up beforehand and sing a couple of songs.**

**Sent from my iPhone**

Oh, so now he wants to meet up? I show Jordan the email. Her nose puckers and she says, "I can't tell if he's angry with you or he just has a terrible email manner. Is he not even going to apologize for his behavior at the café?"

"I doubt Zac Delavin ever apologizes for anything."

"How are you going to respond?"

What I want to type in my return email is how thrilled I am to sing with him for the first time. I may have spent the last two days complaining about our café meeting, but there's no denying how amazing his voice is. Working with Zac in an artistic sense is a dream come true. I want to jump up and down and share my excitement. Send smiley face emojis and a hundred exclamation marks. But look where that got me the last time I emailed him.

My thumbs start typing. "Let's see how Zac likes a taste of his own medicine."

**From: Mina Midnight**

**K.**

**Sent from my iPhone**

Jordan laughs. “That’s hilarious. But I’m also freaking out. I can’t believe you just sent that to Zac Delavin.”

My inbox chimes with a new message. Wow, that was fast for Zac, considering the one-week-turnaround from our last emails.

**From: Zac Delavin**

**K? Is that short for ok? I’ll book a room at the studio. 3 p.m. tomorrow.**

**Sent from my iPhone**

**From: Mina Midnight**

**I’m busy during that time.**

**Sent from my iPhone**

“You’re not busy—oh... Good one,” Jordan says.

**From: Zac Delavin**

**What time, then?**

**Sent from my iPhone**

**From: Mina Midnight**

**5 p.m.**

**Sent from my iPhone**

After a minute, when there’s no reply, I place my phone on the treadmill and continue working out. Thirty minutes later, there’s still no reply. In Zac Delavin language, I guess that means 5 p.m. tomorrow is confirmed.

**Zac**

“I’ve been thinking,” Verena says through my phone speaker as I sit in the back of an Uber, stuck in the dense New York City traffic on my way to meet Mina. “I want to set you up with my friend.”

“I’m hanging up.”

“Zac! Hear me out. She’s not interested in anything serious. Just some fun, which I thought would be perfect for you.”

“What you’re saying is your friend only wants to have sex?” I haven’t been with anyone in a long time, and while I miss sex, I’m not that desperate. Being casual with a woman isn’t something I’ve ever been interested in. I was with Penny for twelve years, and before her there were only three girls in high school I slept with, who were all my girlfriend.

“Well, yeah, I guess she only wants sex,” Verena says. “Look, Hannah is nice once you get to know her—”

“Wait. Hannah? As in Jannah? The same person who stole your ex-boyfriend from you? You purposefully mis-pronounced her name because you hated her so much.”

“Yeah, Jannah.” She laughs nervously. “But I call her Hannah now. And we’re friends.”

“What the fuck, Verena? How are you friends with the woman who stole your boyfriend? Also, you’re trying to set me up with a cheater? Real great match, considering what I went through with Penny.”

“Will you let me explain? Turns out, she didn’t steal Jake from me. He was the one who did all the instigating, and she was none the wiser till months into their relationship. Anyway, Hannah and I bonded over how much of a dirtbag Jake is. She’s great. I thought you and her could—”

“No, Verena. Forget it.” I hang up and swear beneath my breath. I’m not in the mood to be set up right now, not after dealing with lawyers and Penny all day.

I swear again when I see the time and that I’m late for my rehearsal with Mina. So much for making amends on the shitty first impression I gave. My repeated tardiness is going to do wonders for my working relationship with this girl.

The traffic light turns yellow, and I feel the car slow down. “You could have made that light,” I tell the driver.

“Yellow means slow down, not speed up.” He smiles at me in the rearview mirror and starts humming a song. My hands scrunch into fists. I need to punch something. What must it be like to feel so carefree and happy that you’re mindlessly humming a song while stuck in peak-hour traffic?

It’s 5:20 p.m. when I arrive at the studio. I jog to catch the elevator and press level three, then pull out my phone, finding several email notifications from lawyers, property managers, and the most recent one being from Mina, which arrived in my inbox one minute ago.

**From: Mina Midnight**

**You're late again. I contemplated not sending you this message because I don't want to seem petty and unprofessional, but three times now you have proven how unprofessional *you* are, so I figure you're ok with unprofessionalism. Please tell me this little act of being late is not going to become a habit of yours. I don't care how good looking you are (which I'll admit, yes, you're a handsome guy, but that's beside the point), how many fan girls want you to sign their boob (yes, I saw that footage on YouTube), or how much of your fortune your wife is trying to**

Her message ends there. But right below it is another one.

**From: Mina Midnight**

**I accidentally hit send before I finished the email. Sorry. As I was saying, I don't care about your wife or divorce lawyers. I'm not famous like you, but my time is still valuable and I have a life that doesn't revolve around waiting for the "amazing" Zac Delavin to show up.**

**Frustrated regards,**

**Mina**

First of all, I have no clue what she's talking about when she says three times I've been unprofessional. Secondly, I don't know whether to be amused or not. I'm trying not to be a total dick, but the way her messages read, I'm imagining a Pomeranian stamping its foot when it's angry. *Frustrated regards*. Fuck, I'm actually smiling. Who writes that? And the way she typed *amazing* in quotation marks...

I might get along with this girl after all.

The elevator doors open, and there Mina is, right in front of me with a bag over her shoulder, ready to leave the premises. "Oh, so *now* you turn up."

Every time I hear her speak, her Australian accent takes me by surprise. It's not one of those stereotypical lazy ones, but an accent that could almost be mistaken as British. The sound of it is such a breath of fresh air in this city.

I told Verena that Mina isn't my type, and I meant it. From the short interactions we've had, she's all smiles and is too excitable. Her energy is through the roof. She operates on too high of a frequency for me. At least, that was until I pissed her off.

But appearance wise... yeah, I lied to Verena. Mina is fucking gorgeous. She steps into the elevator with me and presses the ground floor button. "If you'll excuse me, I'm heading home."

The doors slide shut, but I hold my hand out to keep them open. "I'm sorry I'm late—"

"You were late at the café too."

"I'm sorry for that as well. But we're both here now, so we may as well sing."

She folds her arms and taps her foot, staring at the elevator monitor.

"I tried to get here on time. The traffic was a nightmare. I really want to sing with you."

"Keep groveling. Maybe I'll reconsider."

I groan internally. "I saw your audition tape, and it was fantastic. I'm glad that you're playing Seraphina."

She scoffs, like she doesn't believe me. "Fine. I suppose if we practice now, it will save me from having to reschedule and waste more time while I wait for your late arrival again."

Mina steps out of the elevator and speed walks down the corridor. I don't bother fighting back with a response, because yeah, I deserved that comment. Taking Mina's acceptance as a win, I follow her out of the elevator. When I join her inside the rehearsal room, she's on her phone, texting someone.

The room we have is sizeable, with mirrors lining the walls. I dim the lights till there's only a spotlight shining on the grand piano. The ambiance will help me get into character. Once I take a seat at the piano, I flip through the sheet music, waiting patiently for Mina to finish with her phone. Neither one of us says a word, which only thickens the tense atmosphere in the room. I suppose she's still holding a grudge, which I don't blame her for.

When a minute passes and she still hasn't joined me, I glance her way, about to ask if everything is all right, but pause because... shit, Mina is nothing like I remember from that time she sang for me in Australia. She was basically still a teenager, and I didn't view her in a sexual way at all. And yeah, this is unprofessional of me, but she's wearing a low-cut dress that shows off how amazing her breasts are. That she has legs for days. I've never been a guy who's attracted to a certain hair color on women, but I think pastel pink might be my new thing.

For the first time in I don't know how long, my dick twitches. Images of having sex with Mina enter my mind. They're good images, it's just...



There's nothing emotional about them. But perhaps my friends were right, that I need someone to be casual with. Someone who offers fun and nothing else. Because let's face it, if I wait till I can trust women again, I'll be living a long life of celibacy. But fuck, I can't have sex with my colleague. Maybe I should take Verena up on her offer for a date with Hannah.

Hannah doesn't appeal to me in the slightest, though. I wish I could find someone like... Verena. Someone I can trust, a best friend, but who I'm attracted to.

Mina smiles at her phone. Who's to say she is even single? Her boyfriend is probably texting her right now, making her smile. There's no way a girl as beautiful as her can be single.

Getting a hold of my wandering thoughts, I clear my throat and look back at the sheet music. "Which song do you want to sing?"

"I don't mind." Her eyes remain on her phone. "How about the one where our characters meet for the first time? It's one of my favorites."

Mine too. The song is slow and emotional. My character, Talon, is a gangster. He enters The Velvet Cigar to hunt a murderer. Instead, he finds Seraphina singing on stage. Time ceases to exist when they make eye contact across the speakeasy. Seraphina stops singing mid-performance. The bustling noises of the venue fade into nothing. The lights dim on every person except Talon and Seraphina.

He's lived the past three years in agony, believing Seraphina had been murdered and that he'd failed to protect her. For Seraphina, her emotions are torn over seeing Talon again. Her family was slaughtered, and she faked her death for survival, creating a new life for herself that didn't involve Talon. But not one day has gone by where she hasn't been in love with him.

"You play piano?" Mina asks, looking up from her phone.

"Yeah."

"Impressive. Do you mind if I record us singing? I'd like to watch the video back and make adjustments to my voice."

"Go ahead."

She places her phone on the piano and presses the record button, then steps back an absurd number of paces, creating a ten-foot gap between us. "Okay. I'm ready to start when you are."

My fingers hover over the keys. I close my eyes and take a moment to mentally shift into character. Talon Prescott. A gangster. A hitman. But at the heart of him, he's a guy filled with inner demons because he couldn't save

the girl he loved. A guy who is infatuated with Seraphina. This method is how I get into character for all my roles.

When I open my eyes again, I *am* Talon.

I gaze over at Mina. Her frustration from my late arrival is nowhere to be seen. She's stiff and with the nerves of someone about to audition for the first time.

I shake my head. "I'm not feeling this set up. I know you can sing. This rehearsal is for us to get into character with each other and feel the music. We're supposed to be in love. Sit beside me."

"You're right." Mina takes a seat with me, the piano stool so small that our thighs sit flush against each other. She blushes and I feel her muscles tense.

"Relax. I'm not Zac Delavin. You're not Mina Midnight."

"Right."

She says all the correct things, but her body language tells me the complete opposite. I don't know if she's nervous because I'm a big name, or what her issue could be. But I'm not singing with her like this. She needs more help getting into character.

"Can I touch you?" I ask.

Her eyes flash to me and her cheeks turn even more rosy. "What?"

"As Talon, I mean."

"Oh." She eases into a laugh and nods, so I slip my hand into hers.

Her palm is hot against mine, but so smooth. I've used this warm-up technique with countless other co-stars, and each time, it's been a routine, flowing through the motions without much thought. A hassle, really, especially being married. Touching a woman in an intimate way who isn't my wife has always felt wrong on some level. Yes, a part of acting, but I've never liked the intimacy that is required.

I twine my fingers with Mina's. My other hand comes up, softly brushing over the blush on her cheeks. "Tell me to stop if you're not comfortable with any of this."

My fingertips brush over Mina's lips. I'm surprised in myself when I realize touching Mina like this isn't the hassle I expected it to be. Her lips open slightly at my touch and her breath comes faster. My own breathing takes a hit when her gaze drops to my mouth and lingers there. I have to wonder what she's thinking. She was so nervous a moment ago. Is she still nervous now? Are her wandering eyes all part of her getting into character?

We're acting right now, but the truth is, I haven't touched a woman like this in... too long. My thoughts can't help traveling back to sex.

Slowly, Mina leans into me with those crystal blue eyes of hers still lingering on my lips. With her this close, her breath caresses my face. Her sweet perfume is all I can smell. She licks her lips, and for a moment, I wonder if she's planning on kissing me. I would let her kiss me if she tried—*for the purpose of this exercise*, I tell myself.

Instead, she murmurs in this sultry voice that sounds nothing like the high-pitched Mina I know, but the sensual tone I imagine for Seraphina. "I'm in character now. Let's sing."

I tear my gaze away from her and place my hands on the piano keys. The music begins with a slow, jazzy tune, and the moment we start singing together, I know I've made the right decision requesting Mina for this musical. Her voice is so hypnotic, like a jazz singer from the 1920s. Our chemistry is like fireworks. Our voices together transport me to the happy place music once offered me that I haven't felt in the longest time. When I'm singing this song, I *am* Talon and Mina is Seraphina, and I forget about my divorce and money issues and how I'm all alone in this world. I'm in love with a girl I thought was dead, and now that I have her back in my life, she owns my entire soul.

My fingers press down on the finishing notes of the music, and our gazes linger on each other as the music fades. "I think I've found my muse. I'm in love with your voice," I whisper, instantly regretting my word choice. I was so swept away in the heat of the moment that they slipped out. Those thoughts are too intense. Too personal. I barely know Mina.

She smiles at me with a dazed look in her eyes and whispers back, "I'm in love with *your* voice."

I know she's returned to Mina when the slightest tinge of pink rises to her cheeks. She clears her throat and reaches for her phone, stopping the recording.

"So, I guess I'll see you at the first rehearsal," she says, standing from the piano stool. "I enjoyed this, even though you were late."

I watch her leave for the door, still hypnotized by her voice. Something dawns on me: I can't be the only one who feels this way about Mina's talent. The world is going to love her when they see her on stage. Penny may be taking me for everything I'm worth, but if this musical is a success in the way I think it will be, I might end up okay. No, that doesn't emphasize how dire

my situation is. I *need* this musical to be phenomenal.

“Hey, ah... Mina, wait.” I jog up behind her and take her phone from her hand. “Let me give you my number.”

“Why?” she teases with a smile. “So you can switch from blunt emails to blunt texting?”

“Actually, it’s so you can send me abusive phone calls if I’m ever late again, instead of abusive emails.”

She laughs. “My emails weren’t that abusive. You deserved them.”

“I did.”

“I hope you’re better at texting than you are with emails.”

“What’s wrong with my emailing skills?” I ask.

“Everything. You sound so angry in them. You need to learn how to use emojis and friendlier language.”

“I’ll add that to my list of things to do.” The video of us singing together is the first thing I see when unlocking Mina’s phone. I add my number and send the video to myself, then hand the phone back to her. “I’m sorry that we got off on the wrong foot. This musical is important to me too. It’s all I have going for me at the moment.”

Mina smiles, and fuck, she’s pretty. Are all girls this pretty but I never took notice because of Penny? They can’t be. “Don’t worry,” she tells me. “This musical is going to turn this world upside down.”

“How are you so sure?”

“Besides the fact that every girl on this planet is in love with Talon and you? I’ve already manifested it.”

“Oh, so you’re one of *those* people.”

“I’m joking. I don’t have much faith in my manifesting skills. I had a crush on you when I was younger and tried to manifest that one day we’d be married. That obviously isn’t going to happen.” She blanches and laughs.

“*You* had a crush on me?” I push away the smile that wants to form on my lips.

“Um, hello, you were a super dreamy Raoul in *The Phantom of the Opera*. But don’t worry, that crush is long gone.”

Of course it’s gone. How typical is it that I have a world filled with girls in love with me—as Mina puts it—but the one I find pretty is not into me at all.

## Chapter Three

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### Mina

“Are you sleeping with Zac Delavin?”

“What?” I croak, startled from sleep as Jordan barges into my bedroom, ripping the curtains open. Blinded from the morning light, I roll over in bed and pull the blankets over my head. “Go away.”

“Answer the question.”

“Of course I’m not sleeping with Zac. Why would you ask that?”

“Because the whole world is convinced you two are in love with each other. I have to say, after watching your video with all the flirty eye contact, I agree.”

Video? What video? The casting announcement for *The Velvet Cigar* hasn’t been publicly announced yet. Jordan isn’t making any sense. Before I can clarify what she’s talking about, Zac’s and my voice plays from my phone. We’re singing. The only time we’ve sung together was yesterday when I recorded it. Why is Jordan watching that footage? More importantly, why is she going through my phone?

“*I think I’ve found my muse. I’m in love with your voice,*” Zac says on the recording.

“*I’m in love with yours.*”

I push my covers down and rub my eyes. “Give me my phone back.”

“I’m not using your phone.”

I glance at my bedside table, finding my pink diamanté encrusted phone where I always leave it before falling asleep.

Jordan waves her phone screen at me. YouTube is open, playing the

recording of Zac and me singing. “This video of you two is on every social media platform. You guys have gone viral.”

My eyes open wide with panic. This can’t be happening. There must be a mistake. I’m still dreaming or something. I grab my phone in a rush, finding an overbearing number of missed calls and notifications. I open my Twitter account. TikTok. Instagram. On each app, the video of Zac and me pops up instantly.

“Shit! No one is supposed to know about the casting yet. I’m going to get fired.”

“Wait, this wasn’t planned?” Jordan asks.

“Of course not. Fuck! How did this even happen? Have you gone through my phone at all?”

“Babe, I don’t do that.”

Maybe I accidentally sent the video to someone or posted it online by mistake. I was watching the recording non-stop last night. It’s possible that my thumb clicked something without me realizing. What if the recording was uploaded to the Cloud and my account got mixed up with someone else’s? What if my iCloud has been hacked?

Jordan sprawls out on my bed, not understanding the dire situation I’m in, and begins reading comments from TikTok.

*“I wish Zac Delavin looked at me like he looks at her.”*

*“The look in their eyes is too real to be acting.”*

*“Fuck, he’s hot.”*

*“She the one he cheated on his wife with?”*

*“I’m obsessed with Zac Delavin. He is perfect as Talon. This girl looks like the perfect Seraphina too.”*

I unlock my phone to call the producers and apologize for this mess. I’m prepared to get down on my knees and beg them not to fire me. My heart sits in my throat when I realize I already have a dozen missed calls from them. This is the end of my career. I can feel it.

Swallowing back the dread, I dial my voicemail. The first message that plays is from one of the producers, Richard Nelson. “Mina.” His voice is firm. “I’m sure you’ve seen the news. I need to meet with you immediately.”

Shit. I am *definitely* getting fired.

**Zac**

I've had a countless number of missed calls on my phone ever since that video of me and Mina went viral. The only call I bother to return is from Rich Nelson. We've been friends for years and he's the one who is saving my ass by giving me the role of Talon. So, when Rich requests that I meet with him in the privacy of his home, I drop everything to be there.

Though it's only midday, the sky is dark with looming rain clouds when an Uber drops me off in front of Rich's apartment building. People are rushing along the sidewalk, focused on making it to their destination before the rain begins, and not a single person recognizes me. I take it as a blessing.

The dewy scent of approaching rain follows me into the lobby of Rich's building. I hold my arm out to catch the closing elevator doors and step inside. Pink hair is the first thing I notice. I'm alone in the elevator with Mina, except she's not her normal bubbly self. She's hugging herself and biting her lower lip. A look of panic strains her face. She's so caught up in her own thoughts that she doesn't even recognize me.

The doors shut, and the elevator begins its ascent. "I'm guessing Rich called you here too?" I ask.

She blinks away her thoughts and looks at me, blurting out, "I'm so sorry about the video. I don't know what happened. I swear I didn't post it anywhere or show anyone." Her jaw trembles and she claws both hands through her hair. "I'm going to get fired over this."

"I leaked it."

She stares at me, stunned. "What?"

"I sent the video to myself from your phone. I'm sorry, I should have told you."

Her temper snaps, and she's yelling at me. "Are you insane? I am going to lose my job because of you."

"No, you won't. I promise. I'll take full responsibility. It will be a slap on the wrist for me. Rich Nelson is a friend of mine."

"You shouldn't have leaked the video in the first place. Do you know how bad this looks for me, regardless of whether you own up to this disaster? I'm not a big name like you. I'm not friends with the producer. My reputation is on the line. If Richard thinks I had anything to do with this—"

"Mina," I hush. "I will make sure he knows you had nothing to do with this."

She folds her arms and scowls at me. At least that's progress from the

yelling. “Why would you leak the video?”

I sigh and lay all my cards on the table for her. “My divorce is costing me a lot of money. The musical needs to be a success—”

“This is a musical adaptation of *The Velvet* fucking Cigar. It was always going to be a success, especially with you as the male lead.”

“No, you don’t understand. Penny is fucking me over with this divorce. I’ve been in plenty of musicals that have died shortly after opening night. I need *The Velvet Cigar* to be successful so that I can try to retain some semblance of my life. That video of us singing together was incredible and is building up hype exactly like I need it to.”

Mina looks straight ahead with frustration, blowing a lock of pink hair out of her face. “Did Richard tell you what this meeting is about?”

“No.” The elevator doors open as we arrive on the fifty-third floor.

She stalks ahead of me. “Let’s get this meeting over with. I’ll deal with you later.”

I knock on Rich’s door and wait beside Mina. His wife, Odette, answers wearing an apron over her lacy dress and smells of freshly baked cookies. She’s the perfect representation of this apartment, pristine and elegant, wearing heels, a pearl necklace, and with her hair styled in ringlets.

“Oh, Zac, it’s lovely to see you again. And I assume you’re Mina. Come in. Rich is expecting you both. He’s in his office.” Odette holds the door open for us.

Rich isn’t a yeller, but I’m bracing myself for a stern scolding when he discovers I leaked the video. He and the other producers had their own plan on how to announce the musical’s cast, and I’ve gone behind his back.

On the contrary, Mina and I are met with silence when we enter Rich’s office. Normally, he’d be wearing a suit and tie, but he’s still dressed in pajamas and I think it’s safe to say this choice of attire isn’t because he’s been enjoying a relaxing morning. Rich is sitting behind his desk, watching a morning talk show on the TV. Surprise, surprise, the topic of conversation among the hosts is our viral video. I open my mouth to speak, but Rich holds up one finger to silence me.

“The casting hasn’t been announced yet,” one of the ladies on TV says. “But this recording was leaked last night, and fans are ecstatic that Zac Delavin is playing the lead. Sources tell us they have casted new talent for the female lead of *Seraphina Heart*, and her name is Mina Midnight.”

Rich mutes the volume and turns to us, speaking with a flat voice, “Who



did this?”

“I did,” I say. “I know I’ve gone behind your back and betrayed your trust —”

He breaks into a smile and spreads his arms wide in celebration. “Zac, you’re a fucking genius.”

I raise a skeptical eyebrow. “I am?”

Beside me, Mina is just as confused.

“Take a seat. Both of you,” Rich says.

Mina and I glance at each other. With reluctance, we sit down in the two armchairs facing the desk.

“We hadn’t planned to release the casting announcement like this,” Rich says. “But this method is fantastic. The buzz around this musical is out of this world. Our phones are ringing off the hook with companies begging to have you two interviewed. They want you both for photoshoots, talk show appearances, as brand ambassadors. Your schedules are about to become *very* busy.”

“We’re... not in trouble?” Mina asks.

“Of course not.”

“Why did you call this meeting then?” I ask.

He leans back in his chair and grins. “I have a proposition for you both. We all want this musical to earn big. This leaked video is showing us how big it could be. The hype isn’t because of the music—yes, the song you rehearsed was amazing and the public loved it—but everyone is talking about the chemistry between you two. They’re obsessed with the idea that you’re in love with one another.”

“What’s the proposition?” I ask.

Rich weaves his fingers together and leans forward, pressing his forearms on the desk. “I want you two to play around with this romance.”

Mina coughs, looking startled by the request. “I’m sorry, I’m not sure I follow. You want us to become a couple?”

“No,” Rich laughs. “I want you to play into the hype.”

“You mean, you want me and Zac to pretend the romance is real? Like a fake relationship?”

“Exactly. I’m not asking either of you to do anything that would make you uncomfortable. Please don’t feel pressured. But pretending to be in love wouldn’t be so hard, would it? Go out in public together and throw each other a few smiles. Stand closer than usual. Flirt with each other when people are

watching. Unless, of course, either of you are already in a relationship.”

I answer with a dry laugh. “Ghost town over here.”

“I’m not seeing anyone,” Mina adds. I’m genuinely surprised.

“So, what do you both say?” Rich asks.

I’m only just coming out of a marriage and already Rich wants me to do this? The relationship with Mina wouldn’t be real, but that’s not the issue here. This is too soon for me—acting happy and in love, when that’s the furthest thing I feel right now. It’s too much.

But then I remember my financial state, and that I need this musical to be a success. I told myself I was willing to do anything to make this musical big. Yesterday, I jeopardized my job and professional relationships by leaking the video. How hard can pretending to date Mina be?

“If this is in the best interest of the musical, I’ll do it,” I say.

“Excellent. Mina, what do you say?” Rich asks.

Mina fidgets with her hands in her lap, her knees bouncing. “I need time to think about this.”

## Chapter Four

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### Mina

As soon as I return home from my meeting with Zac and Richard, I'm tackled with an enormous hug. "Mimi, it's so good to see you."

I can't see anything, the hug is that smothering. But the nickname gives it all away. Ryan has arrived at our apartment.

"Hey." I hug him back. "It's good to see you too."

When he releases me from his arms, I get my first proper look at him. He looks the same as I always see him on his YouTube channel: sandy blond hair that sits on his shoulders, a few days' worth of stubble, tanned skin from all the time he spends outdoors in nature, tattoos covering his arms, and the clothes... I laugh, because even though we're in the city, leave it to him to wear his shirt completely unbuttoned as if he's hanging out at the beach.

"Did you get on the plane looking like that?" I nod at his abs.

"Hey, at least I'm wearing clothes."

He makes a good point. Ryan never shies from telling people about the year he lived in a nudist colony. "You better not bring any of that nudist shit into this apartment. I swear to God, if I see you walking about with your dick out—"

"You won't be able to resist me. I know. Don't worry, I'll keep it in my pants."

I shove his arm and laugh with him. "What are you doing in New York, anyway? Filming?"

"Nah. Broke up with my girlfriend and needed a fresh scenery. Thought I'd spend some time with Jordan since we never see each other." He opens

the fridge and drinks straight from a bottle of brown liquid. “You want some kombucha?”

“Oh, that’s what that crap is. I don’t know how anyone drinks kombucha. It’s fermented. And have you seen how it’s brewed? There’s this massive jellyfish thing living in the liquid.” My body convulses thinking about it.

Ryan laughs at my reaction. “That jellyfish thing is called a SCOBY. This bottle is the store-bought stuff. The quality isn’t as good. Jordan is taking me shopping later today so I can brew the good kind.”

“Shit. You mean that jellyfish thing will be in my apartment? I’m going to walk into the kitchen and see it every day?”

“Yeah, but it’s great for your gut bacteria. I’ve been getting into all this health food stuff lately. Mimi, you’ve got to try it.” He passes the bottle to me, but I step back.

“My gut bacteria are doing fine, thanks. Hey, I didn’t know you had a girlfriend. You never mentioned her in any of your videos.”

“We were together for two weeks.”

Sounds about right for him. “Did the breakup kick-start this health food craze?”

“I’ve been into health for a while. By the time I leave New York, I’ll have converted you too.” He elbows my ribs, teasing me back. “Anyway, enough about me. I get off the plane and your name is everywhere. Jordan tells me you’ve landed some massive role on Broadway.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty crazy.”

“I’m happy for you, Mimi. You’ve wanted this for as long as I’ve known you.”

Jordan pokes her head out of her bedroom. “Babe, how’d the meeting go? You still Seraphina?”

“Yeah.” I sigh and slump backward onto the couch—Ryan’s bed, actually, for the next few weeks.

This apartment will be so cramped with three people living in it. It’s already cramped with me and Jordan. The front door opens right into the kitchen and minuscule living room. There’s no space for a dining table so we either eat standing up or sit on the couch. Our bedrooms are right next to each other with one tiny bathroom adjoining them. The apartment is not the finest housing West Harlem offers, nor the safest, being on ground floor and with a weak locking system. It’s a bit of a commute to Broadway and the club Jordan dances at in Hell’s Kitchen, but it’s in a good location for our

waitressing job. And honestly, it's all we've been able to afford.

"You didn't get fired. This is great news," Jordan says. "Why aren't you happy?"

I take a breath to brace myself. "I need your advice on something. You too, Ryan, since you're here."

"Sure. What is it?" he asks.

"You should take a seat for this."

Jordan grabs Ryan by the shirt and they both sit on the coffee table in front of me. "A sit-down chat. Shit just got real."

"The producer wasn't mad about the leaked video," I say. "He thinks it's the greatest thing and wants me and Zac to pretend we're dating each other."

Jordan claps a hand to her mouth, but I can still see the smile peeking through. "I love this for you. What answer did you give?"

"I said I don't know yet. I need advice from you guys."

"Girl, you are living in a rom-com, I swear," Jordan says. "First, you get cast as the lead in a musical alongside a famous hot guy you've been crushing on for years. Now they want you to date him. Imagine if you fall in love with Zac. I say accept the proposition. It will be good for your career and the most amazing love story."

"You did hear the part where this is all fake, right? And I don't date cheaters."

Jordan sighs. "We've been over this already. You don't know that Zac cheated. Ask him about what really ended his marriage."

"I want to, except... it's not my place to ask such a personal question."

"Well, whatever." Ryan swipes his hand through the air, dismissing the topic. "Forget about the details of Zac's marriage. Jordan's right about this fake relationship being good for your career. If you're comfortable pretending to be Zac's girlfriend, I say go for it."

"I'm comfortable with it. If pretending to date Zac boosts my career, I want to do it. But there's another issue I need to discuss before making my decision. What about Connor?"

"Her ex," Jordan explains to Ryan.

"Correction. My *crazy* ex."

Connor is the only guy I've been in love with and was no doubt the biggest mistake of my life. In hindsight, it wasn't love. What I felt for Connor was infatuation. Lust. And then fear. Whenever I think back to that period of my life, I'm filled with embarrassment and regret.

I met Connor three years ago when I first moved to New York City. He was a tattoo artist and was covered in ink himself. He played underground poker and was in a gang who dealt drugs. In my defense, I wasn't aware of the drugs when I got involved with him. But by the time I found out, I was already addicted to Connor. If anything, the knowledge only made me more attracted to him. I was naïve, but there was an allure of danger with Connor. He made me feel alive.

Our relationship was intense from the start. Connor would send me black roses with love letters attached. We got matching tattoos, which I later removed to shed all traces of him from my life. He would buy me expensive clothes and take me out on the town to show me off to all his friends, and I loved it.

Our sex was intense. Connor had a thing for owning me in every possible way. At the time, I thought being that sexually adventurous with him was empowering for me. I liked being submissive for him until his behavior between sex and everyday life blurred together and he was trying to control me outside of the bedroom too. Connor watched my every move. He monitored who I talked to. Then one day when I did something he didn't like, he hit me.

And when a man hits me, he doesn't get a second chance to try it again.

"Mina got a restraining order against Connor when he hit her," Jordan explains, giving Ryan the condensed version.

"Shit. Mimi, I had no idea."

"It's okay," I say. "This all happened a year ago. I haven't seen or heard from him since."

"What does Connor have to do with your decision?" he asks.

"I'm guessing the only reason I haven't had an issue with Connor is because I haven't dated anyone since him. I've been too scared to. It would not shock me in the slightest if he broke the restraining order out of jealousy. The last words he said to me were *If I can't have you, no one can.*"

"What the fuck?" Ryan's voice rises with shock. "As in he'll kill you?"

"That's how I interpret the threat."

"This guy belongs behind bars."

Jordan brings her feet onto the coffee table, crossing her legs. "Okay, but for all we know, Connor's threat was empty words. What if you haven't heard from him because he's moved on with his life?"

I rub both palms over my forehead, clammy from this topic. "*What ifs* are

not enough for me.”

She pulls out her phone and starts typing.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking Connor’s socials. I’m not trying to push you into the fake relationship if you don’t want it. All I’m saying is, you shouldn’t let Connor control your life. If you do, he wins. He’s already winning by gaining this fearful response from you.”

Connor *is* winning, and I hate it. Jordan is right: I threw him out of my life, yet his presence is still looming over me. This needs to stop now. I can’t let him dictate my choices.

“Ah, okay, look,” Jordan says. “Connor’s Instagram says he’s living in Oregon. That’s all the way across the country. It even seems like he has a girlfriend.”

Jordan shows me her phone, and sure enough, she’s right.

“I’m still scared. Connor is unpredictable. And this isn’t just about me. What about Zac? If Connor hears that I’m dating him, Zac could be at risk too.”

“Fair point,” Ryan says. “That’s something you need to discuss with Zac. He deserves to have all the information before he agrees to this fake relationship. Want to invite him here to discuss the details over a glass of kombucha?”

The three of us laugh. I love Ryan for being able to ease such a tense conversation.

“I’ll call him now.” I dial Zac’s number and head to my bedroom, expecting the call to go to voicemail, but he answers in a monotonous voice.

“Mina, hey.”

“Hey,” I say maybe a little too enthusiastically. I dial it back and try to match his dull tone, but it hurts my spirits. “I hope I’m not catching you at a bad time.”

“Not at all.”

In the background of the call, a female voice asks, “Who’s he on the phone with?”

“The hot one,” a male replies.

A smile tugs on my lips. “I’m the hot one?”

“Ah... sorry about that,” Zac says. “I’m with friends.”

“Zac, baby, come back to bed.” The female moans, then bursts out laughing. The guy joins in.

“Verena, shut up. You too, Darius.”

My jaw hangs open at the mention of those two names. “As in the reality stars Verena Valentine and Darius Hasanza? *They* are the friends you’re with?” I need to pinch myself to wake up. Seriously, how is this my life, associating with people this famous?

“Right now I wish they weren’t.”

“Want to trade places? I love those two.”

“Want to take on my nightmare divorce too?”

I sit on my bed. “Fair point. So anyway, I’ve been thinking about what Richard said. I think we should do it.” I laugh and make a joke. “Let’s take our relationship to the next level.”

There’s silence on Zac’s end of the phone.

“Dude, it was a joke,” I say.

“What? Oh, yeah, I know. Sorry, Darius is making inappropriate hand gestures right now and I’m trying to make him stop.”

I laugh, imagining it.

“So, ah... okay, good, we’re doing this publicity stunt,” Zac says.

“I’m down for it, but there’s something I need to tell you before we officially agree to this.”

“I’m listening.”

I cringe, not knowing how to best approach the Connor topic. “It’s something I’d rather discuss with you in person. Do you want to get a coffee tomorrow morning and take a walk around Central Park?”

“Sure. How is eight a.m. for you?”

“That sounds good. I’ll arrive thirty minutes late so we get there at the same time.”

“Very funny. I’ll be on time.”

“I’ll believe *that* when I see it.”

## Zac

Wanting to make a good impression on Mina, I make sure I’m on time to our meeting at Central Park. In fact, I’m so dedicated to arriving on time that I turn up fifteen minutes early. The day is nice with a clear sky, not too hot for August. No sooner than I take a seat on the park bench, I spot Mina walking toward me with a surprised smile. She looks good. *Really* good. Her



pink hair is in a side braid, messy and loose. She's wearing yoga pants and a midriff hoodie. It takes effort for me to keep my eyes on her face and not the pale skin at her waist. And here I am, wearing a damn suit.

"I can't believe you're here this early," she says, arriving at my side.

I stand to greet her. "I told you I wouldn't be late. Do you want to get a coffee and go for a walk?"

"Sure."

We walk side by side to a nearby coffee stand. I'm not surprised in the least when a flash goes off somewhere in the distance. Already, someone is taking our photo, which I suppose is a good thing. Mina glances around in search for the photographer, and I have to remind myself that this is all a new experience for her.

She fixes her hair and adjusts her clothes.

"Don't bother," I tell her. "No matter how hard you try to look nice, people will always capture unflattering photos of you, and you can bet those will be the photos they post online."

"I'm an optimist. No harm trying to look nice. I had people approach me on the subway ride here and it was fun."

We step up to the coffee vendor. I place my order for a long black and turn to Mina. "What would you like? It's on me."

"I'll have a hot chocolate with extra marshmallows. And can they please be pink?" she asks the vendor. He nods in response. "Oh, and if it's not too much hassle, I'd like them to be baby marshmallows. Thank you so much."

Jesus Christ. Even her drink order is covered in rainbows. I pull out my wallet to pay, but Mina clutches my wrist.

"I can't make you pay for me," she says. I barely notice the words. Is it pathetic that all I'm thinking about is her warm touch? She obviously thought nothing of the gesture. She isn't deprived of another person's touch like I am.

"Mina, when a guy likes a girl, he offers to pay for her drink. You better get used to me paying for you."

She chews on her bottom lip. "Okay, but aren't you like, broke from your divorce?"

"Wow, I feel so masculine right now. I didn't take you to be the type who needs lessons in how to act around a guy you like."

"Sorry, I only meant—"

"I'm paying for your drink. End of story." I hand over the cash and take our drinks, passing Mina's to her.

“So, about this fake relationship,” she says as we fall into step with each other. “I’m up for it. I need to be honest with you about something, though. This information might change your mind, and I totally understand if it does.”

“You’ve got eleven toes?”

“More like a possessive ex-boyfriend who I filed a restraining order against.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” She removes the lid from her drink and scoops one of the marshmallows up with her tongue. Even with her tongue poking out, she manages to look elegant. “What I’m about to tell you will shift our relationship status from *colleagues who barely know each other* to *that was an over-share and I’m going to quietly back away now*.”

“How is the second one a relationship status?”

“The technicalities don’t matter. You get the point.”

I dig my free hand into my pocket. “Whatever it is, just tell me. My whole life has been shared with the public so I’m sure I can manage.”

“Okay, well, I haven’t heard from my ex in a year. I hope he’s moved on with his life and that I never hear from him again. But so we’re clear, he did threaten my life at one point.”

“Shit.” I stop walking and face Mina.

“Yeah.” She shrugs, sipping her hot chocolate and avoiding my gaze. “He said I belong to him and that if he can’t have me, no one can.”

“Wow. And I thought Penny was bad.”

“I haven’t dated anyone since him because I’ve been too afraid, not to mention the lovely trust issues he left me with.”

I let out a humorless laugh, knowing a thing or two about trust issues. I’ll probably never be able to trust another woman with my heart again. “If this arrangement is too difficult for you, I understand—”

“It’s not. I was about to say I can’t keep living my life in fear. The restraining order is in place. Plus, my ex has a new girlfriend and lives on the other side of the country, so I’m pretty sure there’s nothing to worry about. I just want you to be aware of the situation you’ll be getting involved with if we go forward with this fake relationship. If you want to run for the hills, I’ll understand.”

I chew my bottom lip while sifting through all the information she’s shared. Mina hasn’t presented me with a great situation, but the law is

protecting her and it seems like this jerk has moved on with his life. If shit gets real, I'll cut ties with Mina.

"I'm not running for the hills," I tell her. "If you're committed to doing this fake romance thing, so am I."

"Okay, great." A cyclist rides by us, and we resume our pace through the park. "What's our game plan for this relationship?" she asks. "I mean, we won't have to kiss or anything, right?"

"No kissing. We'll leave that for rehearsals."

"Right." She laughs, her cheeks turning the same color as her hair. "I've never had to kiss a colleague before. How do you go about it? Do we practice kissing before rehearsals start?"

"We can do whatever makes you feel more comfortable. If you want to practice beforehand, we can do that, or not."

"I want to impress the director, so we should practice the kissing scene in advance."

"Which one?"

She chuckles. "I know, right? You and I will be well acquainted by the end of this. That leads into something I've been thinking about. If we're going to make this fake relationship believable, we need to get to know each other better. We need to know things about each other that only a best friend would know. So, I've decided that as of this moment, we are officially best friends."

I side-eye her, scrunching my brow. This girl... She's something else. "I already have two annoying best friends. I'm not sure I can handle another one."

"That was mean and no way to talk to your best friend."

"You can't wave a wand and magically turn us into friends."

She pats my shoulder. "Trust me, I'm good with people. You'll love me in no time. We also need to have a thing that we do with each other. Something that's *ours*. Are you into fitness? I mean, obviously you are. Look at your body. We could meet here every morning and go for a jog together then let people see us laugh and flirt over coffee."

"You mean hot chocolate with baby marshmallows?"

"Hey, don't mock it until you try it."

"Not happening," I say as we cross a bridge. "But the morning runs sound fine."

"The hot chocolate *is* happening. Okay, let's speed up this friendship.

Tell me your life's story.”

I take a sip of my coffee and sigh. “I married my high school sweetheart —”

“Everyone knows about that. Tell me something only a friend would know.”

“You’re painful. You know that?”

“Not as painful as you.”

I rub the back of my neck, searching for something to share. “I met Penny in high school. Proposed to her when we were nineteen. Was married for nine years. The last three were miserable. The only time I felt happy was when I was singing. Then Penny took that away from me too when she asked for a divorce. Singing hasn’t made me happy until... This will sound pathetic, but until I sang with you.”

Mina stops and stares at me with amazement, the apples of her cheeks flushing a darker tinge as she smiles. “I can’t be that painful, then. All that talk about you being miserable is about to change. I don’t have miserable friends. It doesn’t happen. We are going to have so much fun together.”

I’ll believe that in a million years. “And you, what’s your life story?”

“I grew up in Sydney, Australia. Never known my dad. It’s always been me and my mom. My birthday is the first of June. I’m a Gemini. My full name is Wilhelmina Lucy Midnight; my mom is a Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* fan in case my name didn’t make that obvious for you. I studied musical theater at uni and moved to New York three years ago with my friend Jordan to make it in the Big Apple. You’ll meet her soon enough. My favorite movies are *Mean Girls* and *The Mummy*. Young Brendan Fraser is to die for. I want to visit the Pyramids one day and climb Machu Picchu. Most of all, I want to be a Broadway star. I have worked so hard to get here. You don’t know what it means to me that I was chosen for this role. My dreams are finally coming true.” Her ramble comes to a stop, and she smiles at me. “You taking notes on all of this?”

“I have a good memory.”

She scoffs at my words and laughs.

“What?” I ask.

“It’s nothing.” From the way she speaks those words, I know she’s implying something. But I can’t pick up on what it is.

Mina looks at the time on her phone. “Oh, shoot. I’ve got to take off. I have a Pilates class I need to get to.”

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow morning for our jog?”

“You bet. I’ll text you the details. Okay, um, let’s hug goodbye. Come here, lover.”

Her arms cling around my neck as she presses her body flush against mine. The hug is so intimate that I go rigid, taking far too long to register what’s happening here. I’m not used to this closeness with a woman. Mina’s breasts are pressed to my chest. Her hips are against mine. When I breathe in, her perfume fills my nose, and I like it. I like all of this too much.

I hug her quickly and let go, but Mina’s arms keep me bound to her.

“And you were giving *me* shit for not acting like I was into you before. Hug me properly,” she says. “This is supposed to look intimate.”

My arms return around her. “This is awkward.”

“I know, but it’s kind of funny.” She laughs and hugs me tighter, lifting up onto her toes.

Her soft laugh is right against my ear. Goosebumps form along the back of my neck from the hot brush of her breath on my skin. I give in and hug her the way I want to, lifting her feet off the ground.

“That’s better.” She lowers one arm and jabs me in the ribs.

I jerk away, returning Mina to her feet. Still, she doesn’t release me from the hug. “What the fuck was that for?” I ask, laughing as she attempts to jab me again. “Mina, get off me.”

She steps back with a massive smile on her lips. “Oh my God, it worked. You’re actually laughing.” Her hand shoots out for my ribs again, but I catch it in time. And fuck, she’s right. This is the first time I’ve laughed, *genuinely* laughed, in... forever, it seems. It feels strange, but also really good.

“I hate you,” I say as she keeps fighting against my grip.

“No, you don’t. I told you, we are going to have so much fun together.”

## Chapter Five

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### Zac

Tonight is the first night I'm spending in my new apartment. So, naturally, my friends have invited themselves over for dinner. The place is nice, but a massive downgrade from where I used to live in the Upper East Side. I'm in Hell's Kitchen now, right in the heart of Broadway.

My apartment is a ten-minute walk to where rehearsals will be held. I figure the location isn't so bad—loud a lot of the time, but I can look past that and throw myself into work. The best part is I'm renting, so Penny can't take this place from me.

The front door opens to a sizeable living area. To the left, I have my grand piano. To the right is a couch and TV I bought today. The kitchen sits at the back of the room. And there's a nice balcony.

Considering how wealthy my friends are, I'm expecting their reaction to be “you can't live here,” or “let me lend you that money.” Instead, the first thing Verena does when entering the front door is hold up an image on her phone.

“You have some explaining to do,” she says, grinning from ear to ear.

I take a closer look at the photo. It was taken four days ago at Central Park. Paparazzi captured the goodbye between Mina and me where we were laughing and play fighting. The caption reads *There's still no confirmation that Zac Delavin and Mina Midnight are dating, but they sure look like a cute couple.*

“Not your type, huh?” Adrian nods at me with a slanted grin.

“I'm just happy to see you smiling,” Darius adds, holding takeout

Chinese food. “What’s the deal with you and Mina?”

I bury both hands into my pockets. “Ah... you guys won’t believe this, but one of the producers has asked that Mina and I pretend we’re seeing each other.”

The three of them take a second to register what I’ve said, then they all burst with laughter, because what are the chances of another fake relationship happening to one of us. It’s how Verena and Adrian got together. I never thought I would be in the same position, especially not at this point in my life, technically still married.

Once I’ve finished explaining the details of how I got myself into this situation, Verena heads to the kitchen. “I’m excited for you. Anything that keeps your mind busy is a good thing. Oh! I just realized, Mina can be your date to our wedding. This is perfect.”

I fold my arms. “I’m not asking her to fly to Australia for a wedding.”

“Why not? Mina is from Australia, isn’t she? I’m sure she’d love to be at the wedding.”

“I’m not asking her because that would be weird. We barely know each other. Being my fake girlfriend doesn’t mean she has to fly across the world.”

“The wedding is a few months away. I’m sure you two will be well acquainted by then. Ask her, or I’ll slide into her DMs and ask her for you.”

“Fine, I’ll ask her,” I groan, knowing Verena isn’t joking.

“Where are the bowls? I’m starving,” she says.

“There are none.” I only arrived with the essentials. My piano, a new couch and TV, bed, laptop, and toiletries. There isn’t even a fridge yet.

“Okay, now I’m seriously worried about your mental state,” Darius says. “I mean, even more so than before. When are you planning on buying everything for this place?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. When I get time. I’m actually a fan of how everything looks. Nothing reminds me of Penny for a change.”

“There’s *some* association with Penny,” Adrian says. “She’s the reason for your lack of furniture.”

I scowl at him. “Thanks for ruining the small amount of peace I’d found.”

“Sorry, man, but you can’t live like this.”

“I don’t plan on living like this. I told you, I’ll buy new furniture when I have a chance.”

“We’re going furniture shopping tomorrow,” Verena says.

“No, we’re not.”

“Yes, we are because I don’t trust you when you say you’ll do it yourself. I’ll turn up here next week and find the place exactly as it is now. But regardless of all that, I’d like to help you set up your new home. Just because you’re getting divorced doesn’t mean you have to do things on your own.”

I pinch the space between my eyes and sigh. Here we go. The pity again. “You don’t have to do that. In fact, none of you have to be here right now.”

Darius pops a bottle of champagne. “We’re celebrating. You’ve got a new job. New apartment. Soon, you’ll be divorced. Your new life awaits you and it will be a great one.”

“Don’t forget the new girlfriend,” Adrian adds.

“Guys...” It takes everything in me to hold back the massive *get out of my apartment* I want to shout at them.

“What does this fake relationship involve?” Darius asks, drinking straight from the champagne bottle since there are no glasses. He passes the bottle to me. I have a sip to be polite but mixing alcohol with my mood isn’t a great idea. I’ve drunk to deal with my feelings for far too many months already and it only makes everything worse.

“The fake relationship is nothing too intense,” I answer. “We’ll make sure the public sees us spending lots of time together.”

Verena grabs the champagne off me and drinks. “How much time have you spent with Mina so far?”

“I see her every day. We meet up for a morning jog at Central Park.”

“Does this mean I get to meet her? Like, sooner than the wedding. It would be unbelievable to the public if Zac Delavin’s best friend hasn’t met the girl he’s dating.”

“I haven’t thought that far into the future.”

Verena unpacks the Chinese. “The food came with chopsticks, which is good since you have no cutlery. Let’s put some music on and get drunk.”

I run a hand through my hair, feeling like a complete dick for what I’m about to say, but celebrating and getting drunk is the last thing I want to do. “Look, I know you are all trying to make me feel better, but I think I might call it a night.”

Darius looks up from the food, the hunger in his eyes turning into a glare. “You are a serious downer.”

“There’s nothing to celebrate. I’m the lowest I’ve ever been in my life.”

“Yes, you are,” he lectures me like I’m a child. “You’re in the biggest rut of your life. I’m buying you a dog—”



“Fuck, Darius. No, you are not. What the hell is a dog going to do for me?”

He places both hands on his hips. “Force you to look after something, because you’re not looking after yourself. The dog will bring you joy.”

“I don’t want a dog.”

“Too bad. I’m buying one for you. I am forcing it on you. It will be here tomorrow.”

“I’ll take it straight to the pound.”

Verena gasps. “You will not.”

“What if Darius buys me some feral dog I don’t like? Choosing a dog is a personal decision.”

“Okay, *you* buy the dog.” Darius collects his belongings and heads for the front door, taking a box of Chinese food with him. “You have twenty-four hours to do so. If I don’t see a dog here tomorrow night, I’m taking charge. End of discussion.”

The door slams shut behind him and now there’s only me, Verena, and Adrian.

“Is it just me, or was Darius’s behavior uncalled for?”

Adrian pats my shoulder. “It’s just you.”

Great. I can only imagine what Adrian thinks of me. Yeah, we’re friends, but we met right when Penny asked for a divorce. He’s only ever known the miserable side of me.

“We should get going too,” Verena says. “Send me photos of the dog you buy. And don’t forget to ask Mina to the wedding.”

The door closes behind Verena and Adrian, and my rowdy apartment is suddenly dead quiet. So quiet that I hear the air conditioner.

Not hungry, I skip dinner and take a shower, then set up my bed with fresh linens. Once I’m done, I lie flat on the mattress and stare at the ceiling. Reality sinks in. Everything is so quiet. I wanted an apartment that has no memory of Penny and now I have it. Yet the relief I thought I would feel isn’t here. Now I’m truly alone and it feels terrible. It’s a loneliness that my friends can’t fill. Not one part of me misses Penny, but I miss the feeling of having a partner with me. Someone to share my life with. It’s a depressing thought, but maybe a dog is the closest I’m going to get to filling the loneliness.

I grab my phone off the nightstand and text Mina.

What are you doing tomorrow?

MINA

(Eggplant emoji) + you.

Her message makes me laugh in the stark silence of my apartment. It's ironic that not once have I laughed with my friends over these last few months, but some stranger who I find too overbearingly bubbly can make me laugh.

MINA

Why do you ask?

ZAC

Darius is forcing me to buy a pet. He says I'm in a rut and need something that will pull me out of it. Do you want to come with me to buy one? Couples do that kind of thing, right?

MINA

Yes and yes.

What are you doing right now?

I'm watching a Netflix documentary about aliens.

Wanna watch it with me?

I'm 17 minutes and 20 seconds through it.

And if you're busy, I really think you should consider dropping all of your important plans to watch it with me :) :) :) My roommates are out tonight and I'm lonely.

How is it that even her messages portray her cheerful tone? I head out to the TV and sit on my couch.

ZAC

I'm turning Netflix on. What's the documentary called?

MINA

Erotic Alien Encounters. This one person is saying how she got abducted by aliens and ended up having sex with them.

Jeez. Was it at least good sex?

I mean, if you're into that kind of stuff. I'd be up for alien sex. It might be a strange experience, but at least it's something I could hold over everyone's head.

Because people would be so jealous of you.

Dude, watch what the woman is saying and tell me you don't want it.

I press play on the documentary and fast forward to seventeen minutes and twenty seconds. After watching the show for three minutes, I text back.

The aliens made her come for five straight hours? Okay, I see your point.

Thank you. You know what, I'm going to call you so we can chat properly.

A few seconds later, my phone vibrates with Mina's call.

"Hey," I answer. "How did you even find this shit to watch?"

"It may be shit, but it's hilarious."

She's right. For the next hour, I laugh with Mina over all the crazy alien erotic stuff people claim to have happened to them. When the documentary is over, we keep talking. And shit, this girl can talk. She talks about anything and everything. There's never a dull moment. We discuss old TV shows. New TV shows. Video games we played as kids. Our school years. Musicals. But the best part about all of this is that with Mina on the phone, I don't feel so lonely in this apartment anymore.

It's three a.m. when I climb into bed and turn the lights off. We're now watching *Rent* together and I'm so relaxed that I don't even realize I'm drifting off to sleep.

## Mina

I wake at seven a.m., later than usual for me, but I'm running on little sleep thanks to staying up all night on the phone with Zac. My phone is buzzing with hundreds of notifications again, which is starting to become my new normal. I'm constantly being tagged in social media posts. I can't keep up with all of them, but the gist of today's online talk has my stomach in knots. A Tweet about me and Zac has gone viral.

**You know what they say: three's a crowd. @ZacDelavin isn't even divorced yet. I wonder what really caused the end of his marriage. \*Cough, cough\* @MinaMidnight.**

The comments are just as bad.

**Mina is the other woman.**

**She's a nobody. Obviously fucked Zac to land such a major role.**

Every inch of my skin prickles with heat. This slander is not what I signed up for when agreeing to be Zac's "girlfriend." Zac and I haven't even made a public statement about our relationship yet.

I send the Tweet to Zac.

MINA

I'm panicking. Should we call off the fake relationship?

ZAC

Relax. This is what we want, remember.

For me to look like your whore?

Zac links me a Tweet posted by Verena Valentine.

**Y'all, the rumors about @ZacDelavin cheating on his wife with @MinaMidnight are obviously a lie. Bitches be jealous. In other news, I have a girl crush on Mina and am about to turn lesbian for her. Bye, Felicia.**

I smile at the Tweet and feel a little better about the situation when I see all the positive comments.

**The whole female population is turning lesbian for Mina.**

**Obsessed with Mina's voice.**

**I hope they're a couple because Zac deserves happiness.**

MINA

Now I like Verena more than I already did. Might turn lesbian for her too.

ZAC

I'll let her know. Are we still jogging this morning, or do you want to skip straight to pet shopping?

Too tired to run.

I'll pick you up in an hour. What's your address?

I send my address, then enter a freak out at the possibility that Zac could enter my apartment. I haven't had a chance to clean it this week, and for all I know, Ryan could still be asleep on the couch when Zac arrives.

MINA

Text me when you're here. You don't have to come in.

I rush into the shower. An hour isn't a lot of time to make myself look pretty when I still need to eat breakfast, do my hair and make-up, and find a cute outfit to wear. There's no way I'm letting Zac see me looking anything other than cute.

I end up choosing a white summery dress that's strapless and floats mid-thigh length. My hair is in loose curls that I created in record time with my straightening iron and a shitload of hairspray. With only ten minutes left to spare, I hurry out of my room to find something to eat, but halt at the abundance of bouquets arranged over the kitchen countertop.

"Oh, hey, Mimi," Ryan says, roaming around the apartment shirtless. He ties his bed hair into a bun. "More gifts arrived. Everyone loves you."

Five days have passed since the video of Zac and me went viral, and every day since, I've been spoiled rotten with gifts. I have a very supportive cheerleading squad of family and friends in Australia, to say the least. I love it, but how long will this go on?

I step up to the flowers and admire their sweet scent. Tiny cards are attached to each bouquet with words like *Congratulations!* and *I'm so proud of you!* written inside.

Jordan exits her bedroom in pajamas. I'm surprised she's awake this early, considering her shift at the burlesque club didn't finish until four a.m.

She points to the sunflowers on her way to the kitchen. "Those sunflowers are from my parents."

"They're lovely. I'll have to message them."

Next, I spot a beautiful arrangement of lilies from my cousin Tina. Her card is sweet: *I'm so excited for you! You're living the dream. Can't wait to have front row seats and cheer you on.*

Beside the lilies is a magnificent bouquet of pink roses the exact color of my hair, dusted in gold glitter. They're so unique and stand out from all the other flowers. I won't admit it out loud because I'm grateful for all the flowers, but the pink roses are my favorite. They must have cost a fortune. Whoever sent them will be in trouble for spending so much.

At the base of the bouquet, there's a card attached.

*I think I've found my muse. I'm in love with your voice.*

I smile, reading the exact words Zac said to me after we sang together. My first instinct tells me the bouquet is from him, but there's no name attached, and I only gave him my address an hour ago. Even when I twist the bouquet around in search for a tag, I can't find anything to indicate who sent the roses.

"Hey, do you guys know who sent these?" I ask.

Both Jordan and Ryan read the card.

"They're beautiful," Jordan says. "I wonder if Zac sent them to you?"

"That's what I thought, but I'm not sure. I guess he could have gotten my address from one of the producers."

"So, what's on the agenda today?" Ryan retrieves a large glass bowl from the pantry and places it amid my flowers. And then I see it, the brown liquid inside. The jellyfish.

"Oh, hell no." I back away, my stomach twisting with revulsion. "Get that thing out of this apartment."

He chuckles. "The SCOBY is a living creature. We can't kick it out of its home."

Jordan is equally amused. "Store it in my room if Mina has such a problem with it."

"And don't ever bring it back out," I say.

Ryan carries the glass jar into Jordan's room. On his return, he rests both forearms on the kitchen counter and says, "You girls waitressing today? The three of us should spend the day together if you're not."

"I have to go pet shopping with Zac. He'll be here any moment." I head for the pantry and grab a bowl for my cereal.

Jordan gasps, clutching her pajamas. "Zac Delavin is coming here? You could have given me notice."

"I barely had any notice myself. But don't worry, I'm meeting him on the street."

As soon as I speak the words, someone knocks on the front door. Jordan squeaks, running into her bedroom to hide. If Zac is our visitor, I will be so embarrassed by the state of this apartment. My eyes shoot to the sink, finding dirty dishes from last night. Ryan only recently woke up, and the couch is still disheveled from his sleeping arrangements. Also, fuck, I haven't had time to eat.

I open the front door halfway, finding Zac standing in the stairwell, looking slick in a black suit and with his dark hair ruffled. "Excuse me, but

you were supposed to text me so I could meet you on the street. My apartment is messy. Also, you're seven minutes early, leaving me no time to scoff down my cereal."

Zac answers with a smile. I've made him smile a couple of times since that first day we met at Central Park, and it looks so good on him. His laugh is even better. He has the most handsome, deep voice. I got to listen to it all last night on the phone, and I think I'm addicted.

"I'll buy you breakfast on the way," he says. "Come on, let's go. My Uber driver is waiting."

"Hang on. Since you're here, I want to introduce you to my friends. Jordan, come out here and meet my one true love," I shout.

Jordan emerges with her black hair swept into a high bun and is dressed in workout wear. I won't lie, Ryan's half-naked appearance is kind of embarrassing and I don't want Zac to have the wrong impression about us, but it would be rude not to introduce him too.

"This is my best friend, Jordan, who I live with, and her brother, Ryan, who's staying with us for a few weeks. I'd invite you inside, but the place is currently gross and I want you to like me."

"I already like you." Zac chuckles. He nods at Jordan and Ryan. "It's nice to meet you both."

"Hey," Jordan says, still shell-shocked.

"Sup, dude?" Ryan nods.

"Jordan is going to become your best friend too," I tell Zac.

He laughs again. "What about Ryan?"

"Nah, he's just some dude who couch surfs and then disappears off the face of the planet until he turns up on a viral YouTube video, bungee jumping off a bridge naked."

Zac's eyebrows twist in a moment of confusion until something dawns on him. "I've seen that video. You're that guy?"

"Yup." Ryan grins, proud.

"Not to get all personal, but wouldn't that have given you severe whiplash down there?" Zac nods at Ryan's crotch.

"Totally, dude. But it was worth it. Being naked is so freeing. I lived in a nudist colony for a year. Mina pretends to hate when I walk around naked, but I know she secretly loves it—"

"Anyway, we should go." I cut in, grabbing Zac's hand and stepping into the stairwell with him. *Shut up, Ryan.* "Don't want to keep your driver

waiting. See you guys later.”

“Wait,” Jordan says, finding her confidence. “Zac, did you send Mina a bouquet of pink roses?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Because she has a secret admirer and we’re trying to figure out who they’re from.”

“Definitely not from me. I admire Mina publicly.”

We all laugh at his joke and say our goodbyes. Zac and I head out to the busy street. He holds the car door open like a gentleman and climbs inside behind me.

“Sit next to me,” he says as the vehicle takes off.

I look around myself, confused. “Is there someone invisible in the back seat with us? We *are* sitting next to each other.”

“I mean right next to me. Take the middle seat.” His voice dips low so the driver can’t hear us. “That’s what couples do, right?”

“I don’t think we have to act like a couple in front of the driver,” I whisper back.

“I know, but we should keep up appearances whenever in public so that we never slip up.”

“Okay, sure.” I slide right next to Zac and buckle my seat belt.

I contemplate whether I should hold his hand. Nerves get the best of me, so I decide not to. But then I think *fuck it, you only live once. I’m going to enjoy this opportunity*. If he questions me, I’ll tell him I’m acting my part as his girlfriend.

Having some fun with this, I take Zac’s hand in mine. No, I do something better. I wrap his arm around my shoulders and snuggle up to him. He looks down at me from the corner of his eyes with the slightest smirk on his lips.

“What?” I whisper. “You’re the one who said we need to keep up pretenses. This is how I act around my boyfriends.”

He chuckles and gazes at the road ahead. “Your friends seem nice.”

“They’re great. Ryan can be a bit full-on sometimes.”

“I can tell. Are you two...?” His voice wanders off with the implication of romance.

Shit.

“We used to see each other, but I put a stop to that. And contrary to what he says, I do *not* like it when he walks around naked—which he doesn’t do in my apartment, just so you know.”



Zac laughs. “Okay. Good to know. What would you like for breakfast?”

“Whatever is easiest. McDonald’s or something.”

Zac redirects the driver. His voice returns to that lower, more intimate volume as he says to me, “You look really nice, by the way. You better be careful an alien doesn’t set its eyes on you, and you become the next person on *Erotic Alien Encounters*.”

I laugh and shove his chest, pleasantly surprised by how firm it is. “I thought I made it clear that I’d happily go on that show.”

He smiles and goes quiet, then says, “I had fun last night. I’ve been pretty lonely. Your company is nice.”

“I thought you said I’m painful?”

“You are.”

I smile back at him. “I had fun too.”

“Hey,” Zac speaks up, addressing the driver again. “Do you mind turning the music up?” A moment later, Madonna is blasting from the speakers.

I raise an eyebrow at Zac. “Is that volume necessary?” The sound isn’t so loud that it’s uncomfortable. A proper conversation with the driver can’t be held without speaking louder than normal. But considering how close I’m sitting to Zac, the two of us have no problem hearing each other.

“I want to talk to you without the driver listening to us,” Zac says. “There’s something I’d like to clear up with you.”

“Okay. Go for it.”

He clears his throat. “First of all, I’m sorry that your name is getting dragged into rumors regarding the end of my marriage. And secondly, if we’re going to be friends, it’s important to me that you know the truth about my divorce. I’m not the one who cheated in my marriage. It was the other way around.”

“Wow, I’m sorry to hear that happened to you, but also kind of relieved you’re not a cheater. Actually, *very* relieved,” I say.

“You should learn not to believe celebrity gossip.”

“Why didn’t you ever make a public statement to correct the lies?”

He shrugs. “I stopped caring about everything when Penny and I separated.”

“Not everything. You said it’s important to you that I know the truth. You also care about *The Velvet Cigar* and making it successful, otherwise you wouldn’t have agreed to this fake relationship. Speaking of which, when are we confirming the rumors with the public?”

“We have that talk show appearance coming up in a few days,” he says. “We can announce our relationship there.”

“Good idea.”

“I should text Rich to let him know we’re on board with his proposition.”

Keeping his arm around me, Zac uses his free hand to retrieve his phone from his pocket. I’m not trying to be a snoop, but he enters the pin code to his phone right in front of me, and it makes me laugh.

“1234, that’s your pin code?” I ask.

“Yeah. What’s wrong with that? It’s easy to remember.”

“And also easy for people to access your phone if it gets stolen. You should change it. I mean, what if someone gets a hold of your dick pics?”

Zac snorts, and yet the sound is attractive, coming from him. “Mina, I don’t keep dick pics on my phone.”

“Where do you keep them?”

“Let me correct myself. I don’t *have* dick pics.”

“Shame. So anyway,” I say as Zac sends a message to Richard, “what kind of pet are we looking for today? A turtle? Snake? Or are we going more traditional with cats and dogs?”

Zac returns the phone to his pocket. “Darius told me to buy a dog. I was thinking a cat will fit into my life with more ease. They look after themselves and will be less work for me.”

“Isn’t that cheating? Darius wants you to have something to look after.”

“I don’t need to share my reasoning with him. A pet is a pet. He’ll still be pleased if I buy a cat.”

“If you say so. Which pound are we visiting?” I ask.

“I was planning on going to a pet shop.”

I gasp and pull back from Zac’s arm. “Nah-uh. Absolutely not. Do you know what they do to animals at the pound that don’t find a home? They kill them. Zac, you could save one of those little beauties and give it a happy life.”

He sighs. “Animals at the pound can be violent.”

“Not all of them. We’ll find you a gentle cat.”

“No. They also have trauma half the time. I don’t have the patience for a pet like that.”

“As your girlfriend, I demand we go to the pound, *please*.” I put on a frown, pouting my bottom lip.

“You’re demanding and begging in the same sentence? Your persuasion

techniques need practice.”

“Zac, come on. I was just starting to warm up to you after you stood me up twice.”

“I didn’t stand you up. I was late.” He jabs my ribs, teasing me in return. I squeal and push his hands away. “Yeah, but you were still a jerk about it.”

“Fuck. All right, fine. We’ll go to the pound.”

“Yes!” I wrap my arms around him. “Thank you. You’re the best!”

## Chapter Six

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### Zac

Mina and I walk hand in hand into the pound. I thought I would hate the acting required for this romantic publicity stunt, but it felt nice to hug someone in the car ride here. It feels nice to hold Mina's hand right now.

The pound is pretty empty, aside from a few customers and a teenage volunteer staff member behind the counter. She's playing on her phone and doesn't notice our arrival.

I step up to the counter with Mina and greet the girl. "Excuse me. Could you show me where the cats are? I'm looking for one that's old and gentle and doesn't require much care."

The volunteer looks up from her phone and gasps when recognizing us. "Sure, I'll show you to the cats. Do you mind if I get a photo with you two first? I'm a huge fan of *The Velvet Cigar*."

"Actually—"

"Absolutely," Mina says. "Do you know you're the first person who has asked me for a photo. I'd wager I'm more excited about this photo than you are."

Typical. I don't know why I didn't see Mina's response coming.

The volunteer steps out from behind the counter and positions herself in front of us, holding her phone up to take a selfie. Usually, I hate this kind of fan interaction but the smile on Mina's face is so genuine, and I remember fame is all so new and exciting for her. So, I smile for Mina's sake, because despite what I said about her having too much energy, I like seeing her happy.

“Okay, follow me,” the volunteer says once she’s taken the picture.

We follow at a distance. I’m caught off guard when Mina slips her hand back into mine, but again, the physical touch is nice.

“That was fun,” she says. “I keep having to pinch myself that this is my life. Oh my God, puppies! I’m a head down this aisle to play with them. Go search for cats. I’ll come find you.”

I watch her walk off, laughing to myself. If only I could get as excited about puppies as she does.

“This is the senior cat section,” the volunteer says, pointing to a nearby aisle. “From as far as we can tell, the cats here are all old and should be gentle. I’ll give you some time to select a cat.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll take that one.” I point to the only cat that is sleeping. Seems like a good indication of its nature, compared to all the others meowing.

“I’ll grab a cage for you to carry him home in. Meet me at the counter when you’re ready to make your purchase.”

Well, that was easy.

Mina’s laughter carries through the aisles. I return to where I left her, finding her sitting in a pen full of puppies with a brown Toy Poodle in her arms, licking her face.

“Zac, look how cute this one is. I wish I could adopt it myself, but I’m not allowed a pet in my apartment.” She places the dog on the ground and stands up. “Bye, little guy. I’m sending my best wishes that someone adopts you. Ugh, this world isn’t fair. I won’t cry.” She fans her eyes.

Despite her best efforts, her eyes turn glassy, and I realize seeing Mina upset is something I never want to witness.

“You know what, I’m ditching the cat idea. I’ll adopt that dog,” I tell her.

Her gaze flicks to me in shock. “What? But you said you don’t want a dog.”

“I’m not the biggest fan of them, but you’re in love with that thing. I’ll adopt him for us.”

“Us? I’m confused.”

“You’re the one who said we’re best friends. He’ll live in my apartment. I’ll take care of him like Darius wants, but you can see him whenever you like. He can come on all our morning jogs. You can even name him.”

“Mr. Fluffy.”

And just like that, she has me laughing again. “I’m sorry, what?”

“That’s what we’re calling him.”

Leave it to Mina to pick that name. It’s so... her. I can’t think of a more ridiculous name. Ridiculous, but at the same time, perfect. “If you want to call him Mr. Fluffy, we’ll call him Mr. Fluffy.”

## **Mina**

“I have a dog.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Jordan asks, watching TV when I return home from my time with Zac.

“Zac bought a dog for us. I was wrong about Zac being a jerk. I think he might be the nicest guy that has ever existed but got fucked over by his marriage. He told me his *wife* is the one who cheated on *him*.”

“Oh, that’s amazing! Now you can let yourself fall in love with Zac for real.”

I glare at Jordan and head to my bedroom.

“Wait.” She places the TV on mute. “Back up to the dog part.”

“I can’t be bothered explaining the situation right now. I need to sleep. I was up all night talking to Zac on the phone. Where’s Ryan?”

“Doing some shit with the kombucha in my room, so I’m taking over the couch.”

My phone buzzes with a message. I smile when realizing it’s from Zac.

ZAC

Mr. Fluffy already misses you.

MINA

FaceTime me later so I can see him... and you, I guess.

(Middle finger emoji) You in the mood to watch another musical tonight over the phone?

I’m always in the mood for musicals, but I can’t tonight. I’m working.

Where?

I’m a waitress. I plan to quit as soon as rehearsals begin. Two more weeks of dealing with Karens, then I’m free.

What time do you get home?

We're watching Chicago at twelve. I've penciled it into my calendar so you can't back out.

Lucky for you Chicago is my all-time favorite musical and I never back out of an opportunity to watch it.

"Is that Zac texting you?" Jordan asks.

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Because you have the biggest grin on your face I've ever seen. Like, even big for your standards. You're into him. More so than a celebrity crush. You full on like him."

I shoot her another glare. "Whatever. At least I *know* Zac in person."

"What's that supposed to mean?" From the way her face flushes red, she knows exactly what I'm referring to.

"We both know you're in love with Steel."

Steel is the guy Jordan met a few years back on an app called Secret Santa. It was our first Christmas in America and she decided to stay here alone while I traveled back to Australia for the holidays. Secret Santa is a friend-based app, with the purpose of connecting lonely people during the holiday season so they have someone to talk to. Sounds super sketchy, but the app does a background check on everyone who makes an account and requires ID before it matches them with like-minded people. The matches are anonymous unless you want to reveal your identity.

Every time I ask Jordan to show me a photo of Steel, I get the same answer, that they decided not to share pictures of themselves. They've never spoken over the phone. All they do is text.

*A lot.*

I mean, like twenty times a day. And this has been happening for years.

Jordan throws a couch cushion at me. "I am *not* in love with Steel."

I lean against the doorframe of my room. "How do you know you're not getting catfished by Steel?"

"Because I can see all of his details on his profile."

According to Jordan, Steel is only a couple years older than her, lives in LA, and works a corporate job.

"I don't know why you don't just meet him already," I say.

"I've already told you, the relationship is perfect as is. What if we meet and we don't get along? Or what if I like him but he doesn't like me? Bam!

Everything is ruined. I prefer to leave our friendship in cyberspace.”

We have this same conversation every few weeks, and it always ends this way. I enter my room and close the door, calling out to Jordan, “I still maintain you’re in love with him.”

“Right back at you about Zac,” she calls back.

Love? Definitely not. A celebrity crush? That much has been obvious from the start of time.

My tiny bedroom greets me with all the bouquets of flowers from earlier. Jordan and Ryan must have moved them in here. There are so many that not all of them can fit on my dresser and some have been placed on the ground. I lower my nose to each of them and smile at the aroma. I’m so incredibly lucky to have such supportive friends and family. I send a thank you text to Jordan’s parents for the sunflowers, and slowly work my way through thanking all the other senders, until I come across my favorite bouquet. The pink roses with glitter scattered over the petals.

They’re so beautiful and I feel terrible for not thanking whoever sent them. I turn the bouquet around, checking the back to see if I missed a card or name. Right in the middle of the bouquet, wedged between all the stems, I notice a small piece of paper. Taking care, I move the roses apart and reach for the paper, gasping when a thorn punctures my skin and draws blood. Motherfucker.

Being more careful this time, I grab the paper, finding no name on it, only a short message.

*Don’t tell me you forgot about our last conversation?*

My eyes narrow in on the strange words, having no idea what they mean. What an odd thing to write. For a moment, I contemplate whether there’s been a mix-up and these roses aren’t meant for me, or that the note found its way into the wrong bouquet. But then an uneasiness creeps over me as a worse possibility enters my mind. What if these roses are from Connor?

*If I can’t have you, no one will.*

I drop the bouquet and scamper backward with disgust. “Jordan!”

She barges into my bedroom with Ryan right behind her. “What’s wrong?”

“That note.” I point to the roses and paper lying on the ground. “It’s from Connor. It has to be.”



“I thought Connor always sent you black roses,” she says.

“Would you just read the note.”

Both she and Ryan kneel beside the bouquet, reading the note. Jordan swears, but it’s Ryan’s reaction I’m more caught on. He picks up the bouquet, examining the stems.

“Mimi, these roses have thorns on them,” he says.

“I know. I pricked myself on one of them.”

“No, you don’t understand. Florists always trim the thorns off roses so people don’t get pricked. Whoever sent these roses requested the thorns remain. If they’re from Connor, he’s sending them as a threat. We need to call the police.”

Jordan pulls out her phone. “Already on it.”

I don’t trust the police. Yes, there are some good cops out there. They helped me escape Connor a year back. But there are also many cops with questionable intentions in this city. I don’t know if Connor is still a member of the gang he was in when we dated, but they had connections with a few corrupt cops and would give them a cut of their earnings from drug deals. That’s how the gang managed to stay under the radar. So, when Ryan says we need to call the police, I’m hesitant, not knowing whether one of the good guys will show up.

“The roses could be from anyone,” the police officer says, four hours later once he’s finally arrived and examined the note and roses. Either crime is big in the city today or law enforcement believes four hours is a swift response for someone in need of help. And then when they do show up, I get this bullshit attitude that I’m wasting their time.

Ryan folds his arms, just as unimpressed as I am. Before he can say anything to the officer, Jordan jumps in with her own harsh words. “It seems a big coincidence that Mina receives anonymous roses and a threatening note which aligns with the last words her ex-boyfriend said to her, who, might I add, she took out a restraining order against.”

The officer—a middle-aged overweight and sweaty man—leans one hip against our kitchen counter. “I appreciate your concern, but there’s no evidence in your argument. From what you’ve explained to me, Mina has

recently become a public figure and is starring in a musical that has a cult following. For all we know, those roses came from a fan. It's not uncommon for celebrities to have fans follow them and send gifts."

"But why would a fan write that note?" I argue.

He sighs and adopts a tone like I'm an idiot. "Celebrities receive many bizarre gifts. The best thing you can do is stay vigilant and inform us if you have any further concerns. We've filed this report, but it's not enough to point the finger in any direction."

Ryan shows the officer out, locking the door behind him. "Great help he was."

"It's the police," I say. "Are you surprised?"

Jordan wraps an arm around my shoulder. "Babe, maybe you should reconsider this whole fake dating thing with Zac. I hate the thought of you being in danger."

I've considered the same thing. Connor scares me. But what, am I supposed to live in fear for the rest of my life? Never date again because Connor thinks he owns me? I already let Connor control me once and I won't let it happen again. The bastard won't win.

I step out from beneath Jordan's arm and face my friends with rage. "Fuck Connor. I am on the brink of making all my dreams come true. I am going to be successful and the most talked about celebrity, and some pathetic roses with thorns on them will *not* stand in my way."

## Chapter Seven

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### Zac

Over the past week, I've run with Mina and Mr. Fluffy every morning. Despite not wanting a dog, I'm starting to warm to the little guy. He sleeps at the foot of my bed each night, keeping me company. Taking care of him isn't the burden I expected it to be, and a plus side is that Mina is constantly visiting my apartment to see him.

This last week has also made me sleep deprived from staying up late every night, talking to Mina on the phone while we watch crazy documentaries together. But the amount of fun I have with Mina is worth sacrificing sleep for. I also got Verena and Darius off my back by buying more furniture for my apartment. And now, I'm about to announce my relationship with Mina on a talk show.

The two of us are standing behind a door to the stage, waiting for the host to welcome us. I get a glimpse of Mina's cleavage beside me. Her breasts look phenomenal in the red dress she's wearing. I'm pretty sure the term for her dress is a pencil fit. The material is tight from her breasts all the way down to her knees. I could stare at her for days, looking this incredible—aside from how she's visibly nervous.

Mina won't stop fidgeting with her hands. She shifts back and forth on her feet, then she's bouncing on the spot. Wait, no, she's blowing raspberries with her lips. A few seconds later, she's humming vocal warmups.

"You nervous?" I ask, keeping my voice low so that I don't interfere with the filming.

"The opposite," she whispers at lightning speed, entering a ramble. "I

think I'm about to explode with excitement. It's kind of concerning. My heart is pumping *really* fast. Tell me something to distract me."

"Well... ah..." I adjust my suit jacket. One thing comes to mind. "I've been meaning to ask you something. My friends Verena and Adrian are getting married in a few months. They asked me to invite you to the wedding as my plus one since we're 'together' now."

"Yeah, sure. I'll be your date." She continues to fidget, peering around the backstage area.

"The wedding is in Australia."

Her gaze shoots to me and I sense something displeased in her eyes. "I asked you to make me *less* excited. Now you're telling me I get to go home to Australia? This is amazing. Where are they getting married?"

"The Whitsundays. Verena and Adrian have a history there. It's where they became a couple."

"Oh, romantic. I can't wait."

A nearby filming crew member holds his earpiece, listening to a command. He clears his throat and nods to us. "You two are on in a moment."

Mina gives me a quiet squeal. "You ready to do this?"

I take her hand in mine, weaving our fingers. "You bet."

The audience quietens down on the other side of the door as the host speaks. "I'm so excited about our next guests. Everyone, please welcome stars from the upcoming musical *The Velvet Cigar*, Zac Delavin and Mina Midnight."

Upbeat music plays and the audience turns wild, cheering for us. The door in front of us slides open and lights are flashing all around us. People are pointing at us holding hands. Girls are screaming my name. They're holding up signs that read things like *We love you Zac* and *I'll volunteer to be the next Mrs. Zac Delavin*. I even see a few of the girls crying with excitement.

Mina and I walk out to the couches and give the host, Chantelle O'Brien, a hug. Chantelle is a middle-aged woman who used to be a model in her younger days. Her red hair hangs by her waist, and she's dressed in a skirt suit.

When the music and audience simmer down, I take a seat on a couch with Mina, wrapping my arm around her. The intimacy in our body language has the audience screaming again.

“Shush, all of you,” Chantelle scolds the audience in good humor. “I can’t ask the question everyone is dying to know the answer to if y’all are yelling like that. So, Zac and Mina, before we discuss *The Velvet Cigar*, I have to ask, are you two a couple? It certainly looks that way.”

“Yes, we’re dating.” I give Mina a squeeze and kiss her forehead, sending the audience crazy. As for Mina, she stiffens in my arms the moment my lips touch her skin. A blush rises to her cheeks. Her reaction is adorable.

“Mina, many people would call you the luckiest girl in the world to be dating Zac.”

“I’m not going to fight that title. I’m extremely lucky.” She places her hand on my thigh and smiles. And suddenly, I’m having a tough time thinking about anything other than that hand on my leg.

“Now, Zac, tell us. We know you’re in the process of getting divorced. How did this romance between you and Mina start?”

The question catches me off guard, because I know what it’s insinuating: Mina is the woman I cheated on my wife with. I’m angry with myself for not being prepared with an answer. I should have seen this coming, that my divorce would be a topic of discussion today.

Mina steps in, saving me. “We met up for a coffee once we knew we both made the cast, and sparks flew from there. This was only a couple of weeks ago.”

“I can elaborate,” I say, finding my voice. “I know what the public say: that I cheated on my wife. But that’s not what happened. Mina has nothing to do with the end of my marriage. Anyone who has been through a divorce knows it’s a horrible experience. I shut myself off from the world to cope, never publicly addressing the rumors about me cheating. Honestly, the gossip was the least of my problems. But I’m back now and I’m correcting those rumors because I can’t stand to see Mina be shamed for something she has no connection with.”

The crowd erupts with cheers again. Mina squeezes my hand and mouths the words *thank you* to me.

“So,” Chantelle continues, “rehearsals for *The Velvet Cigar* start in a few days. What is the one thing you’re looking forward to most about working with each other?”

“Uh... Have you heard Mina sing?” Everyone laughs at my comment. “Mina has the most amazing voice I’ve ever come across. Not only that, but she’s also incredibly dedicated to her work. And she is so much fun to be

around.”

The audience gives my answer another applause. I catch Mina looking at me with puppy-dog eyes, flattered and like she can't believe what I said.

“Your turn, Mina,” Chantelle prompts. “What are you looking forward to most about working with Zac?”

“How do I follow Zac's answer? It makes me want to cry.” Mina sends the cutest smile my way, like she's in awe of me. “I need to think of a better response. All I was going to say is you're really hot and I'm excited to kiss you in rehearsals.”

Shit. Is she being serious or putting on a show? My heart pounds against my ribcage.

Someone in the crowd wolf whistles. Giggles follow, spreading throughout the studio. Everyone seems to like Mina's answer as much as I do.

Chantelle brings a glass of water to her mouth and takes a drink. “Great segue, Mina. I was about to ask about the kissing scenes.”

An audience member in the front row shouts, “And the sex scene!” Everyone laughs in response.

“Yes, the sex scene too. Tell us, how are you two preparing for those scenes?”

“Let's be real,” Mina says with a scandalous grin, “you all know how we're preparing for those scenes.” She winks at the audience, and this time, the cheering is the loudest it's been since we arrived on stage.

## **Mina**

“Today went well,” Zac's voice speaks from my phone while I lie on my tummy in bed.

Tonight, we're watching a documentary called *Unusual Sexual Practices from the Ancient World*. I chose this one because I was hoping it would give us a good laugh. Ordinarily, I *would* be amused by the concept of Cleopatra getting herself off with a box that vibrates when bees are placed inside. But all I can think about is the rose I found on my doorstep when returning home from the talk show today. There was no note attached, and it went straight in the bin. But I know the rose was from Connor because it was black, identical to the roses he sent me when we were dating.

“Did you hear what I said?” Zac asks.

“Sorry, I was zoning out.”

“I said our talk show appearance went well.”

“Yeah, I guess. Except now I’m depressed because of all those nice things you said about me to the audience.”

He laughs. “Why does that make you depressed?”

“They’re the nicest things anyone has ever said about me.”

“Still not following.”

I roll onto my back and sigh, bringing the phone with me. “I suppose this fake dating shit is getting to my head. And I don’t mean romantically, because I know we’re friends. I have to remind myself that all the nice gestures and things you say aren’t true, like how you cleared up the rumor about me causing your divorce. You didn’t do that for my sake, it was to benefit the fake relationship. Then you were telling Chantelle how fun I am to be around. I know you think I’m annoying.”

Zac scoffs. “You are so annoying, which is why I spend hours every night talking to you on the phone when I could be sleeping.”

That makes me laugh.

“Mina, I didn’t clear up the rumor to benefit the musical. I probably should have hyped *up* the rumor. Believe me, the media loves a good scandal. I cleared the rumor for you because I don’t want your name being trashed.”

“Oh.” I’m speechless. Zac’s explanation makes sense when he puts it like that. “Here are those lovely trust issues I have shining through. Sorry for being a bitch.”

“You’re not a bitch. All right, I’m bored of this documentary. You want to watch *Pitch Perfect*?”

“No, I’m not in the mood. I think I might go to bed. We’ve got a big day tomorrow with the photoshoot for *Vogue*.”

There’s a pregnant pause on Zac’s end of the phone call. “Are you alright? You don’t seem like your usual bubbly self.”

“I’m fine. It’s just been a long day.”

“You sure? Because best friends tell each other what’s getting them down.”

I laugh. “Don’t pull the best friends card on me. That’s my trick for when you’re a grump.”

“You’re laughing, so it worked. Come on, tell me what’s bothering you.”

I prop myself up on my forearms, exhaling frustration. “It’s just... you

know those glittery pink roses Jordan thought you'd sent me?"

"Yeah."

I hesitate before continuing, not wanting to bring Zac into my problems. But friends *do* talk about this stuff. "I found a note attached to them that makes me believe my ex sent them. When I returned home today, I found another rose on my doorstep. But this one was black. That was my ex's thing. He would always send me black roses when we were together."

"Shit." Zac's voice loses all sense of ease. "This is pretty serious. Is this the ex you have the restraining order against?"

"Yeah. We called the cops the other day, and they were no help. They said the pink roses could have been from some random fan who found out where I live. I haven't bothered contacting the police about the black rose from today because I know they'll tell me the same thing as last time."

"The roses could be from a fan," Zac says. "I've received a lot of strange gifts from fans over the years. But you should report the black rose. And make sure you're always careful, okay? Never leave your apartment unlocked. Don't walk alone at night."

I poke fun at him, hoping to shift the topic of conversation into something lighthearted. "You're beginning to sound like my mom."

He doesn't laugh like I want him to. "I don't want anything happening to you."

"Zac..."

"I'm serious. And promise me you'll report the second rose."

"All right. I promise."

"Good. Because I care about your safety."



## Chapter Eight

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### Mina

I reported the second rose. The response I received from the police was the same as with the pink roses. *The rose could be from anyone.* Blah, blah, blah.

So, I didn't report the third rose when it arrived on my doorstep, or the fourth or fifth. There's never any note attached to them, but I know who they're from. Though the roses stir up anxiety in me each time I find one, my coping strategy is to pretend they don't exist. This little intimidation tactic of Connor's is pathetic, and he will *not* control my life.

Jordan and Ryan are aware of each rose since they live with me. Zac isn't. I know he'll hassle me to tell the police, which will be pointless since they've proven to be no help. As far as he is concerned, there *is* no rose issue anymore.

On a positive note, I quit my waitressing job last night. I'm out of bed at the crack of dawn, buzzing with nervous energy now that the first day of rehearsals has arrived. All throughout the night I was tossing and turning with anticipation and don't think I slept for a minute. I'm dressed in my workout gear and about to head to Central Park for my daily run with Zac, ready to burn off some of these nerves, when I receive a text from him.

ZAC

Canceling today's morning run.

That's it? No explanation, and with barely any notice.

MINA

Are you angry at me or something?

No.

Then why have your texting skills reverted to the way you used to send abrupt emails?

Busy. Not angry. Lawyer issues. See you at the table read today.

Damn. I was really needing this run to get rid of my nerves.

Sorry. I'll make it up to you.

Boo. I throw my phone on my bed and head for a shower. At nine a.m., I arrive at the studio, bursting with a mixture of butterflies and joy. People greet me as I travel through the corridors. The studio is bustling with life, with everyone involved in the production gathering for the first time.

Right before I enter the rehearsal room, Richard Nelson pulls me to the side. "Mina, I'm glad I caught you before the day starts. The public are loving your relationship with Zac. You two are doing an excellent job."

"Thanks. Anything for *The Velvet Cigar*, right?"

"Exactly. Now, listen." His voice lowers. "No one else in the production knows about this set up between you and Zac, so let's keep it that way, all right? The more people who know, the more likely the truth will be leaked."

"Yeah, no problem. I wasn't planning on telling anyone."

Richard gives me one firm pat on the shoulder. "Excellent. Let's get this table read started and show everyone how much chemistry you have with Zac."

I follow him into the rehearsal room and am once again overcome with a rush of excitement. The room is already full of cast and crew members, many of them seated at a set of tables that are grouped together, creating a large circle for everyone to face each other once the reading begins. Other people are standing in small clusters, engrossed in conversation. More cast members greet me, saying how excited they are to work with me. Their comments are all so surreal to hear. I've been to many table reads before, but this one hits differently. *I'm* the star of the show, and I can't imagine those words will ever sink in.

"Our chairs are over here, gorgeous." Zac's voice comes from behind me, but without the affection I'd expect from a boyfriend. Before I get a chance to

turn and face him, he slides his hand into mine and leads us to our chairs.

We take our seats next to each other and Zac sits in silence, sipping his drink from a takeout coffee cup. His jaw is stiff and the look on his face is sullen.

“Shit. Things went badly with the lawyers?” I ask.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Here, I got you a drink.” He pushes a takeout cup along the table to me.

I take a sip, smiling when I taste hot chocolate. I open the lid and laugh at all the pink baby marshmallows floating on top. “I don’t know how your wife fell out of love with you.”

“Sorry for canceling our run this morning.”

“It’s okay. You said you’d make it up to me and you made good on your word.” I point to the hot chocolate.

The tiniest smile breaks free on his lips, and I realize I love it, that *I* can make Zac smile when he’s having a bad day. So, I push forward with the positive energy. “You need a lesson on how to text properly. I’ve let it slide till now, but the time has come.”

“I know how to text,” he says.

“Yeah, but we’re talking Mina-style texting.”

“Oh, God, here we go.”

“First of all, you need to use emojis, and lots of them. You also need to text the same way you would talk. No one-word answers or short sentences. Something like this...” I grab his phone off the table and enter his ridiculous pin code of 1234. But the screen shakes, alerting me of the wrong code.

“I changed it after you lectured me about needing a stronger code. The new code is your birthday.”

I chew on my lower lip, confused. “My birthday?”

“Don’t couples use dates like that as passwords?” he whispers to assure no one around us hears.

“Yes, but *how* do you know my birthday?”

“You mentioned it that day in the park when you gave me a rundown of your life. I told you I have a good memory.”

I smile and enter the code. “Now I feel bad for not knowing your birthday.”

“It’s the twenty-ninth of February.”

“On the leap day? That is so cool. So technically, you’re like seven years old.”

Zac chuckles. “I should have known you’d say something ridiculous like that.”

“Okay, back on topic. This is how you should text me from now on.” Once I’m into his *messages* app, I pull up my name and start typing a text, reading the words out loud as I write them. “Hey, Mina. Smiling emoji. How’s your morning been? I’m so sorry but I need to cancel our jog today. Crying emoji. I was looking forward to hanging out with you because you’re fun to be around and nice on the eyes. Like, *really* nice. I’ll just have to settle for seeing you at the rehearsal instead. We’re still on for our jog tomorrow, where I’m going to be shirtless. Eggplant emoji.”

He smirks at me. “You are...”

“The best?”

“Trouble. I’ll see what I can do with honing my texting skills to your liking.”

“Glad to hear it.”

A loud whistle interrupts our conversation. The room turns quiet as Richard speaks up. “Welcome, everyone. I’d like to say a few words before rehearsals begin. You are all here because you are incredibly talented performers. We are going to work hard and make this the best show the world has ever seen. There’s already so much buzz surrounding Zac and Mina, and I could not be happier that they are our leads. Without any further ado, let’s get this show on the way.”

Everyone claps and cheers, and oh my God, I am so excited I could cry.

And I do cry. Three days later, to be exact, when I’m hiding out in a toilet stall on my lunch break. But they’re not tears of joy. It’s funny how fast excitement can turn into stress. I’m overwhelmed with the number of things I need to master for Seraphina’s role: choreography, stage directions, having the stamina to sing and dance at the same time without entering cardiac arrest. On top of all those issues, more black roses are arriving on my doorstep. Pretending Connor doesn’t exist isn’t as easy as I hoped, and the uncertainty of his actions has me nervous.

But I didn’t run to the bathroom to cry. With the build-up of stress, what breaks me and brings on the tears is the two chorus girls standing at the sink,

having a conversation about me without realizing I can hear them.

“What do you think the deal is with Mina?” I peek through the crack in the door and see the voice belongs to a girl named Lisa.

The second one, Samantha, replies, “I don’t know how Mina got cast as the lead. Yeah, she can sing, but so can the thousands of other girls who auditioned.”

Lisa laughs. “I know how she got the lead. She’s sleeping with Zac Delavin.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“Look, I didn’t hear it in those exact words, but Richard Nelson told me Zac requested Mina to be the female lead. Why would Zac do that? She’s not that good a singer. It’s because she’s fucking him. She’s sleeping her way to the top. I could have done that, but I won’t reduce myself to being a whore.”

“Either that, or Zac has some fetish for pink hair and promised to make Mina the lead because he wanted to fuck her.”

I’m sick to the stomach hearing these accusations. If these girls are thinking such horrid things about me, others are too. The vicious rumors never stop. But is there some truth this time? I don’t know what to make of the news that Zac requested I be the lead.

Why would he do that when we didn’t know each other? Unless... the chorus girls are right and he’s just trying to get into my pants.

The tears come even stronger at that thought, stinging more than my eyes but my heart too. I thought I’d been chosen for the role because of my talent. I guess that was a load of shit.

I want to believe the best in Zac, but I can’t see why he would go out of his way to make me the female lead when he had no clue who I was. All Zac would have seen of me was my headshot and perhaps audition tape. Like the chorus girls said, my talent is no greater than anyone else’s. It’s not like Zac would have watched the tape and dropped to his knees, demanding I be the lead because he was so impressed by my audition.

Regardless of Zac’s intentions, this fake relationship is supposed to boost publicity, and it’s done that, all right, but in all the wrong ways. It’s made me look like a husband stealer, a talentless whore who sleeps her way to the top, and has brought on unwanted attention from Connor. I can’t handle this, not with all the pressure I’m under.

It’s not until after the chorus girls exit the restroom and I’ve wiped away my tears, that I pluck up the courage to leave my stall and confront this

situation head on.

“I’m done with this fake relationship. It’s over,” I say once finding Richard alone in a rehearsal room, busy on his laptop. I wanted to go straight to Zac, but unlike me, he isn’t on his lunch break. In fact, I’m barely seeing him today. Our rehearsal schedule doesn’t line up.

Richard stares at me from behind his laptop screen, shocked by my abrupt tone. He opens his mouth to speak, but I cut him off before he has a chance. “I overheard people talking about me, saying the only reason I got the lead was because I’m sleeping with Zac. If they’re thinking it, God knows how many other people are too.”

“Mina—”

“I’m not finished speaking. This is not the image I want to create for myself. Then they said Zac requested I be the lead because he wanted to fuck me. This is so typical—the moment I think I’m getting somewhere in life, that my hard work is paying off, I find out it’s all a lie.”

Richard rises from his chair, holding up both hands to hush me. “Mina, you need to calm down and listen to me. I’m sorry you heard such hurtful words. Yes, Zac requested you be the lead. Actually, he demanded you be the lead. I let him listen to the audition finalists and asked for his input on who to choose. He recognized your voice the moment he heard it and asked me who you are. He didn’t even see your face. When I gave him your name, he said you’d sung for him once before and your voice is phenomenal.”

“He... What?” My words are barely a whisper as I try to comprehend everything Richard revealed.

“People will always talk and be jealous of your success. You need to believe in yourself. You *have* worked hard, and you were picked because of your talent.”

“I... don’t know what to say. I’m not usually this hot-headed. I’m just stressed about—” Well, where should I start? The list goes on: my psycho ex-boyfriend, the need to perform perfectly for this musical, the slander against my name. I spare Richard the details.

He folds his arms. “You don’t need to say anything. Just tell me you’re not pulling out of the relationship with Zac.”

“Um... yes. Of course I won’t.”

“Good. Now, get back out there and continue working hard.”

I take a deep breath and nod. No sooner than I return to the corridor, a text arrives on my phone.

ZAC

Mr. Fluffy told me he misses you. I'm taking him for a walk at sundown. Want to join me?

His message makes me smile; makes my heart beat faster. I miss Mr. Fluffy too, but I think I miss Zac more. I can't believe he remembers me from the masterclass and that more than three years later he still recognized my voice. I'm in shock how he *demand*ed I be Seraphina.

Each time I've doubted him it's because of rumors or my own insecurities and trust issues. But finally, it's sinking in that Zac is a really, *really* good guy.

## Zac

I'm standing in our usual meeting spot at Central Park with Mr. Fluffy when I see Mina walk toward me with the biggest smile on her face. Fuck, she's beautiful. She's always smiling, but I don't know what I've done to deserve a smile of this magnitude.

"You remember me from the masterclass."

I smile back at her, a little confused. "I'm not following."

Mina scoops Mr. Fluffy into her arms and gives him a kiss. "Richard said you recognized my voice and demanded I be Seraphina."

"Oh... ah... yeah. Of course I remember your voice. You were amazing in that masterclass."

"What do you mean 'of course'? I have explicit memories of that masterclass. You were on your phone while I was singing. You even growled at one point and stormed out of the room mid-performance."

"Uh... Sorry about that." I scrunch a hand through my hair, a little embarrassed that Mina has such a clear memory of that day. "I was dealing with some stuff at the time. Penny... That was the day I found out she'd cheated on me. We were texting during the masterclass. I heard your voice and thought it was so unique and amazing, but I was not in a good place mentally and had to remove myself from the room."

"Shit. I'm sorry to hear that. I'm glad for the explanation, though. You have no idea how big of a jerk I thought you were. After our first two meetings for the musical, I was certain you were a dick. Why didn't you say

anything about remembering me?”

I shrug. “I thought it would be a little creepy if I did.”

“Are you kidding me? Being remembered by Zac Delavin is the biggest compliment.”

“Hopefully, I’ve changed your mind about me being a dick.”

Mina returns Mr. Fluffy to the ground and starts walking him, smiling over her shoulder at me. “You adopted a dog for us. I’d say you’re doing pretty good.”

I catch up to her, smiling too. “So, how are you finding rehearsals?”

We walk Mr. Fluffy for half an hour while discussing all the ups and downs of what is now our work life. It’s so nice to have the company that when Mina tells me she’s starving and needs to head home for food, I’m not ready to say goodbye to her.

“Crap, the fridge is empty, though,” she says. “Looks like I’m eating takeout tonight.”

I jump on the opportunity to keep Mina by my side. “I’ve got plenty of food in my fridge. Want to have dinner at my place? I’ll cook.”

She grins at me, and the next thing I know, we’re walking through the front door of my apartment.

Mina has been here many times already—visiting Mr. Fluffy—and makes herself at home, pouring a glass of cold water from the fridge. “I know you just moved in here and all, but when are you planning to decorate? I’m *dying* to get a glimpse into your soul.”

“My *soul*? Who speaks like that?” I let Mr. Fluffy off the leash. He curls up on the couch and goes to sleep.

“I do, obviously. The way a home is decorated says a lot about the person who lives in it. Take my place, for example. It looks like crap because I’ve been a starving artist for my entire adult life.”

I join Mina in the kitchen. “By those principles, this apartment describes me well.”

“I dunno. This place says *bleak* to me. Not *handsome* and *caring*.”

I laugh quietly to myself, not sure if she’s flirting or being her cheerful self. But either way, I like knowing that Mina thinks I’m handsome.

“So,” Mina says once finishing her water, “what do you plan to do with this apartment? You got a style you’re going for?”

“Haven’t thought about it.”

She raises her hand like an eager schoolgirl. “If you need someone to help



you, I volunteer as tribute.”

“Sure. Verena has been hounding me to decorate this place. We can go shopping this weekend if you’re free. Give the paparazzi something to fuss about.”

“It’s a date. Anyway, what’s for dinner?”

“Do you like lamb?” I ask.

“Love it.”

“I’ll get the oven preheated.”

I grab an array of vegetables from the pantry and place them on a chopping board. Mina hoists herself onto the kitchen counter, sitting right beside where I’m cutting the food. The temptation to gaze at her legs is strong. Her breasts are even more tempting. But I do *not* want to be caught staring at them.

“Back to the decoration topic, what decor do you already have?” she asks. “Where’s all of your stuff, in storage?”

“I threw out everything. Whatever is in this apartment is all I own.” I laugh, because fuck, that sounds depressing. “Mina, I can’t emphasize this to you enough: I was in a *really* bad marriage. I don’t want any reminders of that time in my life.” I keep telling myself there’s only two more days until my divorce is official and I can finally put this nightmare behind me.

“I get that. When my ex hit me, I—”

My knife pauses mid-carrot, and my voice rises with shock. “He did *what* to you?”

“Oh... yeah. Look, it’s no big deal. I’m fine now.”

“Mina, that is a *massive* deal.” Despite the anger pulsing in my veins, I want to stop what I’m doing and hug her. But I hold back, knowing that would be strange for us. I’ve hugged her many times in public for others to see. In private, we barely touch. “You can’t drop information like that into a conversation and expect me to have no reaction. This is the guy you got the restraining order against?”

“Yeah. I wasn’t trying to make this conversation about me. I only wanted to say I relate to what you’re feeling, not wanting any memory of the past. I had a matching tattoo with my ex and got it removed the moment we broke up.”

Even the fact that she had a matching tattoo with this asshole pisses me off. It makes me jealous, and I don’t fucking know why.

“Have you received any more roses from him?” I ask.

“Not since the second one I told you about.”

“Good. What’s this guy’s name, anyway?”

“Connor Phillips.”

“Do you have a photo of him?”

“Only one. I deleted all the others.” She pulls out her phone and starts scrolling. “I wanted to delete this one too, but I’ve kept it as a reminder of how far I’ve come since being trapped in a controlling relationship.”

She hands her phone to me, and I almost choke with shock from the image. I don’t know where to look first, at Mina’s body in the skimpy dress, the piece of shit who hit her, or the way he’s holding her throat and ass.

The image is so... vulgar. I try my best not to stare at Mina in the photo, because it feels like an invasion of privacy. But it’s impossible. Connor is lifting her dress and grabbing her ass. He’s clutching her neck like she’s a possession and is licking the side of her face.

Mina clears her throat. “Sorry, I should have warned you about the photo. It’s not my finest moment.”

Looking at this image, I feel jealous again. Not because of what this guy is doing to her, but because the girl in the photo is not the Mina I know. The photo makes me realize there’s a whole other side to her I don’t have access to, and it sparks something territorial in me. I want to know everything about Mina and be the only one who knows her in such an intimate way.

So, this is the kind of guy she’s attracted to. Covered in ink. Rough looking. Before him, there was Ryan, the free-spirited guy who lives life on the edge and attends nudist colonies, who also has tattoos. She has a type, and I can’t be any further from it if I tried.

“Okay, I’m embarrassed. Can I have my phone back?” she asks. I pass it to her without a word. “You’re judging me right now.”

“I’m not judging you.” *I’m jealous that I don’t have access to all of you.* “I’m trying to understand how this guy could be lucky enough to call you his girlfriend then fuck it all up by hitting you.”

“I’ve been trying to figure that one out for a while.”

I resume cutting the vegetables. “This Connor guy, did he do anything else to harm you?”

“He only hit me the once. I didn’t give him another chance and got the restraining order. But he was manipulative all throughout our relationship. Not only that, he was also involved with gangs and drugs. It was fucked up. Toward the end of our relationship, I found out his gang killed a few people.”

“Are you serious?” I look up at her in shock.

“Yeah. I should have left him way sooner than I did. I was in too deep and couldn’t see clearly for a while. He would always gaslight me into thinking I was a bad person.”

“Looks like you and I have that in common too. Penny would always twist the situation to make me out to be the bad guy.”

“Relationships can be so hard. You know what’s depressing? You’re the best boyfriend I’ve ever had, and you’re not even real.” She says the words in humor, lightening the mood.

I arrange the vegetables on an oven tray with the lamb and grin at her. “Hey, I’m standing right here, aren’t I? I’m real.”

“You know what I mean. I have no clue how Penny could cheat on you.” In typical Mina-style, she pulls a joke. “If you were my husband, I’d be up on you ten times a day.”

“My God, Mina.” I laugh.

“I’m being serious.” She continues teasing me. “I guess I’ll have to make do with living vicariously through Talon and Seraphina’s sex scene. Oh, speaking of which, we have our first kissing scene coming up in rehearsals next week. I think we should practice beforehand, like you suggested.”

“Sure. Let me know when you want to rehearse.”

“How about this Saturday night?” she asks.

“That’s fine with me.”

“I’m kind of nervous. I mean, is the kiss going to be awkward between us?”

I place the food in the oven. “Not on my end. I’ve kissed many colleagues before and it’s always very professional.”

“Okay, but what about after the kiss? What if we can’t be around each other without things being awkward?”

“Mina, it’s not a real kiss. There won’t be any romantic feelings involved.” But even as I say those words, I know they’re a lie.

## Chapter Nine

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### Mina

Another goddamn rose turns up on my doorstep Friday morning, and this time there's a note attached to it.

*He hasn't laid his hands on you yet. Lucky.*

Anger gets the best of me, and I'm dialing Connor's phone number before I can stop myself.

"Hello, Connor speaking," he answers in a friendly tone, which makes me more furious because there is nothing friendly about Connor. The way he speaks and holds himself and even how he looks at a person is threatening.

"What the fuck does this note mean?"

"Excuse me?" he asks, clueless. "Who is this?"

I pace around my tiny kitchen. "Don't mess with me, Connor. You know exactly who this is."

"Mina? You shouldn't be calling me."

"And you shouldn't be sending me threatening notes and roses."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he says in a calm tone that's so convincing I almost believe him.

"Oh, so someone else is copying your behavior?"

"If you're having concerns, you should call the police. You're good at doing that."

“Oh, fuck this. Stop trying to scare me. I won’t succumb to your threats.” I hang up the call, angrier now than before. Then something sinks in.

*You should call the police. You’re good at doing that.* Is that Connor’s way of being spiteful over the restraining order placed on him, or is there a deeper meaning to his words? Is he telling me in not so many words that he’s watching my every move and knows I’ve reported the roses to the police? The possibility isn’t so crazy, considering the corrupt cops who are connected to his gang.

Shit. I can’t trust the police at all. I’ll never know if I’m talking to a genuine cop or one who is working with Connor.

An even worse realization comes over me.

*He hasn’t laid his hands on you yet. Lucky.*

The note is referring to Zac, isn’t it? How closely is Connor watching me? Closer than relying on his police connections to relay if I’ve reported a rose. Close enough to know Zac and I aren’t truly together.

A cold sweat forms over my forehead. I think I’ve got myself a stalker.

By nighttime, I’ve had a full day of rehearsals and a chance to find clarity about the latest note from Connor. He doesn’t want me kissing Zac, even if the kiss is pretend. By those standards, Connor is expecting me to quit *The Velvet Cigar*. He wants to strip me of my success. But I’m done being scared by him.

The police are no help, nor do I trust them to ask for their help, so I’m taking matters into my own hands. I’ve placed a letter opener in the shape of a dagger in my purse, along with pepper spray. If Connor tries anything on me, I’ll be ready for a fight. Other than that, I’m living my life without fear, and when I kiss Zac tomorrow night, I’ll make damn sure I enjoy it. Fuck Connor.

As for right now, enjoying life means unwinding from a long week with a bottle of wine and reruns of *Friends*. Unlike me, Jordan is in a panic, late for her shift at the burlesque club and is rushing around the apartment trying to dress herself. I don’t plan on telling her or Ryan about the latest development with Connor. Nor Zac. It will only stress them out and they’ll push me to go to the police, which I’ve already established is not an option.

“Where’s Ryan at tonight?” I ask from my spot on the couch.

Jordan is too busy checking she’s packed everything in her bag to answer me. As soon as she’s done, she balances on one foot to buckle her heels and almost falls over from how fast she’s moving.

“Hello? I asked you a question. Do you know where Ryan is?”

“No idea other than he’s out with some random backpacking friends he met yesterday.”

I snort. “So typical of him.”

“Okay, I’ve got to get to the club. I’m so late—” Her phone lights up in her hand and she stops to check it. Seconds later, she’s wearing a gushing smile.

“New guy on the scene?” I swallow a sip of wine, my gaze returning to the TV.

“It’s Steel.”

“Oh, how stupid of me to have not realized.” Her online pen pal. “What are you guys chatting about? Must be important if it’s preventing you from getting to work.”

“He’s in New York for a few days and wants to meet up.”

My head whips to her, losing complete interest in the TV. “Seriously? You *have* to meet him. You text each other every day.”

“I’m too scared to. What if we don’t like each other in real life?”

“Impossible—”

Our conversation pauses when my phone beeps from the coffee table. I pull it onto the couch with me and read the new text message. A rush of excitement hits me when I see who it’s from.

ZAC

Well, I am officially a divorced man.

“Let me guess, Zac?” Jordan teases.

“Shut up.”

MINA

Woo! Congratulations!!!!!!

We need to celebrate! There are cheap drinks at the club Jordan works at. I’m getting dressed. Meet me there in one hour.

ZAC

I don't feel like celebrating. I've lost so much fucking money and am in a terrible mood.

I can only imagine how that must feel, but the optimist in me says you'll get back all that money, plus more, from The Velvet Cigar :) :) :) :) This is the first day of the rest of your life. I'm forcing you to come out with me.

No.

That one-word message was intentional to display my tone. So was the full stop.

Yikes. You've been researching texting etiquette and learned about the aggressive full stop. I'm impressed.

I texted you because I need someone to vent to. Not because I want to celebrate.

Ok, but I hate that you're sad. I want to make you happy. Think of all the fun we'll have drunk together. You've never seen me drunk before, and I really want to see you drunk.

The three typing dots appear from Zac's end of the messaging. They stay there for a minute then disappear. A moment later, they appear again, and his message arrives.

ZAC

Fine. You win. I'll meet you there in an hour. What's the address.

MINA

YES!!!! SO EXCITED!!!! The place is called Club Noir. It's not far from your apartment.

I've heard of the place. We're going to a strip club?

Burlesque club! There is some stripping, but it's classy.

"Okay, change of plans," I tell Jordan, who's still texting Steel. "Zac's divorce has been finalized and we're coming to your club to celebrate. Can you wait a few minutes for me to get dressed and we'll share a ride?"

"Be quick."

"Ah! Love you!" I jump over the couch and run for my room. "Tell Steel to come too. If meeting him gets awkward, you'll have me and Zac as a buffer."

"My first time meeting Steel will *not* be while I'm wearing lingerie. Stop

talking and get dressed.”

## Zac

It’s ten p.m. when I arrive at Club Noir in a terrible mood. Tonight, I’m not sure if even Mina can lift my spirits.

The lights in the club are dim. A red glow fills the venue, casting a sensual atmosphere I’d expect to find in any burlesque club. But it’s not seedy, which I’m glad of. The clientele are dressed well and the interior of this place looks like something from *Moulin Rouge*. The entertainment area is large and packed with customers seated in velvet couches and armchairs scattered around the room, all facing the stage where a group of contortionists perform alongside a live jazz band.

I spot Jordan on stage, doing the splits while in a handstand. Impressive. She’s dressed in lingerie, as with all the other performers. The routine, though risqué, must be comedic because the audience laughs every few seconds. Although the dancers are the center of attention, muttered conversation still takes place among the audience.

Mina’s last text said she was at the bar. I make my way through the audience, passing waitstaff delivering drinks, and emerge to the left of the entertaining area where I spot Mina with her forearms resting on the bar and her ass poking out. Suddenly, I find it hard to look anywhere else. Her hair tumbles down over her shoulders in luscious pink curls and sits by her waist. She’s wearing a short, white dress and heels that emphasize the slender length of her legs. The dress is tight, sculpting the perfect shape of her ass and breasts. I *need* to stop noticing these features on Mina every time I see her.

Tonight, that might be an impossibility. She’s always beautiful, but the way she looks right now... it’s pure sex. I don’t know how I’m able to think about sex on a night like tonight, but that’s the effect Mina has over me.

She laughs at something the bartender says to her. My eyes switch to him and I’m instantly on the defense. Tattoos poke out from the collar of his shirt. Of course he has tattoos if Mina is flirting with him. He’s looking at her like he wants to fuck her, and I hate it. Maybe coming here tonight wasn’t such a bad idea after all. Jealousy and lust are overpowering my anger toward Penny.



I step up to Mina and place my hand on her lower back, whispering in her ear, “You’re only supposed to be flirting with me.”

Mina turns around, brimming with a smile the moment she recognizes me. My gaze drops to her bright red lipstick, and all I can think about is kissing her. It takes so much mental strength to meet her eyes.

“You came,” she says.

“You thought I wouldn’t?”

“Your texts sounded like you weren’t in a great mood. And by the way,” she lowers her voice, “I wasn’t flirting with the bartender.”

“Well, *he* was flirting with *you*. I can’t blame him. You look incredible tonight.”

“As do you. I’d have no clue you’re a divorced man if you hadn’t told me.” Her red lips wrap around a straw, and she swallows a mouthful of some glowing blue cocktail that’s in a long, thin glass, ten inches tall. “You want one? It’s called a Fruit Loop.”

“Sure.”

“Good answer.” She calls out to the bartender and places an order for me. I pull out my wallet, but she hands over her card before I have a chance to pay. “Girlfriends *do* pay for their boyfriends too, you know. Tonight is just as much a celebration for me. My boyfriend is no longer married.”

I let her get away with paying this time because I’m caught up on how she calls me her boyfriend. It sounds so good coming out of those red lips—which I *need* to stop looking at.

When my drink is served, I grab the glass in one hand and return my other hand to the small of Mina’s back. My palm prickles at the contact. I was wrong at the start of the night to think Mina’s presence wouldn’t cure my mood. Just being around her makes me forget that I’ve lost my life savings and wasted twelve years with the wrong woman. Fuck, I am *really* enjoying this fake relationship. I can touch Mina like she *is* my girlfriend, and she’s none the wiser about how much I like it.

The audience laughs again and applauds as the current performers exit the stage and the next act enters, ready to perform a fan dance with ostrich feathers.

“Want to take a seat on one of the couches and chat?” I ask Mina.

“Yeah.”

Keeping my hand pressed to her, we navigate through the crowd, choosing a free couch toward the front of the audience. When we sit down,

Mina is positioned right next to me with her leg against mine. She has so much skin on display that it makes me wonder what she looks like naked. There's not one part of her body that I don't find a turn on.

Mina lifts my drink to my mouth and sips on her own. "In case it wasn't obvious from my text messages, we're getting drunk tonight. You can vent all you like to me about Penny, but this *is* a celebration."

I thought I wanted to vent. But the thing is, being with Mina is so effortless and a breath of fresh air. When I'm with her, I want to forget I have baggage. I would give anything to kiss those red lips.

She smirks, and I realize I've been caught staring. "Sorry," I say. "That lipstick is very eye-catching."

"Don't apologize. I chose this color because I *want* people to look at my lips."

"People or me?" The question slips out of my mouth before I realize what I'm asking. I regret it instantly because I don't want things to turn weird between us.

Mina isn't supposed to know I'm growing more attracted to her each day. We're friends and colleagues and the truth is, even if something were to happen between us, I'm not in the right mind frame to have a relationship with her. I can't open myself up to be hurt all over again. A pretend relationship suits me fine.

Mina sips on her drink, ignoring my question and asking one of her own. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Go for it."

"I know you said your marriage was toxic, but do you still have feelings for Penny?"

"Absolutely not," I say within an instant, shocked that Mina isn't already aware of the answer. "Why do you ask? Does it seem like I do?"

"No. I just... wanted to be sure. Relationships can be a complicated thing."

Before either of us can say anything further, a young lady steps up to us with a nervous smile and a pen in her hand, pointed toward me. "Hi, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I'm a huge fan. Do you mind signing my arm?"

"Sure." I take the pen and sign my name on her skin. Even after all these years of being in the spotlight, it never stops feeling strange that people want my autograph.

"I'm jealous," Mina teases as soon as the lady leaves us. "How come *I've*

never received a Zac Delavin signature on *my* body?”

Fuck, is she... flirting with me? I can't tell. Mina is always smiling and joking with me, and I've lost my radar when it comes to her. If only she knew how bad I want to leave my signature on her body, but not with the ink of a pen. My dick pulses at the thought of kissing her. *Fucking* her.

I squeeze Mina's hand and smile. "Soon enough, it will be your autograph people ask for. You'll be a star. All your dreams are going to come true."

"I hope so."

"I'll make sure they do."

Mina looks as if she's about to tell me something, but her gaze catches onto a sight behind me, and her nose puckers. "Hey, what's going on over there?" She nods to the far-right side of the audience where Jordan is chatting with a dark-haired man.

Unlike when I first arrived at the club, Jordan is now wearing a robe to conceal her body. As for the guy, he's dressed in a three-piece suit. The two of them are standing by the wall, away from everyone. There are a few back-and-forth smiles between them, but overall, the conversation looks a little tense.

"You know that guy?" I ask.

"Never seen him before. I hope that's Steel."

"Who's Steel?"

"Long story," she says. "An anonymous pen pal kind of thing."

"Do you think Jordan is okay?"

"I don't know. Do you mind if we check up on her?"

"Not at all."

We grab our drinks and weave through the couches until we're at Jordan's side. The guy's hand is pressed against the wall above Jordan's head. He's by no means cornering her. The only thing pinning Jordan against the wall is the man's gaze. Though he's leaning into her, there's space between them. She's so caught up in the conversation with him that she doesn't even notice when we arrive.

"Hey. Who's your new friend?" Mina asks.

Jordan's gaze darts to us and she blushes. The guy retracts his hand and steps back. Up close, I get a better look at him. He has a strong jawline and a thin layer of stubble, brown hair that's slicked back, and there's an air of power and wealth about him.

“Think about my offer, Delphine.” He hands Jordan a business card, then disappears into the audience.

“Delphine?” I repeat.

“My stage name is Delphine Fox,” Jordan tells me.

“Babe, you have a lot of explaining to do,” Mina says. “Who is that guy?”

“His name is Daxton Hawk. He’s no one. Just this guy who’s come to the club a couple of times this past week. He offered me money to be his date for a few upcoming business dinners he has.”

The guy’s name sounds familiar. “Wait... Daxton Hawk, as in the entrepreneur?”

Jordan shrugs. “I guess. I don’t follow that kind of news. I’ve never heard of him before.”

Mina presses her lips together with a look of concern. “How much money did he offer you?”

“A thousand dollars.”

“Whoa!” Mina’s eyes open wide. “And what did you say?”

“I said no, obviously. He’s an attractive man and I’m flattered by the offer, but I have no interest in being an escort.”

Jordan’s words only make Mina more alarmed. “An *escort*? Did this Daxton guy proposition you for sex?”

“No, but you can bet the date would turn out that way.”

“You’re right. It would have,” I tell her.

“How do you know?” Mina asks me.

“Because I saw the way he was looking at Jordan. When a guy looks at a woman like that, it means he wants sex.”

“I better not find *you* looking at anyone like that.”

From the corner of my vision, I catch Jordan watching us. A knowing smile tugs at her lips and she shakes her head, laughing. “Don’t worry, babe. Zac only looks at you like that.”

I glare at Jordan, which only makes her smile broaden.

Lucky for me, Mina assumes Jordan is joking, and laughs along with her.

Jordan shrugs. “Even if Daxton’s intentions are noble, I’m not reducing myself to be some mute girl hanging off a man’s arm with no other purpose than to look pretty.”

“When I first saw you two together, I thought you’d come to your senses and decided to meet Steel,” Mina says. “I was excited for you—thinking Daxton is Steel—because that guy is hot.”

She rolls her eyes, dismissing Mina's words. "Anyway, I'm glad I found you. I have two exciting things to tell you."

"Oh?"

"The first one is that I've been offered a solo act here."

At Jordan's news, Mina squeals and wraps her friend in a hug. "Babe, that's amazing!"

"I know! I'll be dancing in a giant martini glass for the routine."

"You will look so fucking sexy doing that. When's your first performance?"

"Next weekend."

Mina squeals again. "Zac and I will come and watch."

"Definitely," I add.

Jordan laughs. "I mean, sure, if Zac has no problem watching me strip down to a thong and nipple pasties."

I place both hands in my pocket and shrug. "Burlesque is an art form, right? I've got no issue with it if you two don't." And besides, how different can it be to when Jordan was performing in lingerie?

"Ugh, I'm so excited about this solo," Jordan says. "Things are finally happening for me. And I'll be earning a couple of hundred extra dollars a week."

"That's amazing!" Mina bounces on the spot. "Okay, what's the second thing you have to share?"

Right as Mina asks the question, the fan dancers step into their final pose and the audience sends them off stage with applause.

Jordan grins. "I have a surprise for you."

"Oh?"

The venue's dim lighting fades to a darker shade, until only a spotlight is shining on the stage. The light swivels to stage left where the jazz band sits, and a male saxophonist speaks into his microphone. "And now, ladies and gentlemen, we have a surprise performance, given to you by the lead actress in the upcoming smash hit musical *The Velvet Cigar*. Please welcome Mina Midnight."

Mina stiffens with shock as applause travels around the audience. She shoots a sharp look at Jordan and hisses, "What the fuck?"

"I thought I'd get you on stage since you're in the club tonight. I asked the manager, and he was so thrilled by my suggestion, that he shuffled around the whole performance schedule for you. Come on, when do you give up the

chance to sing in front of a group of people?”

“I know but... I’m here with Zac, not to sing.”

The spotlight switches to Mina, and the cheering grows louder.

I lean into her and whisper, “I don’t mind. You know I love it when you sing.”

“Are you sure? We’re supposed to be focusing on you tonight.”

“Get on that stage now.”

A hesitant smile rises over her lips. But I know she wants this. I can see the excitement in her eyes. A moment later, the excitement switches into something mischievous. “All right. I’ll give these people something to talk about.”

Mina ascends to the stage and speaks to the jazz band, then takes to the microphone center stage where the spotlight rests on her.

“Thank you all for welcoming me tonight. I’d like to dedicate this song to my boyfriend.” She sends a secretive smile to me.

I grin back at her. But my grin is lost when the jazz band begins playing and I recognize the slow and sensual introduction of *Fever*, with plucked double bass strings and the smooth rhythm of the high hat. This is the song Mina chose to sing? Shivers travel through my spine. When the first lyrics come out of Mina’s mouth, it’s like she’s singing each word with a kiss. Like she’s sending those kisses to me because she hasn’t stopped gazing in my direction. She *doesn’t* stop gazing at me as the lyrics continue to leave those luscious red lips of hers.

I’m physically attracted to Mina, that much has been obvious for a long time. Emotionally attracted, too, despite not wanting to be. But only now, during this song, do I realize I’m way in over my head with this girl because I know she’s acting right now. This performance is all a show to make people believe we’re together. But I want her need for me to be real. I want Mina to be burning up inside for me like the lyrics of *Fever* suggest.

A worse realization dawns on me. Mina wants to practice our kissing scene for the musical tomorrow night.

How the fuck am I supposed to kiss Mina and not get carried away with my need for her?

## Chapter Ten

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### Mina

Zac and I stumble up to my front door at three a.m., drunk and laughing. Thank God there's no black rose waiting for me. Tonight is exactly what I needed to forget about Connor. The entire front of my dress is wet from the pink cocktail I spilled on it, and I'm barely managing to balance in these heels. I rummage around my purse for my key, which is a difficult job, being this drunk.

"What's the hold up?" Zac asks through laughter, leaning against the wall. I love him like this. His black hair is a mess, his suit is ruffled, and he too is struggling to stand.

"I can't find my key. You try." I push the purse to his chest.

"You don't have secret women's stuff in here?"

"I have women's stuff, but none of it is secret."

He sorts through the purse, having just as much trouble finding my keys as I did. There are three different kinds of lipstick, a tiny bottle of deodorant, band aids, about a hundred bobby pins, and I can't remember what else. I love that it's not awkward when he notices the tampons.

Zac laughs, pulling out a thong. "What, have you got your whole house in here?"

"A girl always needs to be prepared with a fresh pair."

Next, he pulls out a condom packet and raises a brow. "You definitely are always prepared."

"You're telling me you don't have one in your wallet just in case?"

"I was with one woman for twelve years. I didn't need one."

“Whatever. Don’t slut shame me.”

“As if I would ever do that. I’m impressed,” he says.

“Well, now that you’re single again, you better start carrying a condom. Never know when the occasion will find you.”

He grins and keeps searching through my purse. A second later, his smile drops into a frown. “You’re carrying a knife and pepper spray in here too?”

“Condoms aren’t the only protection I need. And for the record, it’s a letter opener. Not a knife.”

“Are you... still afraid of your ex?”

I don’t know how I’m still laughing through this conversation. I don’t find it the least bit funny, but the alcohol has me feeling as if I’m invincible. “He threatened to kill me a year ago. I’m taking precautions, even if he was bluffing.”

“Mina, this isn’t funny. Has he sent you any more roses?”

I wobble on my feet, steadying myself with the wall. “No, I told you they stopped.” Yeah, it’s a shitty thing to lie about, but I don’t want to get into an argument about contacting the police.

Zac sighs and looks back at my purse. “Okay, I can’t find any keys in here.”

“Shit.”

“What time does Jordan get home from work?”

“Not for another two hours.”

“And Ryan?”

I pull out my phone and call Ryan, hoping he’s already returned home after his night out with the backpackers. When the call rings out, I know I’m left with only one option. “I guess I’m waiting on the doorstep till Jordan returns home.”

“You can’t do that. Stay at my place for the night.”

## **Zac**

I pull a shirt out of my closet and toss it at Mina. She’s still drunk and barely catches it.

“What’s this for?” she asks.

“Wear it to bed. Your dress is still wet from that cocktail.”

“Thanks. Where can I get changed?”



“The bathroom is through that door.” I take a seat on the edge of my bed and point to the door next to my closet.

She heads into the bathroom and swings the door shut behind her. The latch doesn't engage, though, leaving a small gap visible into the bathroom. I should be a gentleman and look away. Or better yet, close the door.

I'm about to get off my bed and do exactly that, but pause when Mina steps into view, right where the small gap in the door is. Her back is toward me as she unzips her dress. I swallow hard, unable to tear my gaze away from her. The fabric slides down the curve of Mina's ass and gathers at her feet, revealing red lacy lingerie. My dick shifts slightly at the sight in front of me that I know I shouldn't be looking at.

I gain control over myself when she unclasps her bra, and I look at my phone for a distraction. When I hear her bra drop to the ground, I can't help but look back through the slit in the door. I get a glimpse of side-boob as Mina pulls my shirt over her head. But a glimpse is enough to make me full on hard. Fuck, her body is incredible.

She smiles at something, I'm not sure what, but it makes me wonder whether she knows the door is open. That I'm watching her.

Does she *like* that I'm watching her?

I have the greatest urge to enter the bathroom and kiss her. My cock aches when I remember I *will* get to kiss her within a few short hours.

“Almost done,” she calls to me, right before washing her face in my basin.

Shit. She's about to step out of the bathroom and see how rock hard I am. I need an excuse to get out of here and buy myself some time to calm down. “Hey, ah... there's a spare toothbrush in the cabinet you can use. Toss your dress out to me and I'll put it in the wash.”

“Okay, thanks. Hey, you want to watch a musical and sing along to it?” The door opens a smidge more and her dress comes flying out.

“Sure. You choose which one.”

I pick the dress up and hurry out to my laundry room. Once I've thrown Mina's dress into the washer, I take a moment to breathe, leaning against the wall and trying to lose my hard-on.

I don't know what's happening to me. I swore off women ever since Penny broke my heart. I gave her everything, and she ruined me. Then in comes Mina. Fun, talented, sexy Mina who somehow managed to sneak into my heart when I wasn't looking.

That last thought makes me cringe. What the actual fuck? Now I'm talking about Mina being in my *heart*? It's the alcohol. I have a soft spot for her as a friend, that's all. The rest is lust. I'm confusing desire for romantic feelings. The fake relationship certainly isn't helping me see clearly. But one thing is clear: I've lost too much because of Penny, and I won't make the same mistake with Mina. I won't let myself become emotionally attached to her. At least not more than as a friend.

I drag both hands up over my forehead and groan. There's only one way forward. I can't pursue anything with Mina, no matter how much I want to have sex with her. I'll admire her from afar. It would be unprofessional to take our relationship any further. We're colleagues.

Colleagues who kiss each other for their job...

The solution comes to me. That's how I'll have Mina, when we're rehearsing the musical. She never needs to know that each time I kiss her it will be real for me, that I'll be thinking about fucking her and what she sounds like when she comes.

This way, no one gets hurt.

Five minutes pass before I'm able to calm my arousal. I prepare a bowl of popcorn and grab two bottles of water from the fridge, then return to the bedroom.

"You ready to watch—" My words cut short when I find Mina asleep on my bed with Mr. Fluffy curled up at her feet.

I'm not sure what it is about seeing her asleep on my bed and wearing my shirt, but it's the best sight I've seen all night. Better than her in that tight dress. Better than when she sang on stage with eyes for only me. I place the popcorn and water bottles on the end table, then scoop Mina into my arms and position her in the bed properly, drawing the covers up to her shoulders.

I pull my shirt off, strip down to my boxers, and climb into bed next to her, leaving plenty of space between us. Now that I stop for a moment, the alcohol catches up to me and I'm asleep within an instant.

Come morning, I wake face-to-face with Mina, with barely any space between us. My arm is around her waist. Our hips are flush against each other, and our legs are tangled.

Shit.

I slowly retract my arm and roll onto my back, not wanting to wake her. This position isn't much better though. The sheets are tented from my morning wood. Girls know about that, right? If Mina woke up and saw how hard I am, surely I wouldn't have to explain?

She stirs from my movements and reaches for me in her sleep, curling up to my side. My body turns rigid, not sure how to respond. My heart beats faster when her leg hooks over me, brushing against my erection.

Right on cue, someone knocks on my front door. I slip out from Mina's grasp, leaving her asleep while I greet the visitor.

"Hey, man," Adrian says as soon as I open the door. He laughs, taking in my appearance. To his credit, my head aches with a hangover and I probably look like shit. I don't even have a shirt on. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"I just woke up."

"It's almost midday and you're only waking up now? Tell me it's because you had a big night and not because you're depressed. Verena will not be pleased," he says.

"Actually, yeah. I went out last night and am hung over. Didn't get to sleep till early this morning."

"In that case, Verena will be very pleased. I won't keep you for long. Verena insisted I bring you these suits."

Only now do I notice the garment bags slung over Adrian's shoulder. He enters my apartment and places the bags on my couch. "How's everything going? Verena told me the divorce became official yesterday."

"Zac?"

I should have closed the damn bedroom door. Adrian's gaze flashes to the source of my name and finds Mina standing by my bed with her back to us. My shirt rides up her legs as her arms stretch high up to the ceiling, revealing a glimpse of her lacy red panties. Sweet heavens. This image will be tattooed in my mind for the rest of time.

Adrian smirks at me. "Big night, huh?"

"It's not like that. We're friends."

"She's wearing your shirt, and she slept in your bed."

"Mina spilled a drink on her clothes. And I can sleep in the same bed as a friend."

"Alright, man. If you say so." But from the smug look on Adrian's face, he doesn't believe me. "By the way, Verena wants to know if you've asked

Mina to be your date at the wedding.”

“I have. You can tell Verena she’ll be there with me.”

Mina enters the living room, flinching when she sees Adrian. “Ah, hi. Zac, where are my clothes?”

“The dryer. Through that door.” I point.

She disappears into the laundry with Mr. Fluffy right behind her.

I turn to Adrian. “Is there any point of me asking you not to tell Verena and Darius about this?”

He grins. “I won’t say anything.”

Mina returns to the living room, once again in her dress. She places her shoes on and grabs her bag. “You’ve got company. I should go.”

“Don’t mind me,” Adrian tells her. “I’m not staying.”

“Do you want breakfast?” I ask Mina.

She smiles and gives me a hug. “Thanks, but it’s late and I have some errands to run. We’re still on for tonight though?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“Great. I’ll be back at eight.” The front door closes behind her and she’s gone.

A moment of silence lingers between me and Adrian as we both stare at the door. Then he says, “What’s tonight?”

I swallow hard, feeling my chest tingle with anticipation. “We’re practicing the kissing scene for the first time.”

Adrian chuckles and shakes his head. “Right. Have fun with that.”

## Chapter Eleven

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### Mina

At eight o'clock, I knock on Zac's door and fidget with my floral dress while I wait for him to answer. Since we parted ways at midday, I've gone through four panty changes because the thought of kissing Zac tonight has kept me in a constant state of arousal. Anyone would think I'm a virgin from how turned on I am. I'm wet right now and it's pathetic. What's more pathetic is that I spent over two hours trying to pick something to wear for tonight, and I don't even know why I'm so stressed about looking good because tonight is not a date. Within a few minutes, I'll be kissing Zac for the first time, but for *work*-related reasons. He probably hasn't thought twice about the kiss. There's nothing romantic about it.

But that doesn't change what's about to happen.

I'll be *kissing* Zac.

If only my teen-self could hear me say that. She wouldn't believe her ears.

Zac opens the door and before I get a look at him, Mr. Fluffy bolts through the doorway, jumping up my legs in greeting.

I bend down and ruffle the fur on his head. "Hello, my baby. I missed you."

"Can I have a greeting like that?" Zac asks.

Mr. Fluffy runs into Zac's bedroom, which is for the best. The cute little guy shouldn't witness what could be the world's most awkward kiss.

I stand up to meet Zac, getting my first good look at him for the evening. And damn, I think I'm about to combust into a ball of fire when he smiles at

me. He's so handsome, I can't even. Zac is wearing leather shoes and a white button-down tucked into his black pants. Though this attire is nothing new for him, he's wearing it in a casual way with the sleeves rolled to his elbows and the collar loose.

Zac stands to the side of the doorway. "Hey, come on in."

I walk past him, smelling the most delicious food as I enter the apartment. "You're cooking?"

"Yeah. Have you eaten yet?"

"No. I'm meeting Jordan for dinner in an hour."

"So... I guess we don't have much time to practice the kiss."

"I thought it was easier this way. I mean, how long does a kiss take? And to be honest, I'm nervous. It's better to get the kiss over and done with, right?"

He laughs, leaning against the back of the couch. "I didn't realize you were capable of being nervous."

"Because I'm always happy?"

"Pretty much. Yeah."

"Well, I *am* nervous. I have a million thoughts running through my head that won't shut up." Like what if Connor somehow finds out that I've kissed Zac and turns psycho on me? I mean, more psycho than he already is. But I don't want to discuss Connor with Zac, so I mention another thought that's been plaguing me. "What if I'm a bad kisser and no one has told me before?"

The slightest trace of a smirk rises over his lips. "Why should that matter? We're not kissing for pleasure."

"I know, but still... I've never given someone a fake kiss before."

"Then think of it as a real kiss."

My cheeks blossom with heat and I let out a tense laugh. "I can't do that. We're friends. If I cross that line mentally, things could turn weird."

"Then think of it as acting. You're Seraphina. I'm Talon."

"You're right. Okay, so how do we start this? Do you want to act out the scene, sing the song, then flow into the kiss?"

"I think we should just kiss," he says. "Kiss me the way Seraphina would kiss Talon."

"Shit. You're not making this easy for me. You want *me* to initiate the kiss?"

He laughs and rubs the back of his head with a look of contemplation in his eyes. A moment later, that indecisive look is gone, and he walks toward

me with his gaze pinned on my lips the entire time. My breath quickens with each step he takes, knowing what he's about to do. There's no more talking to be had or any other means of procrastination.

Zac's hand finds the nape of my neck, the heat of his skin sending tingles through my chest. He leans in, gently pressing his lips to mine.

As expected, Zac's kiss leaves me weak all over. I'm floating away in a dream world, hypnotized by the masculine scent of his cologne and the soft but deliciously warm touch of his lips.

My mind hasn't caught up with time, and before I have a chance to return the kiss, Zac leans back an inch and whispers, "There. Not so bad, was it?"

I shake my head, unable to find the words. The kiss was only a peck but having Zac's lips on mine for even a second is enough to show me that I need more. And it seems he does too. Zac's lips meet mine again, and this time when he kisses me, his tongue slips into my mouth, sending hot flutters to my breasts and lower.

My eyelids slide shut as I sink into this moment. His breath is so intoxicating. His kisses are slow but skillful. To my embarrassment, a soft moan finds its way out of my throat. Instead of laughing at me or making a joke, Zac takes my moan as an invitation to place his free hand on my waist. The other hand that's behind my neck trails down the bare skin of my arm—the contact such a tease—until it too finds my waist.

I step in, closing the distance between our bodies as I find the nerve to kiss him back. Warmth radiates from the front of his body into me, making my breath shaky. This isn't like me, to be nervous around the opposite sex. But Zac has that effect on me. He turns me into a teenage girl who's about to have her first kiss with the guy she's been crushing on for years.

Zac responds to my closeness by curling his hands farther around my waist. I don't think he notices what he's doing; this kiss is routine for him. But I like that he's holding me. Being in Zac's arms and kissing him is a place I don't want to leave.

I know the feeling isn't mutual when Zac's lips part from mine. This is a professional moment for him, as it should be for me too.

"You're a good kisser," he murmurs. "So you don't have that to worry about."

At least, I *thought* this kiss was professional for Zac, until that comment.

My eyes open to gauge Zac's reaction, which is a mistake. Heat swells in my core, igniting an ache between the top of my thighs. The way he's

looking at me sets off something feral inside me. There's a darkness in Zac's eyes, as though he *is* on the same page and has far more than kissing on his mind. Or maybe that's just me believing what I want to. Either way, my need for Zac takes a hold of me and I shed the nervous schoolgirl. Acting upon pure need, I reach up to kiss him with more force, breaking free from the delicate rhythm we established. My arms wrap around his neck, drawing me tight to his chest. To his entire body.

The next thing I know, he's gone, removing my arms from his neck and stepping back till there's a huge gap between us.

"So, ah... That was good," he says.

"Shit. What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You pulled away quickly. I came on too strong. I'm sorry—"

"I need a minute."

"Why?"

"Mina..." He laughs. "I'm a guy, kissing a *really* attractive girl. My mind knows I'm acting, but my body has its own reaction."

"Oh." My gaze lowers to his groin on its own accord. He doesn't appear to be hard, but I suppose that was the whole point of pulling away from me, to prevent himself from becoming visibly turned on.

Zac laughs again, catching me with my attention on his crotch. "I suppose subtlety isn't your thing tonight?"

My eyes flick away from Zac's dick. What the hell is wrong with me? "Ah, yeah, sorry about that. I told you, I'm nervous." And hot all over from the knowledge that Zac is turned on by me. I guess I have it lucky as a female because Zac has no idea how wet I am. How wet I've been for him this entire day.

I take a seat on the couch to add to the much-needed distance between us.

He sits beside me, which defeats the purpose. "Okay, I'm ready to try the kiss again."

There's no time to form a reply. Zac's lips are on mine again, hot and fast. I give myself permission to enjoy the kiss, telling myself I'm acting as Seraphina, and this is for educational purposes. I'm enhancing my performance on stage.

My fingers bunch through Zac's hair. Our kisses aren't gentle but filled with the passion and need shared between Seraphina and Talon—two lovers who are reunited after years of separation.



“I think we’ve got the hang of this kissing thing,” I murmur.

“Get on top of me,” Zac rasps.

My breath hitches and I pause, my heart pounding as I repeat the instructions in my mind, wondering if I heard them correctly. “Get... on top of you?”

“Yeah.”

This might be the best moment of my life. I climb onto Zac’s lap, sitting sideways so that my legs fall to the right of him.

“Not like that.” Zac’s powerful hands pull one of my legs to the other side of his lap, repositioning me in a straddle. He grabs my hips and draws me close so that my breasts are pressed to his firm chest. So close that I can feel the hammering of his heart. “Much better.”

I don’t know if it’s the position we’re sitting in, the fact that I want to play Seraphina’s role perfectly, or that I’m turned on right now, but when our kisses resume, I let myself be consumed by the moment and slowly bounce up and down on Zac’s lap as if I’m fucking him.

“Don’t do that,” Zac holds me still, his voice sounding almost pained.

“Why?” I push his hands away and continue to move up and down while kissing him. “You’re the one who got me into this position. Seraphina would do this. I’m only playing my part. We’re acting, Zac. Show me how Talon would respond. You can do anything to me and I won’t object.”

Zac hesitates beneath me, then a husky growl erupts from his throat and he pushes me onto my back. I was wrong a minute ago. *This* is the best moment of my life, with Zac on top of me with a look in his eyes that says he wants to fuck me. I’m letting my own desires run away with themselves again, but the thought of Zac wanting me sends a jolt of sweet pleasure to my clit, and I have to work hard to hold back a moan.

Zac parts my knees and slides between them, hovering above me on his forearms. I attempt to pull him closer, needing to feel his weight on me, and even more so the hardness in his pants. But no matter how much I tug at him, he maintains the space between our bodies which I have to respect.

With Zac between my legs, my dress rises to reveal my panties, but he’s too busy kissing me to notice. All I hear is a mixture of moans and heavy breaths from both of us as his right hand slides up the outside of my thigh and slips beneath the hem of my dress, prickling hot against my bare skin as he explores all the way up to my chest. Another growl breaks free from his throat when he grabs my breast, making me wish I wasn’t wearing a bra. I

wish none of my clothes were on and he was inside me.

Zac's hand returns down my body, grabbing my thigh again. My ass. Then his fingers move too close to the apex between my thighs, and he halts, drawing back to search my eyes.

"You're wet," he whispers.

"What do you expect? I'm kissing a *really* attractive guy. My mind knows I'm acting, but my body has its own reaction. We can stop if you want —"

Zac shuts me up with another kiss, abandoning whatever rule he had for himself about maintaining distance between our bodies, and thrusts against me. We both gasp as his hard cock pushes against my crotch, meeting the resistance of our clothes. His movements don't stop. He keeps thrusting. Keeps giving me what I want. The ache in my groin grows each time Zac grinds against me. He's working my clit so hard that if he doesn't stop soon, I'm going to come. Does he *know* what he's doing to me?

"Those little sounds you make..." Zac delivers another thrust, gasping mid-sentence like the pleasure is too much for him to handle. "You've got my cock so hard. I need to fuck you. Mina, *please* let me fuck you."

My God, did he really say that? The muscles between my thighs quiver with need. I slide my panties down to my knees. "Do you have a condom?"

Zac doesn't answer straight away. He stares speechless down at the smooth and wet opening between my thighs. "Fuck." His voice drops to a deeper, guttural tone. "Your body is incredible. And yes, I have a box of condoms in my bedroom."

Zac slides my panties off the rest of the way, wraps my legs around his waist, and carries me into his bedroom. He lowers me to his bed and pulls my dress over my head. I get to my bra before he does, tossing it to the ground so I'm stark naked in front of him. There's not a single part of me that's self-conscious or afraid. The hunger in Zac's eyes as his gaze devours my body is empowering and has me feeling like a queen.

"Mina, how are you even real?"

I smile at Zac's words, but when he unbuttons his shirt and slides it off his shoulders, I'm struggling to breathe as much as he is. Zac's bronzed torso is huge. Every muscle is defined and sculpted to perfection. My gaze trails down to his hands where he unzips his pants. His cock emerges, and I'm holding back a whimper because it's so long and thick and makes my groin even more swollen with greed.

“Excuse me, but that is *not* going to fit inside me,” I say. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re so huge?”

“The same way you didn’t tell me you have the most fuckable little body. I’ve spent a lot of time visualizing you naked and my imagination didn’t come close.” Zac rolls a condom over his shaft and climbs over me. “I’ll try to go easy on you. But there are no promises.”

“Stop talking and fuck me already.” My legs wrap around Zac’s waist and position the head of his cock to my opening.

“So demanding.” He bends down, flicking his tongue over my nipple. I gasp at the surprise burst of pleasure and arch my back. “I’ll fuck you when I’m ready. I want to drive you insane first and make you feral for my cock.”

The words out of Zac’s mouth already have me feral. I never could have guessed Zac would speak like this in the bedroom.

He sucks my other nipple, and I squirm beneath him as the tip of his cock rubs over my clit. “Zac, please,” I beg.

“Yeah, say my name. It sounds so fucking good when you beg me like that.”

“Zac, I need it. Stop torturing me, please—”

His dick thrusts deep inside me, and we both moan so loud that I’m sure the neighbors can hear us. There’s a moment of pain as his cock stretches my tight inner muscles open. My legs clasp around Zac’s waist to lock him in place, unable to handle a single thrust.

“Fuck, Mina,” he pants, gritting his teeth. “You are so tight.”

His hips swirl in a slow and teasing circle as he sucks on one of my nipples again. A wave of pleasure bursts through me, making me cling onto Zac with my entire body. He takes ahold of my legs and attempts to unwind them from his waist, but I hold them in place, needing a few seconds to adjust to the size of his length.

“Are you trying to torture *me* now?” he asks. “Release your legs. You *have* to let me fuck you.”

“You’re too big.”

“I promise I’ll go slow and get you used to my cock.”

Zac uses more strength, working against my resistance, and pries my legs from around him. His cock pulls out of me. When he slowly glides back in, my muscles are more relaxed and attuned to him. He thrusts into me again, deeper this time, hitting my back wall. And even then, when his cock meets resistance, he pushes farther, making my toes curl, and draws out a cry of

bliss from within me.

“That’s it, Mina,” Zac says. “Let me hear how good it feels.”

He withdraws and thrusts a little faster. Pleasure overpowers the pain of his size. My hips work in time with his as he thrusts again, the two of us finding a slow tempo, until that pace is no longer enough for me and I’m raising my hips faster.

Zac gazes down between us, at where his cock fills me whole, and where I keep lifting my hips to give him easier access. “Look at you,” Zac purrs. “You take my dick so well. I told you I’d start off gentle, but gentle isn’t enough for you anymore, is it?”

“It’s not. I need you to fuck me now, Zac. Fuck me hard. Please.”

Zac hooks my left leg around his shoulder, and I moan at the deep access this position gives him. He’s no longer gentle. He fucks me with fast and sharp thrusts, rocking my whole body and making me hold him tight. A sweat builds between us in no time. The headboard is banging against the wall.

An orgasm builds low in my core, but penetration alone has never been enough to make me come. I reach down to stroke my clit, stopped by Zac lifting my hand to his mouth and sucking the wetness from my fingers.

“You taste good,” he growls. “No touching yourself. It’s *my* job to make you come.”

Zac’s hand lowers between my legs. As soon as he touches my clit, my muscles involuntarily tighten around his cock and we’re both gasping at the sensation.

“Just when I thought you couldn’t get any tighter,” he says, massaging that sweet spot on me. “I’m going to come right after you do. You feel too good.”

Needing release, I tighten my inner muscles on purpose this time. The tension pushes me closer to my peak.

“Fuck.” Zac stops thrusting. “Whatever you’re doing, stop it right now. You’ll make me come too soon.”

But I can’t stop. I’m right there. Right on the edge of my orgasm. I squeeze tighter until my control bursts and my muscles are spasming. Gasping Zac’s name, I kiss him as the contractions in my orgasm ripple over his cock. He starts thrusting again, groaning louder than he has yet. The sounds Zac makes when he’s coming are so heated and untamed. I love that I do this to him.

Our eyes meet, and what I see in his gaze makes me come harder. Zac is

looking at me like he... No, I don't want to think of the four-letter word. He doesn't feel that way about me. This is just sex.

I know I'm right about the sex being a spontaneous decision triggered by lust and nothing else when Zac breaks the eye contact and kisses my jaw. My neck. Everywhere but my mouth. And I'm okay with that. I'm more than okay with it because this is the hottest sex of my life.

As our movements come to a stop, Zac collapses beside me and draws me into a hug. "Mina..." His chest heaves as he recovers from all that exertion. "That was the most... intense sex I've ever had."

I've experimented with a lot of different sexual acts—mainly due to Connor's desires—and I can say with confidence that sex with Zac is far better than any of those taboo experiences. And I know why. The connection we share is deeper. With Connor, we were only ever about sex.

I chuckle. "Again, I have to wonder how the hell you are a divorced man. If you were my husband and fucked me like that, I swear I would never get off your dick."

He laughs and strokes my hair. Neither one of us speak, catching our breath, then Zac rolls on his side to face me and asks, "What just happened between us?"

"Well, it's a thing called sex. And you made me orgasm extremely hard, might I add."

"No, I mean... what happened between *us*? One minute we were practicing a kiss, then the next... I had you naked in my bed. We didn't discuss what sex would mean for us or what we want from each other."

"Zac," I laugh, rolling my eyes. "You're not seriously asking me that question, are you? I'm not some needy girl who expects you to be my boyfriend now that we've had sex. Your divorce became official only yesterday. I know you're not looking to have another relationship anytime soon, and I'm fine with that. We're two people who haven't been with anyone in a long time and were swept up in the moment. We got all the sexual tension out of our system. Now we can move forward and focus on giving our best effort to the musical."

"You seriously feel that way?" he asks, sounding a little shocked, but in no way offended.

"Yes. We're friends."

"Because I don't want to ruin what we have."

I grab my bra and put it back on, smiling down at Zac's naked body as I

say, “Trust me, nothing is ruined.”

He steps into his pants and hands me my dress. “Good. I’m glad. You don’t have to leave right away.”

“Actually, I do. I have dinner plans with Jordan, remember?”

“Oh, right. It slipped my mind.”

I head back out to the living room and retrieve my panties. “What are your plans for tomorrow?” I ask while ordering an Uber. When I look up from my phone at Zac, his shirt is back on.

“I told Verena I would decorate this place. You still want to help out?”

“Of course. We can go shopping tomorrow.” I straighten my dress and run hands through my hair to neaten up the mess. “I think we’re all set for the kissing scene on Monday.”

“Agreed.”

Zac follows me to the front door. I give him a hug because that’s what I always do when I say goodbye to him, and I don’t want things to be weird because we’ve slept together.

Things *are* weird, though. His embrace is stiffer than normal, and I know it’s because of the sex. What the fuck is with guys acting differently after sex?

I jab Zac’s ribs, making him laugh. He pushes me away, but I hold tight and jab him again.

“Mina, stop,” he laughs. “What are you doing?”

“Trying to stop you being weird.”

“I’m not being weird. Call me when you get home, okay? We’ll watch some crazy documentary together over the phone. Your pick.”

We smile at each other, and I leave Zac’s side, heading down the corridor for the elevator. When I’m halfway there, I look back at Zac, and he’s still watching me.

“The cliché look-back,” he calls out to me. “You’re the one being weird.”

When we both laugh, I know nothing has been ruined with our friendship. As soon as I’m out of sight and in the elevator, I grin at myself in the mirrored walls, accepting one truth.

Before tonight, I had a crush on Zac.

Now...

I am completely obsessed with him.

## Chapter Twelve

---

### Zac

I'm lying on my couch, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what the hell just happened between Mina and me.

How the fuck did I end up sleeping with her?

I gave myself one rule. One *tiny* rule, to admire her from afar, and I couldn't stick to it. I should be thankful she didn't make a big deal out of the sex. Mina's attitude is exactly what I need, for her to not expect a commitment from me. No emotional ties. She's right: now we can move past the sexual tension that was hanging between us.

The only problem with that is Mina left my apartment over an hour ago, and my cock is still hard. The nature of our sex was so raw and primal. The best lay of my life. I never had sex like that with Penny or any of my prior girlfriends. The desire had never been there, my needs always being vanilla. With Mina, she unleashes something so untamed within me. Honestly, I was holding back on her tonight and wanted to do so much more than I had the chance to.

Regardless, I've spent weeks lusting after Mina, and now that I've had her, the feeling should be gone. Or at least lessened. But my need for her is worse than ever. I want her back in my bed where I can enjoy her body all night long. I want to kiss every inch of her smooth skin and learn what she likes between the sheets.

I want... Mina to smile at me. For her to fall asleep in my arms every night and be the first sight I see when waking each morning. I want her scent to infuse itself in my bed so I can smell her hypnotic perfume when she's not

around.

Fuck. No, I *don't* want those things. I *can't* want those things, because if I do, it means Mina has the power to hurt me. I'd like to think she wouldn't, but I thought that way about Penny once, and look where that got me.

I need to find another sexual outlet, someone else to be infatuated with, because I have no clue how I'm going to survive rehearsals come Monday when I'll be kissing Mina every day. I can't risk fucking up my friendship with her because my dick gets in the way. Nor can I risk developing feelings for her.

*I don't have feelings for Mina.*

*I don't have feelings for Mina.*

*I do NOT have feelings for Mina.*

A flashback of Mina naked beneath me enters my mind. The memory sends more blood to my dick. I'm so fucking hard it hurts.

*Mina is good in bed, that's all,* I tell myself. I'll find someone better.

I grab my phone and text Verena.

ZAC

Still want to set me up with Hannah? I'll give it a try.

Mr. Fluffy races out of my bedroom to greet me and Mina after a long day of solitude while we were busy shopping for my apartment decor. Mina meets him with just as much enthusiasm, dropping to her knees and rubbing his belly.

"Do you think Mr. Fluffy will like the bed we bought him?" she asks.

"Only one way to find out." I grab the dog bed out of one of the shopping bags we've returned with and toss it on the ground. He runs straight onto it and curls up in a ball.

"He is so cute. Okay, we need to start decorating."

"Right now? It's dinner time. Aren't you hungry?"

"Yeah, but I'm more excited to decorate," she says.

"How about this: you decorate and I cook us dinner? Sound good?"

She twists a finger around her hair, a little startled at my suggestion. "You don't mind me decorating your apartment without your input?"

"I don't have an eye for this kind of stuff. And besides, you picked most



of the items today.” It’s true. Unless I felt strongly about not liking something, I gave Mina free rein over what to buy because she looked so happy and in her element.

“Okay. I promise this place will look great when I’m done with it.”

I head to the kitchen to get started on the cooking. Once I’ve gathered all the ingredients for spaghetti Bolognese on the kitchen counter, Mina begins mindlessly singing one of the songs from *The Velvet Cigar*. I glance in her direction, finding her bent over and rummaging through the bags of decorations. She’s wearing the tightest little pants that barely conceal her ass in this position. I shouldn’t stare at her ass, but I do. *Admire Mina from afar*. Despite my slipup last night, I *can* stick to the rule. My dick throbs from looking at her in that position and how much I’d like to come up from behind and fuck her. I can already see myself jerking off to this exact image when she leaves my apartment tonight.

I don’t know how, but I’ve managed to be around Mina for the entire day without her catching me staring at her incredible ass and breasts. Even if she had caught me, I doubt it would have mattered. I’ve been playing hard into this fake relationship. I got to hold her hand all day while shopping. I hugged her from behind while waiting for sales assistance. I even snuck a kiss on her forehead at one point.

None of our interactions felt strained. By some miracle, the sex last night hasn’t made anything awkward between us. Mina isn’t acting any differently around me, and I’m telling myself that’s a good sign.

Over the next hour, Mina busies herself decorating my apartment with Mr. Fluffy tagging along behind her while I cook us dinner. When she’s finished decorating, the apartment looks great. Before we went shopping, part of me was concerned she’d turn this place into a pink zone, but she’s managed to make the apartment look sleek, with a black and white color scheme. And now the apartment looks like this place is somebody’s home.

We eat on the couch, crossed-legged and facing each other, so close that our knees are touching. We laugh and talk about the most random topics, like how she’s freaked out by Ryan’s kombucha, how she’s determined to make me try the classic Australian Vegemite, and how Jordan is secretly in love with Steel. It’s crazy how I can feel so... *me* again only two days after my divorce. And it’s all because of Mina’s company.

Mina twirls spaghetti around her fork. “Will you tell me about your family? I feel like a crap friend for not knowing about them.”

“They’re a boring bunch and I like it that way. There’s never any drama between us. They live in Boston. My parents are best friends. It’s what I wanted for my own marriage. I have a younger brother. My family is great.”

“And what about your friends?” she asks.

“There’s Verena, and you met her fiancé, Adrian. They’re obsessed with each other. Then there’s Darius.”

“You know, I’m kind of offended that you haven’t introduced me to your friends already. You’ve met mine. Are you scared I’ll be embarrassing or something?”

I swallow a spoonful of spaghetti and wipe my mouth with a napkin. “The other way around. They have no filter.”

“What could they possibly say?”

“Let me frame it this way. Even though my friends know you’re not my real girlfriend, they’re invested in our relationship as much as the rest of the world.”

Mina laughs and takes another bite of her spaghetti, finishing her plate.

“There’s more if you’re still hungry.”

“No, I’m good.” She checks the time on her phone. “Nine o’clock. It’s getting late.”

“Let me order you a ride home.”

“Actually, I was wondering if I can stay for a while longer.” She buries her hands in her lap as she speaks those words. When I look at her face, the slightest dusting of pink warms her pale cheeks. “We’re rehearsing a kissing scene for the first time tomorrow and I’m still nervous about it. Last night... we got a little sidetracked and didn’t get a chance to sing through the song or practice the scene. Do you mind if we practice it now?”

My groin is instantly filled with heat from her suggestion. I can be professional about this. I *have* to be professional. Come tomorrow, we’ll be rehearsing the scene in front of people. “Yeah, of course. Let’s practice.” I take our plates to the kitchen.

Mina grabs a packet of spearmint gum out of her bag and pops a piece in her mouth. “You want some?”

“Sure.” I chew on a piece to freshen my breath, then we both dispose of the gum and relocate to the piano.

Despite not having practiced the kiss for this scene, we did a brief run through of the choreography during rehearsals last week. The scene we’ll be rehearsing tomorrow takes place in an empty speakeasy—The Velvet Cigar

—with Talon sitting at a piano and Seraphina perched on top.

I help Mina climb onto the piano and take my own seat on the stool. Her legs are crossed at the knees. She's wearing sneakers and short pants, but I'm visualizing how she'll look when in costume, with heels and a slit in her gown running all the way up to the top of her thigh.

*Fuck, concentrate, Zac.*

I launch into the song, my fingers gliding along the piano keys and creating the backing music as we sing our lyrics. For the past week of rehearsals, whenever Mina and I sing together, I've been in a daze over how beautiful her voice is. Tonight, I can't help but fixate on how the kiss at the end of this song is drawing closer by the second. I'm craving the taste of her sweet lips, but I can't lose control with Mina this time.

When we near the end of the song, I take my cue to gaze down and focus on the piano keys I'm pressing. As instructed, when Mina sings her lines, her left foot presses up beneath my chin, lifting my gaze from the piano to the bare skin of her slender legs, up past her breasts, and to what will be red lips when she's in costume.

My body feels alight with flames when Mina performs the next choreographed move and slides down from the piano, onto my lap in the same straddle position I had her in last night on the couch.

A strong current of desire ripples through my body as our lips meet, traveling to my cock. Fuck, I am a weak excuse for a man.

Mina's kisses are slow but deep and filled with passion. My hands bury themselves in her hair as I kiss her in return. I'm putting so much effort into not getting hard. A few moments ago, Mina said she felt nervous about the kissing scene we're to rehearse tomorrow. But as she kisses me now, I can say with absolute certainty there is no reason for us to be practicing this scene tonight. We're already amazing together. She has perfected her performance.

Our kissing ceases for a moment while I sing my lyrics and she sings hers. My hands find her waist, gripping her tight while my lips trail along her jaw. I wait for my next cue. In a moment, Mina is supposed to moan Talon's name, signaling for me to sing my next lyrics.

Mina's head tilts back as my lips wander down her neck. She lets out a breathy moan. "Zac."

My body stills. My name on her lips sends a jolt of heat to my groin. She moaned my name. Mina moaned *my* name instead of Talon's.

"What's wrong?" she asks with a dazed look in her eyes. "Why did you

stop?”

Do I call her out for saying my name? She looks like she has no idea of the mistake she’s made. Maybe I’m looking too far into this, but I can’t distinguish what is real and fake between us anymore. One moment we’re having sex, the next, she’s telling me we’re friends. Now she’s moaning my name instead of Talon’s.

*Stop over-analyzing this.*

*We are friends.*

But now... I’m having doubts. Did Mina ask to rehearse this scene because she felt unprepared for tomorrow, or did she just want another excuse to kiss me?

“Did I do something wrong?” she asks.

“No, *Seraphina*.” I kiss her, deciding to move on with the scene.

Only this time, when I wait for Mina to sing the next lyrics, they never come. What I hear instead is a moan. Mina’s hips move, adding a repeated back-and-forth pressure on my lap. She’s... *Fuck*, she’s getting herself off on me. The knowledge makes it impossible for me to hold back my erection. I know Mina feels the hardness in my pants when she moans again.

I let out a pained sigh against her kisses. “Mina, we can’t.”

Her hip movements turn into grinding, and she answers with a breathy, “I know.”

I need to stop her, but how can I when she’s working my dick so hard, building heat within me and a need to fuck. That’s what this is—she *wants* me to fuck her. And at that knowledge, I can’t hold back any longer. I grab Mina’s ass and guide her hips, assisting her grinding. Her breath comes faster. Her cheeks turn flushed.

“I should stop thinking about riding your dick,” she murmurs. “I should stop thinking about you being inside me. Tell me to stop, Zac, and I will.”

The word is right on the tip of my tongue. But no matter how hard I command myself to say it, nothing leaves my mouth. I keep guiding her hips over my cock that desperately needs to be released from my pants. I can’t believe I have this gorgeous creature wanting to have sex with me. Mina’s body is so small and delicate on my lap, yet there’s nothing innocent about her. She’s trying to seduce me, and it’s working.

“Zac.” The way she whispers my name is such a fucking tease. “I need you to tell me to stop.”

Finally, I gain control of myself and put a stop to her grinding, holding

her still. The next words out of my mouth are so deep that I don't recognize the sound of my voice. "Take your pants off." I don't ask. I command. Not once have I ever spoken to a woman like this. It's the biggest turn on when Mina stands from my lap and does what she's told, dropping her pants to the floor.

I stare at her smooth pussy, contemplating what I want to do with it. My tongue longs to get a proper taste of her instead of the lick of her fingers from last night. What I would do to feel her come on my tongue. I'm desperate to feel her little pussy clench around my fingers too. But my cock needs all the attention right now.

I unzip my fly and pull my cock out, along with the condom in my pocket. Mina's eyes widen as she watches me roll the rubber over my shaft.

"Sit on my lap."

Not needing to be told twice, Mina climbs on top of me and lines up her wet opening with the tip of my cock. I watch my length slowly disappear inside her as she lowers her hips. A hiss leaves my mouth at the euphoric sensation of her muscles cinching around me. She's only halfway down when she stops and attempts to rise, but I hold her in place.

"You can take more. Sit on my cock properly," I order.

Mina lowers again until she's full, her body shaking as she moans my name.

"That's a good girl. Now ride me like I know you want to."

She holds onto my shoulders, and I watch with so much satisfaction as she slowly bounces up and down. I shouldn't enjoy this as much as I do. But I love that it's *my* dick Mina is riding. I love the desperate little moans that escape her lips each time she lowers onto me and my cock stretches her that little bit farther.

Now that she's warmed up, this slow pace isn't enough for me, and I need to fuck. I hook her legs around my waist and stand up, resting Mina's ass on the closest surface, being the piano keys. A clash of notes plays as I lower her onto them, and again as I thrust into her, picking up speed. The piano is an antique and the last thing I should be having sex on, but right now I don't give a shit about damaging it.

"Fuck, Mina," I growl into her ear as I push into her. "You have my dick feeling so good. I need to come in you."

"Do it," she begs.

"Not until I've made you come first." I pull out of Mina and drop to my

knees, devouring the soft flesh between her legs.

She cries my name, the music of more piano keys joining her as her hands clamp the edge of the piano. Her legs attempt to clench shut around my shoulders, but I pry them open, feasting on her like I'm starved.

When my tongue flicks over her clit, she's moaning my name again. "I'm going to come, Zac."

"That's the plan, beautiful."

Her head tips back as I say that last word, and suddenly her entire body tightens with climax. She's coming because I called her beautiful? Fuck, I love that. My lips return between her legs just in time, humming softly to create vibrations on her clit. Mina's hands knot through my hair as she gasps my name over and over. I'm certain of this: there is no better sound in the world than Mina saying my name as she orgasms.

As soon as Mina is finished, I return to my feet and shove my dick into her swollen entrance. I'm already so turned on that it only takes a handful of sharp thrusts before I'm ready to come. I don't want this to be over, though. I don't like what waits for me after, when the two of us return to being friends.

My pace slows down in an attempt to prolong my climax, but Mina looks up at me and I see her gorgeous blue eyes, and all of my control flies out the window. I'm groaning her name and coming so fucking hard from the way she looks at me. I kiss her lips, her neck, anywhere that means I won't have to see those eyes. Because when I gaze into them, this is more than just sex for me.

After my last pump, my forearms slump onto the piano and I bury my face into Mina's neck, out of breath and riding the high from my orgasm.

Mina giggles, the feminine sound doing all kinds of strange things to my chest. "I think you might be the best friend a girl can ever have, Zac."

I lean back to face her and grin. "This really shouldn't have happened again."

"Hey, you're the one who told me to take my pants off."

"Right, because your part in all of this was so innocent."

"Okay," she sighs, still with humor in her voice. "I promise it won't happen again."

**Mina**

It happened again.

Two more times to be exact.

The kissing scene went well during rehearsals on Monday. I told Zac I wasn't pleased with my performance, so we ended up rehearsing at his apartment again that night, which led to us having sex in his kitchen. On Tuesday, the same scenario happened, the only difference being that the sex happened in his shower.

It took all my mental strength to head home after work today instead of scheduling another "practice session" at Zac's apartment tonight. But I have to draw the line somewhere because having sex with Zac is all I think about, and it needs to stop. Beyond the sexual attraction—fuck, Zac is handsome—he is the perfect guy, so friendly and caring. His divorce earned him a scandalous reputation, but I love that he's let me in close enough to know the real him. Shit, making mental lists of everything I love about Zac is *not* helping the situation.

So here I am, rocking back and forth on my couch with a manic bounce in my knees as I try to focus on the TV.

The front door opens, and Jordan walks in from her waitressing shift, carrying a black rose.

Well, that's one sure way to rid my mind of Zac.

"Throw that thing in the bin," is the first thing I say to her.

"There's a note on this one." She tosses the rose in the bin and hands me the note.

*I don't like when people touch what's mine.*

My pulse races with fear. I'm nauseous too. Connor knows something has changed between me and Zac. I don't know how or what his knowledge is, but he's been watching me closely, and I think I'm going to be sick. Has Connor been stalking my rehearsals at the studio and seen me kiss Zac? I hate the thought of Connor being at my workplace, but it's better than the alternative: Connor watching me leave Zac's apartment after sex.

Fuck. There's a worse thought yet.

Has Connor seen me *having* sex in Zac's apartment? Zac lives on the fourth floor of his apartment building. We haven't been cautious about closing the curtains. Surely Connor doesn't have any means of knowing which apartment Zac lives in. But... I have no way of knowing the meaning

behind his note.

Jordan reads the note over my shoulder. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“It means nothing.” I scrunch the paper and shoot it into the bin. On the inside, I’m not as confident as my words, and the note eats away at me. I still have the dagger-shaped letter opener and pepper spray in my purse. If the time comes, I *will* use them to protect myself.

“We should call the police,” Jordan says.

“Why? So they can tell me there’s nothing they can do? What if my police reports are getting back to Connor? You know he has police connections.”

“Babe, we can’t do nothing.”

I’m tempted to call Connor and yell at him again, but that got me nowhere last time. It would only give him satisfaction that he’s getting to me. “Ignoring Connor is the best way to act.”

I turn back to the TV and click through the channels in rapid succession, now not only attempting to keep Zac off my mind but Connor too.

Jordan sighs with frustration and joins me on the couch. “What are you doing home tonight?”

“Trying to watch TV. There’s nothing on.”

“How can you tell? You’re changing the channel too fast.”

I turn the TV off and grab my phone. No new messages. Dammit. I think it might be a universal law that when you want a guy to text you, he won’t, and that time will move painfully slow.

“What about Netflix?” Jordan asks.

“Already looked. Nothing to watch.”

“Why aren’t you with Zac?”

“I saw him this morning for our jog and all day during rehearsals.”

She grins at me. “I’m not seeing why today is different from any other day. You’re with him around the clock.”

“Because...” Ugh. At least talking about Zac is a distraction from Connor, but it’s painful in its own way. “I’m starting to like Zac’s kisses too much.”

Jordan has no clue I’ve slept with Zac. It’s easier for me if she doesn’t ask questions about my status with him. I don’t want to like Zac as much as I do because I know he has nothing emotional to give in return, and I’m okay with that. I can appreciate our relationship for what it is: friends who have good sex. He’s newly divorced and I don’t expect anything from him. Most



of all, I will *not* let my feelings for Zac ruin our friendship.

My phone vibrates with a text. Naturally, my eyes whip to the screen, hoping to see Zac's name. I swear when it's just a message from Mom. "Anyway, I need to distance myself from Zac."

Jordan laughs. "Right. And that's going to work so well with your morning running dates and kissing him every day during rehearsals and pretty much every night?"

"I just meant that's why I'm not with him tonight. And look, I want to ask you something. Would you feel weird if I ask Ryan out on a date?"

Her face screws up into a ball of confusion. "You're into Zac but Ryan is the guy you want to ask out? That totally makes sense."

"I need another guy to distract me from Zac. Maybe I just need to get rid of all my sexual tension."

"And you want Ryan to be that guy?"

"Not if it will be weird for you," I say. "I figured you'd be okay with it since Ryan and I have hooked up a few times before."

"I couldn't care less what you and Ryan do, but are you even attracted to him?"

"I mean... not anymore. But he's good in bed."

"I think this is a terrible idea."

Ryan steps out of the bathroom with his long hair wet from the shower and a towel wrapped around his waist. "Anyone going to ask what *I* think of this?"

Jordan and I laugh. She heads to her bedroom, calling over her shoulder. "I'm staying out of this. You two do whatever you want."

"Sorry you had to overhear that conversation," I say as Ryan sits on the couch with me.

"I don't care. You know I think you're gorgeous, Mimi. You want to have sex with me to get Zac out of your system? I'm totes down for that."

"I was going to broach the topic in a smoother way. Do you want to go on a date or something?" I ask.

"Won't that be a problem if people see you on a date with someone other than Zac?"

"No one will see us if we go to the movies."

He chuckles. "Okay, sure. How's Saturday night?"

"Perfect."

## Chapter Thirteen

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### Zac

“I spoke to Hannah,” Verena says, flipping through a clothes rack of her latest designs in her office. Watching Verena at work is not my favorite pastime, but I don’t have Mina with me tonight, and I need a distraction. “She would love to go on a date with you.”

I almost forgot that I agreed to be set up with Hannah. I texted Verena about Hannah on Saturday night. It’s now Wednesday evening. My attention has been elsewhere. Namely, having sex with Mina. A date with Hannah is exactly what I need because I don’t want to stop having sex with Mina, and that’s where the problem lies. Every time I get her naked, I grow more attached to her. I don’t know how people have sex without feeling something for the other person, but I’ll try it with Hannah.

I take a seat on the edge of Verena’s desk. “Does Hannah understand the date needs to be kept secret? The public are supposed to believe I’m with Mina.”

“Yes, she knows.”

“And you’re sure I can trust her?”

“Yes.” Verena types Hannah’s number into my phone. “Seriously, Zac, I don’t know why you’re bothering with Hannah when you’ve got a gorgeous pink-haired girl sleeping in your bed and wearing your clothes.”

I swear under my breath. I haven’t told Verena that I’ve slept with Mina, so there’s only one thing she could be referring to: the morning Adrian saw Mina in my bedroom. God dammit. “Of course Adrian told you about that.”

“I want to meet Mina.”

“Not happening. You’ll meet her at the wedding.”

“The wedding is *months* away. Why can’t I meet her now?”

I run a hand through my hair and sigh. Coming to Verena’s office was a bad idea. “Because introducing friends to a girl is what you do when you have a girlfriend. Mina is not my girlfriend.”

“She’s your fake girlfriend. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“No.”

“Why are you so protective of her? Are you afraid I’ll embarrass you in front of her?”

“Of course not.”

She gasps, smiling. “You’re in love with her.”

My body freezes at the sound of that four-letter word. Even my lungs aren’t working. I manage an irritated groan. “I am *not* in love with her.”

“Have you kissed her? I mean, outside of rehearsals?”

“You know what, maybe I *am* embarrassed about you meeting her because you’ll say some shit like this.”

She swats my arm. “I’m just messing around with you. I won’t say anything about you two to her face. Come on, please let me meet her. People introduce friends to friends.”

“Verena... Why do you want to meet her so much?”

“Because I keep seeing photos of you and Mina posted all over the internet and you’re the happiest I’ve ever seen you in them. There’s no way it’s a coincidence this mood shift happened at the same time that Mina entered your life. Come on, it’s my birthday soon. Introducing us can be your birthday present to me.”

I shake my head. “I don’t know.”

“I do. That’s all I want from you for my birthday. If you get me anything else, I will be upset and hate it.”

“Fine. I’ll bring you to rehearsals one day.”

Her face brightens. “So I can see you kiss her?”

“God dammit. No. Something else, then. I’ll set you up for a lunch date with Mina.”

“That’s no fun if you’re not there with us too. How about this: I host a small dinner party for my birthday and invite only the important people? You, Mina, Adrian, and Darius.”

“Fine, I guess. I’ll ask if Mina is interested in attending.”

I can't stop stealing glances at Mina all throughout our Thursday morning jog. Fuck, her body is amazing. Every so often, my jogging slows down to be a few strides behind her so I can admire her ass. The best part is, I know exactly what her ass feels like. I know what every inch of her body feels like.

"Hot chocolate time," Mina pants, slowing to a walk as we approach our usual coffee vendor. I match her pace and pull out my wallet, ready to pay.

"Good morning," the old man behind the coffee stand says to us. "You want the usual? One hot chocolate with baby marshmallows for the lovely lady, and a long black for you, sir?"

"Make it two hot chocolates," Mina says.

I side-eye her with an unimpressed look. She smiles at me in return. "Fine. I suppose the day has arrived where I try your ridiculous drink."

While we wait for the man to make our drinks, my gaze wanders to Mina. She's wearing a sports bra, as usual, but for the first time today, I notice the slight discoloration of a bruise on her ribs.

I brush the back of my hand over the bruise, making sure to be gentle. "How did this happen?"

Mina looks down to see what I'm talking about, then bites her bottom lip and smirks. She speaks low enough for only me to hear. "I believe you left that mark on Tuesday night when we were in the shower."

A growl stirs in my throat. I would never intentionally hurt Mina, but satisfaction washes over me, knowing I've left my mark on her during sex.

"Two hot chocolates ready to go," the man says.

Mina and I take our drinks and walk side by side through the park. I raise the Styrofoam cup to my lips, but Mina lowers my hand before I have my first sip.

She pulls me to a standstill to the side of the path. "You need to remove the lid and lick the marshmallows first."

I roll my eyes and laugh, following her instructions. Even though I feel like an idiot, my tongue darts out and scoops up a baby marshmallow. Mina's luminous blue eyes watch me with anticipation. She looks so incredible that I need to gulp back the urge to kiss her. And that smile—she's *always* smiling at me. I can't get enough of this girl.

"Well, what do you think?" she asks.

The hot chocolate is far too sweet to be considered a morning drink. But

all I can think about is that smile on Mina's face and the heated way she looks at me when I get her naked.

I clear my throat and glance away from her. "It tastes good. Sweet." I can think of something that tastes sweeter.

Shit. *Stop* thinking about sex.

I continue walking and change the topic to the first thing that enters my mind. "Oh, hey, before I forget, it's Verena's birthday soon, and she asked that as my present, I introduce her to you."

"What?" She nearly chokes on her drink. "Verena Valentine wants to meet me for her birthday? Why?"

"No fucking clue because you're a total bitch."

"Zac!" She shoves my shoulder, and my whole arm tingles from her touch.

"I suppose Verena wants to meet you because she's a fan of *The Velvet Cigar* and you're playing one of the leads. Makes sense. She's hosting a small dinner party and asked me to bring you along. If you're not interested, that's cool. No pressure."

"Of course I'm interested. When is it?" she asks.

"Saturday night."

"Oh. Um... I have a date. Can I bring him to the party?"

A bitter feeling spreads from my chest to every extremity of my body, like poison seeping through my veins. I don't know why I'm so... jealous at the news of Mina having a date. Because I feel like I have some prior claim to her since we've had sex? Because I thought that if she was into someone, wanting to date someone, it would be me?

None of these feelings make any sense. I have no right to feel jealous. Mina knows I'm not looking for commitment. And it's not like I haven't thought about going on a date myself. I haven't texted Hannah yet, but I planned to at some stage.

At my prolonged silence, she says, "Forget it."

"No, I'm just surprised." I work hard to keep a casual tone. "I didn't realize you were into anyone."

"I'm not. It's complicated."

"Explain it to me."

She shrugs. "It's been a long time since I've dated anyone. You know, because of Connor. I thought maybe if I push myself into dating again, things will be easier for me. So, I asked Ryan if he would—"

“Wait, *Ryan* is the guy you’re going on a date with?” The guy she used to sleep with. The guy she’s living with. This keeps getting better and better. I can’t stop thinking about Ryan’s hands on her, and Mina looking at him in that desperate way she looks at me right before I make her come. I fucking *hate* the thought of her looking at anyone other than me like that. I seriously need to punch something right now.

“Yeah, I’m going on a date with Ryan. I’m not into him. That sounds bad. But we’ve got a history so I guess there will always be some residual feelings there.”

All I can do to stop myself from drowning is make a joke. “As your fake boyfriend, I’m insanelly jealous.”

She laughs. “Is this dinner party a public event? If it is, I won’t invite him.”

“No, it’s intimate, at Verena’s penthouse.”

“So, can I bring Ryan?”

“I’m sure it’s fine. I’ll tell Verena. Speaking of friends, when is Jordan’s debut solo performance?”

“Oh, ah, it’s tonight. I’m going with Ryan to watch her.”

The shots keep firing. When Jordan told us about her solo, Mina said we would attend the performance together. We’ve been doing everything together. Now, she’s going with Ryan? I don’t have a clue what’s happening between us.

## **Mina**

“No Zac tonight?” Ryan asks over the music of the burlesque club, sitting on the opposite end of the velvet couch from me. He knows the rule: no public displays of affection. Everyone is supposed to believe I’m Zac’s girlfriend.

And they do believe it, all right. Richard Nelson told Zac and me to leak another video of us kissing during rehearsals today, which is currently going viral. Everyone is loving the video. Everyone except Connor, I’m sure. But screw him.

“I’m trying to keep my distance from Zac, remember?” I tell Ryan.

“You’re doing a terrible job, Mimi. You’ve been texting him all night.”

I smile, caught red-handed, because right this very moment I’m drafting a

text to Zac in response to his last message that arrived a minute ago.

MINA

Yes! We need to watch Sweeney Todd next.

Once I've sent the message, I feel like an idiot because my reply goes against the distance I'm trying to create between me and Zac. In all honesty, I don't know what I'm doing. I'm terrible at this distance thing. All I do is think about him. Every time I'm with Zac, I can't stop checking him out. I didn't visit his apartment last night because I knew we'd end up having sex, so instead I spent the night running my vibrator with thoughts of Zac inside of me.

The worst part of all this is that when I mentioned going on a date with Ryan, Zac didn't seem bothered in the slightest. Even though I've had sex with Zac, I'm in the friend zone with him. As much as I know this is for the best because we're working together and he just got divorced, I can't deny hating it.

ZAC

How was Jordan's performance?

MINA

She hasn't performed yet. I'm kind of panicking because I need my beauty sleep for rehearsals tomorrow.

I make a joke out of the situation, but I actually am panicking. Tonight's plan was to watch Jordan perform at ten, then head straight home to bed since I have an early start for work in the morning. It's now twelve, and she still hasn't performed.

"Hey, how much longer do you think we'll have to wait for Jordan?" I ask Ryan.

It's humorous he's even here tonight, in my opinion. I mean, what brother wants to watch his sister perform a burlesque strip tease? Ryan says it won't be weird for him, that burlesque is an artistic expression. I guess maybe he has a point. After all, he did live in a nudist colony, so I suppose he's desensitized to this kind of thing.

He pulls out his phone. "I'll call Jordan and ask when she's performing."

ZAC

Beauty sleep? You're always beautiful.

My heart switches gears into overdrive when I read Zac's message, even though I know he's only being friendly. I so badly want the words to be true.

Ryan hangs up the call. "Jordan's coming out here to talk to us." He nods to the backstage exit, to where she's already making her way to us.

"Babe, what's the hold up?" I ask as she arrives by our couch, standing in front of us in a satin robe to conceal her costume.

"There was some mix up in the schedule. I'm not performing for another forty minutes," she says.

"Shit. I've got rehearsals early in the morning."

"You should go home."

"I can't do that. This is your first time giving a solo performance. I need to see it."

"And you will see it some other night," Jordan says. "Ryan can take you home. Get a good sleep."

"No way," I rebut. "We're not both missing it. Ryan can stay to support you. I'll be fine getting home by myself."

Ryan nods to a couch over by the left, where I see that same guy from the other night, the one who offered Jordan money to be his date. Daxton Hawk. Zac called him an entrepreneur. He's looking straight at Jordan as we speak.

"Looks like Jordan has got plenty support as it is," Ryan says.

Jordan exhales a laugh. "That guy has been coming in every night. He approached me earlier this evening and upped his offer to two thousand dollars to be his date for a business dinner he has."

"Babe, that guy is hot. If he offered me two thousand dollars, I'd be slutting myself up for him," I tell her, joking around. There's no way I want her going on a date with that guy.

"There's only one guy Jordan will slut it up for and that's Steel," Ryan says.

"Not even him," I correct. "He's been trying to meet up with Jordan and she refused."

"What?" Ryan almost shouts at his sister. "You never told me he wants to meet. Why the hell are you not meeting him?"

Jordan folds her arms and sighs. "How many times do I need to say this? I don't want to ruin what I have with Steel. End of discussion. Ryan, take Mina home."

"Ryan is staying," I correct.

"You sure?" Ryan asks. "I don't mind taking you home."



“I’m sure. I’ll see you guys tomorrow.” I order an Uber on my phone, then hug both of them goodbye and wish Jordan good luck, telling her she’ll be amazing on stage.

Once we’ve parted ways, I receive a notification on my phone that the Uber will be here in ten minutes. When I step outside the venue, a cold breeze brings goosebumps to my skin. I hug myself and wait with a small crowd of people who are also catching rides home. The minutes tick by, and when I pull out my phone to check on the Uber’s progress, I see the estimated time of arrival has increased to fifteen minutes. With a groan, I bring up the app’s map view to track where the vehicle is located. It’s in some random backstreet, stationary. For fuck’s sake. A moment later, the vehicle drives down a few streets, turns around, and returns to the place it started at.

I open the chat panel and type a message to the driver: **You lost?**

They reply instantly: **Yes.**

I’m about to cancel the service and order a new Uber, but who knows how long that will take. I reply to the driver: **Stay where you are. I’ll walk to you.**

Walking to the vehicle is a pain in the ass, but the driver isn’t *that* far away from me. I’ll stick to lit streets and all will be fine. Worst case scenario, I’ve got my dagger-shaped letter opener and pepper spray in my purse.

I cross the road and begin my journey toward the Uber. I should play it safe and walk the main roads, but that will make the journey longer. There’s an alleyway up ahead that cuts through a block of buildings and will take me directly to the driver. The alley is full of life, with late-night restaurants and cute little cafes. I know it well, having eaten there a bunch of times with Jordan.

I continue along the main strip of road for a couple of minutes with my eyes glued to my phone, smiling over back-and-forth texts between Zac and me.

MINA

What are the vibes for Verena’s dinner party? Dress to impress or casual?

ZAC

Verena always dresses to impress. Wear whatever you feel comfortable in. But don’t look too nice or I won’t be able to concentrate.

Damn, he's full of compliments tonight. Or is it just banter? I can't tell anymore. I'm tempted to reply with something flirty but decide that's a bad idea. I turn down the alleyway, keeping my response safe.

MINA

My wardrobe isn't very extensive. How about I wear the white dress from last weekend?

ZAC

The one you spilled a cocktail on?

Obviously the stain won't be there this time.

Bad choice. You looked way too good in that dress.

I look up from my phone, needing a moment to think up a reply. But replying to Zac is suddenly the last thing on my mind. Only now that I'm halfway down the alley do I realize I've walked down the wrong one. The few restaurants here have already closed for the night. All is quiet, with no one around. Worse still, the walkway ahead of me is poorly lit.

I turn around, about to return the way I came, but pause at the sight of a hooded figure walking in my direction. My heart races and my palms grow clammy. I tell myself I'm overreacting, having heard too many horror stories about this kind of thing. But I'm not taking any chances. I return my phone to my purse and reach for the letter opener and pepper spray, holding one in each hand.

I continue down the alley at a faster pace. It's not *that* far till I'll exit to the busy street. *Keep walking. Don't stop. I'll be there in no time.*

The traffic noises grow louder as I approach and the lights are a little brighter. When I check over my shoulder again, the person is gone, and I let out a sigh of relief.

"There you are, sweetheart."

The deep voice comes from behind me, a voice I thought I'd heard the last of when filing the restraining order. But the joke is on me. I hoped Connor was bluffing with all the roses he's been sending. Yet here he is, coming to show me he's not messing around.

Before I can scream or turn around to face him, his hand covers my mouth. His other arm wraps around my body, locking my arms to my side and squeezing me so tight that I drop the letter opener and pepper spray. Despite the trap he has me in, I squirm with all my strength and try to scream.

Connor's lips press against my ear, his cold breath sending revulsion through my body. "Scream all you like, no one will hear you. The more you resist me, the tighter I'll hold you. I'm not letting go, Wilhelmina. You belong to me."

No, I won't let him win. I switch into survival mode. There's no thought process, my body reacts because I know this is do or die, and my foot slams backward into his groin. Connor jolts with pain. At his lapse in power, I break free of his arms.

He's quick to recover, and his fist slams into my cheekbone, knocking me to the ground. I see stars, but adrenaline keeps me moving. Connor's punch was a blessing in disguise because right in front of me is the letter opener.

The shadows of Connor's hood obscure his face. I don't get a proper look at him with the poor lighting in this alley. But I hear him laugh, and it's a sickening sound. "You have been a *very* bad girl and my cock will take pleasure punishing you for this."

As soon as he reaches down for me, I grab the letter opener and thrust it upward with all my force, shoving the dagger into the side of his abdomen. The letter opener is not as sharp as a real dagger, but the blade still draws blood. Connor howls and staggers backward, dropping to his knees.

I don't know how severe the injury is. I don't care. I make my escape, sprinting through the alleyway as fast as my legs will carry me.

I run and I don't stop. I should go to the cops, but I don't know where to find them in this part of town, nor do I trust them. Zac's apartment is a few blocks away from here, so I run to him as it's the only safe place I know, and hope he answers the door.

When I arrive at Zac's building, I'm breathless and covered in sweat. I enter the pin code for the lobby and run up four flights of stairs until I'm puffing in front of his apartment door.

Holding back my tears, I bang on Zac's door and wait desperately for him to answer. "Zac, it's me," I shout, my voice cracking mid-sentence. "Are you home?"

"Mina?" His response is muffled, followed by a yap from Mr. Fluffy.

I open my mouth to answer, but my throat clenches from the need to cry. Footsteps approach within the apartment. Seconds later, Zac opens the door with a smile that vanishes the instant he sees me.

His hands are suddenly on me, stroking my hair behind my ear to get a clearer view of my bruised cheekbone. "What the fuck happened?"

“I’m sorry.” My voice shakes as the tears spill down my cheeks. “I shouldn’t have come here. He might be following me. But I didn’t know where else to go. Jordan and Ryan are still at the club. I didn’t want to go home. I didn’t want him to follow me there—”

“Him?” That one word out of Zac’s mouth, though deep and slow, is laced with aggression. His hands drop from me, and he stands tall with every muscle in his body visibly growing tense. The look in his eyes turns murderous as he takes in my appearance. “Mina, who did this to you?”

I wipe the tears from my cheeks. “Connor—”

“I am going to fucking kill him.” He pulls me into his apartment and locks us inside. Zac dials a number on his phone and presses it to his ear.

“Who are you calling?”

“The police.”

“No, please don’t,” I beg. “I don’t trust them. Connor has friends in the police.”

“The police have protected you before. They helped you get a restraining order. What’s so different now?”

That’s true, they did help me once. I hope they can help me again, but I don’t have confidence. Zac doesn’t know how closely Connor has been keeping an eye on me and that his cop friends might be assisting him. He doesn’t know the roses have continued.

How do I explain the situation to Zac without him realizing I’ve lied to him?

“Mina.” His voice dips and he looks deep into my eyes. “You were assaulted. You can’t ask me to sit back and do nothing to protect you.” An operator answers the call, and Zac explains my situation to them in a surprisingly calm manner for how angry he is. “I need someone out here immediately. My girlfriend was assaulted by a man she has a restraining order against.”

Girlfriend? In this moment, Zac is still keeping up pretenses? Despite the trauma I’ve been through tonight, my breath hitches at the title. He’s called me his girlfriend in public many times before, but on this occasion, the word comes out of his mouth so naturally, like he’s not even thinking.

Zac answers several questions, and right when I think the phone call is about to end, he raises his voice. “No, we are not waiting. You will send an officer to my apartment *immediately*.”

The second he hangs up, I take his hand in mine to calm him. “It’s okay.

I'm safe here with you. They can take as long as they need to."

"No, Mina, it's not okay," he growls, pinching the apex of his nose and squeezing his eyes shut. When he looks at me again, he's even more wound up. "What if you hadn't managed to fight Connor off? What if he'd done more than give you a black eye? You told me he's threatened to kill you."

"Zac, it's okay."

"Shit." He sighs and draws me into his arms. "I'm supposed to be comforting *you* right now. Come here."

Zac holds me tight and kisses my hair. Even though I'm still shaken by the attack, his embrace feels warm and soothing and like nothing can harm me.

## Chapter Fourteen

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### Mina

“Whoever attacked you tonight wasn’t Connor Phillips,” the police officer says. “Connor has an alibi. He’s in Oregon. His AA sponsor reported Connor’s presence at a meeting tonight. Someone else attacked you. Do you have any idea who it could be?”

Typical. Connor has covered his tracks well. I don’t know if this cop is being genuine or lying for Connor, but either way, I want him out of Zac’s apartment. I shake my head in response to the cop’s question while hugging one of the cushions on Zac’s couch for comfort.

“If Mina says it was Connor Phillips, then I believe her,” Zac tells the officer with force. He’s too heated to sit down with me. “How do we know his sponsor was telling the truth?”

“Connor’s sponsor is a Justice of the Peace,” the policeman answers. “Connor also has no stab wound. Anyone could have done this to Mina. It’s not uncommon for celebrities to have stalkers. The attack was no doubt a traumatizing experience and events like this can mess with a person’s memory. Mina, I don’t want to belittle your experience—”

Zac’s voice rises again. “That’s exactly what you’re doing. A woman is coming to you for help, and you are ignoring everything she says.”

“Sir, you need to calm down.”

“Do not tell me to calm down—”

“Sir, I understand the severity of this situation. We have this incident

recorded. But until we have concrete evidence, there is no further action we can take against Connor Phillips. We will be on the lookout for anyone who arrives at a hospital with a stab wound. The best thing Mina can do is remain vigilant, don't take risks, and inform the police of any continued suspicious activity."

"I did report suspicious activity to the police," I tell him, finally finding my voice, even though it's shaky. "I have received countless anonymous roses and the police don't seem to care at all."

Zac's eyes switch to me, shocked. "Countless? I thought it was only two." Shit.

## Zac

I'm fuming inside—at the police officer for not providing more help, and at Mina for lying to me about the roses and notes she's received from Connor. The officer writes down everything she says, and yet we still get the same response from him: there's no proof Connor was Mina's attacker tonight, there's no proof the roses are from him, and there's no proof the roses have any correlation with the attack.

As soon as the police officer is gone, I head to the kitchen. "They're fucking useless. And the AA sponsor is lying."

"I'm not surprised," Mina mutters. "He's probably connected to the gang Connor is in."

"I need a drink. You want one?"

"I'm tired. I should call Ryan and see if he's home yet."

Mention of Ryan's name makes me even more furious. Why wasn't he with Mina when the attack happened? He could have stopped it. Hell, the attack probably wouldn't have happened if he'd been with her.

I groan quietly to release my frustration, knowing my anger toward Ryan is caught up in jealousy and I'm just looking for someone to blame. None of this is his fault. As precious as Mina is to me, she doesn't need a man to protect her. She proved so tonight by fighting Connor off.

I pour myself a whiskey. "Don't go home. Sleep here. It's not an issue at all."

"You sure?" Mina's voice is so lifeless. So out of character, that hearing it physically hurts me.

“Of course. Take the bed. I’ll have the couch.”

“I’m not kicking you out of your bed. *I’ll* sleep on the couch.”

I sigh her name, scrunching a hand through my hair. “Don’t fight me on this one. You’ve had a terrible night.”

Without another word, Mina heads for my bedroom. But I’m not ready to say goodnight to her. There’s still so much we need to discuss. “Mina,” I call out before she gets too far. She looks back at me, waiting in silence when I don’t say anything. I don’t know how to broach the rose topic in a delicate way, so I say it outright. “You told me the roses stopped. Why did you lie to me?”

“I thought I could handle the Connor situation on my own. I didn’t want to worry you. This isn’t your problem—”

“*Don’t* do that. Don’t push me away. Mina, I care about you. We spend all our time together. We’ve *slept* together multiple times. Your problems are my problems. Penny kept secrets from me. Please don’t put me through that again. If anything were to happen to you...”

I don’t let myself finish the sentence, because fuck, now I’m talking like we’re together. She *isn’t* my girlfriend. She’s made that blatantly clear by asking Ryan on a date. *I’ve* been trying to convince myself she doesn’t mean anything more than a friend, but it’s a fucking lie. If this attack has taught me anything, it’s that Mina is the most important thing in this world to me. I was afraid to give her power over me, but she has full control of my heart. She has the power to break me, and if Connor takes her from me, it *will* break me. It will tear me to shreds. And that scares the shit out of me.

“Okay,” she whispers. “I won’t keep any secrets.”

“What happens tomorrow when you leave?” I ask, attempting to maintain my calm. “What is stopping Connor from attacking you again?”

“I got him pretty good with the letter opener. I don’t think he’ll be coming after me for a while.”

“But a time will come when he does. You said he’s in a gang. What if they come after you?”

She sighs. “Zac... I can’t live my life in fear.”

“How can you be so flippant about this? I don’t like the thought of you being unsafe in your apartment. You’re on the ground floor in a shitty building. The building has no security code. Jordan works nights. Ryan is out partying half the time.”

“I’m not flippant, but what am I supposed to do?”



In my frantic state, I blurt out the first solution that comes to mind. “Move in here.”

Mina’s eyes widen with surprise. “What?”

The apartment goes silent. My words are as much a shock to me as they are to Mina. But now that I’ve said them, they seem like a good suggestion.

“Stay here, at least until we figure out what to do about Connor. The building is secure.”

“Zac, I can’t live with you. Things between us would get complicated. And besides, I’m happy in my apartment with Jordan.”

“I hate how you won’t let me help you.” I grab a spare key from the top kitchen drawer and place it in Mina’s hand. “At least take a key for my apartment. If you ever feel unsafe at home, or even if you’re not at home and feel unsafe, promise me you’ll come here.”

She nods, her eyes glazed over with the arrival of new tears. “Yes, I promise. Thank you.” Mina steps back to walk away, but I don’t release her hand from mine.

“And promise me you won’t go anywhere alone. Don’t be reckless just to prove Connor doesn’t scare you.”

“Zac...”

“Do it for me, so I can sleep at night knowing you’re safe.”

“Okay, I promise,” she whispers before heading to my bedroom.

Once I’m alone, I shoot back my drink and pour another one, then step out to the balcony and collapse into a chair, watching the city lights as I try to get a grip on my temper. I *hate* that I can’t do more to protect Mina.

An hour passes before I’m calm enough to sleep. I enter the bedroom to grab a fresh set of clothes but pause when I see Mina fast asleep. She’s hugging Mr. Fluffy, and aside from the bruise on her cheek, she looks so peaceful. I hope it’s because she feels safe here with me.

Mina has taken it upon herself to wear one of my shirts again, and the sight of her in it does something funny to my insides. I like how she wore it without asking me, and that she’s sleeping in *my* bed. The shirt is hiked up over her thigh, revealing the perfect curve of her ass in her lace panties. For a moment, I get lost in the fantasy of Mina being my girlfriend. My *real* girlfriend, and that this is the sight I get to see every night. I want the fantasy to be a reality so badly.

There’s nothing stopping me from climbing into this bed and wrapping Mina in my arms. But no matter how much I want to join Mina, I can’t do it.

I know myself too well, and if I climb into bed with Mina, I won't be able to stop myself from pressing up against her. Nor will I be able to hold back from kissing her. And I can't do that to Mina, not tonight. Not after she was attacked. She deserves someone who respects boundaries and doesn't force themselves upon her. I would never do anything to make her feel uncomfortable.

It takes all my willpower to turn around and head to my couch, but that's where I'll be sleeping tonight.

## Chapter Fifteen

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### Mina

I think I'm falling in love with Zac.

Something changed between us on Thursday night when I stayed at his house after the attack, and I think he feels it too. He looked at me differently, like he cared for me as more than a friend. The way he touched me and spoke to me was so protective. I wanted to tell him right then and there how I feel, but nerves got the best of me. I didn't know whether I was thinking clearly because of the attack. But now that two days have passed and I've had time to rationalize the situation, I want to tell Zac what he means to me. If he rejects me, that's something I'll just have to deal with because I can't keep living a lie.

I'm a nervous wreck as I prepare for tonight's dinner party at Verena's penthouse, partly because I'll be meeting one of my idols, but also because by the end of the night, I want to tell Zac everything.

Jordan helps me choose the perfect outfit for the evening. My dress is a black, floor-length gown, with a split high up my right thigh. The top is fitted and has an elegant one-shoulder style that ends in a full sleeve. I've matched the dress with pink heels to go with my hair, which Jordan styles in a half-up do. Then we spend two hours on my makeup, perfecting it till my bruised cheekbone is flawless.

When evening arrives, I'm dressed and ready to leave for the dinner party. Jordan grins at me. "Zac will love the way you look."

"You mean me?" Ryan asks, standing in my doorway. "*I'm* Mina's date."

Right. I almost forgot about Ryan. This thing between us is going

nowhere. The plan was to have sex with him to forget about Zac, but there's no way I can sleep with him anymore. I was tempted to withdraw Ryan's invitation tonight, but he's so excited about meeting Verena, I figured I'd let him tag along.

I'm shocked to see Ryan dressed presentably. He's wearing a black suit and looks polished for a change—except for the long, ruffled hair. That will always give off classic Ryan vibes.

“Wow.” He grins at me. “You look incredible, Mimi. Wouldn't even know you have a bruise beneath that makeup.”

“Good to know because the bruise hurts like a bitch.”

“You should put some kombucha on it when we get home. The probiotics will speed up the healing process.”

“Thanks, but I'll pass. You ready to leave?” I ask.

“Sure am.”

A message alert goes off on Jordan's phone. As always, she races to unlock the screen.

“Lover boy Steel again?” I roll my eyes and laugh with Ryan. “That's our cue to leave.”

“It's not him,” Jordan says in a serious tone.

“Is everything all right?” Ryan asks.

“Shut up, I'm trying to read this email.”

“Wow, must be something important.”

Ryan and I wait in silence, watching Jordan's eyes grow wider until she says, “Shit. The producer for an upcoming reality show called *Search for the Next Burlesque Star* saw my solo performance at the club and wants me to audition for the show.”

“That's amazing.” Ryan tackles her with a hug.

I join in on the embrace. “Everything is coming together for you. First your solo, now this.”

Jordan steps away from us to continue reading. “The email says I need to send in an audition video. Fuck, I only have two days before applications close. That's barely any time to film an audition.”

“Okay, don't panic. We'll help you get the application done,” I tell her. My phone beeps, alerting me that our ride has arrived. “Crap. The Uber is here.”

“Go to the party. I need time to plan out my audition tape. We'll film it tomorrow.” Jordan adjusts the collar on Ryan's shirt. “Remember, you two

arrive together and leave together. I don't want a repeat of Mina being attacked."

"I'm not leaving her alone," Ryan says. "She'll be safe with me. Don't worry."

"Hey, I fought off Connor. I can take care of myself." I've stashed an actual knife in my purse this time and more pepper spray.

"I know you can," Jordan says. "But you shouldn't have to."

"Everything will be fine. Okay, we're leaving now."

As soon as our Uber arrives in front of Verena's building in the Upper East Side, I text Zac to let him know Ryan and I are here. He replies, telling me he'll be down in a minute to escort us up to the penthouse.

"Wow, look at this place," Ryan says, gazing at the building from the backseat. He climbs out of the car and opens my door, offering me a hand. "It's so weird that we're about to have dinner with a bunch of celebrities."

I take his hand to steady myself as I step onto the pavement. "Hey, you're living with a celebrity. You're basically a celebrity yourself after that viral naked bungee jumping video."

"Yeah, but we don't count."

A doorman opens the door to the building's lobby. Out walks Zac, dressed in a suit and with his black hair slicked back. In other words: handsome as hell.

I twirl around to show off my outfit as he approaches. "How do I look?"

Zac greets me with a hug, whispering, "Really fucking good." His gaze lingers on my bruised cheekbone. He nods at it and smiles. "Can't even tell there's a bruise under that makeup."

"I said the same thing," Ryan adds. "Mimi looks stunning."

Zac's gaze switches to Ryan, and for a split second, he seems... pissed off.

"Hey, dude." Ryan extends a hand to shake. "Good to see you again."

Zac shakes his hand, offering a stiff nod. "Come on, I'll take you two to the penthouse."

An awkward silence hangs in the air as we step into the elevator. I hate it. Nothing is ever awkward between me and Zac, but I can't think of anything

to say while trying to understand why he looks so annoyed. I'm hoping the issue is he doesn't like seeing me with Ryan. I'd like to have that very open and honest conversation about my feelings with Zac right now, but this isn't the right time or place.

"Any more contact from Connor?" Zac asks.

"No. I told you I'd let you know if anything happened."

"What about the police? Have they found anyone with a stab wound?"

"I would have told you about that too if there were anything to mention."

Ryan pats Zac's shoulder. "Don't worry, man. Mimi is in good hands while I'm around."

Zac glares at the hand on his shoulder. "I'm supposed to find that information reassuring? Mina told me you're only visiting New York briefly."

"I might be staying in the city for longer than intended."

"Really? Since when?" I ask.

"It depends on how a few things pan out."

The elevator opens and we follow Zac out to a corridor with one wall lined in glass windows. He's about to unlock a door when Ryan swears, walking up to the glass.

"Holy shit, Mimi. Get a load of this view. It's incredible."

Zac steps beside me, muttering in my ear, "You never told me people call you Mimi. Isn't that something a boyfriend should know?"

"Ryan is the only one who calls me Mimi."

"Mina is prettier."

I smile at those words. Usually, whenever I smile at Zac, he smiles back. But not this time, and it leaves me feeling uneasy.

He returns to the door and unlocks it. "Come on, everyone is waiting for you. You too, Ryan. If you think that view is impressive, wait till you see the view from inside the penthouse."

We follow Zac into the penthouse, and I'm instantly surrounded by luxury. In front of us is a massive open living space with a crystal chandelier draped over a sunken lounge area. Eclectic furniture and art are scattered around the room. There's a staircase leading to an upper floor. And the view of Central Park is incredible.

"Ah, she's here," a female voice squeals from out of sight. My heart races with excitement, because oh my God, I know that voice from TV.

A second later, Verena Valentine turns a corner and comes into sight with

Darius and Adrian behind her. She looks even more beautiful in real life than she does on the screen. Her long, dark hair is styled in waves. Her red dress hugs her curves. She's walking toward me with a martini in one hand and her other hand outstretched like she's incoming for a hug.

And that's exactly what she does, squeezing me tight. "I am so excited to meet you. I hear you've briefly met my fiancé, Adrian. And this is Darius."

Fucking hell, all the men in Verena's life are gorgeous. Though I did meet Adrian at Zac's apartment, I was hungover and barely got a chance to look at him. But my God, he is handsome—in a different way to Zac. Where Zac has a suave look about him, Adrian gives off smug boy-next-door vibes. But with those muscles, there's nothing boyish about him. He's the smug *man-next-door*. And damn, Darius is like a male model. I suddenly get the steamiest, yet most inappropriate intrusive thoughts of being in a foursome with Zac, Adrian, and Darius. What the fuck is wrong with me?

Somehow, I manage to clear the sex thoughts out of my mind and speak coherently. "None of you need an introduction. Zac has told me all about you three. Plus, I'm a fan of your show and designs. I would have worn one of your dresses tonight, but you know, starving artist here."

"Verena would love to see you in her designs," Darius says. "You should visit the office this week and I'll get you fitted."

Verena gasps. "Yes. Let me dress you."

"Uh... seriously?" I start *um-ing* and *ah-ing*, unsure how to answer them. "Thank you, but I can't afford your designs."

Darius waves a dismissive hand. "Who said you have to pay? Verena is obsessed with you. She'll give you an entire wardrobe for free."

Verena shoots him a glare and hisses, "Stop embarrassing me." She turns to me and smiles. "Of course you'll get the clothes for free. After all, I'm a huge fan of *The Velvet Cigar* and you're dating one of my closest friends."

As much as I try to fight it, my cheeks grow hot at the mention of dating Zac. "You all know the relationship is fake, right?"

"They know," Zac says. "This is Mina's date, Ryan."

"Oh, shoot." I grow even more red, embarrassed that I forgot about Ryan. "I am so sorry. I'm not usually this rude. I'm just so excited to meet you all. This is my friend, Ryan."

Ryan laughs the belated introduction off and shakes all their hands. When Adrian's turn arrives, there's a brief pause from Adrian's end. He looks at Ryan like he's trying to decipher something.

“The naked bungee jumping guy?” Adrian asks.

“Yeah, that’s me.”

Laughter erupts through the room, followed by Adrian asking Ryan questions about his YouTube channel. There’s a lull in conversation for the rest of us, exactly when I catch sight of a pair of long legs in stiletto heels walk down the staircase. As the woman’s body comes into full view, I’m a little speechless at what she’s wearing. Or more correctly, how little she’s wearing—a short, white dress with large sections cut away to reveal the bare skin of her tanned body. She’s rake thin, with platinum blonde hair, heavy makeup, and *massive* breasts.

“Zac, have you seen the pool upstairs?” the woman asks. “We have to go for a swim later. I brought a bikini with me, but I’m up for skinny-dipping if you are.” Her eyes land on me and she smiles. “Oh, fantastic. Everyone has arrived. I’m Hannah, by the way.” She steps right up to Zac, closer than a friend would stand and sends me a friendly wink. “I’m Zac’s *real* date.”

I force a smile in return, even though I’m blinded by Zac having a date. I thought we were getting closer, especially after the attack. I thought... Shit, I don’t know what I thought, that maybe Zac was falling in love with me too.

Fuck, I’m an idiot. I am so *fucking* stupid.

How long has he been seeing Hannah? Has he *slept* with her? That thought alone has me feeling sick. My eyes flick to Zac for an explanation, not that he owes me one, but I feel so... upset that he never told me about Hannah.

He’s already looking at me, yet the emotion in his eyes is unreadable. He still seems tense, but why, I can’t tell. It’s not because I’m here with Ryan, like I’d foolishly thought a moment ago.

“Mina and Ryan, can I get you two a drink?” Verena asks.

“Sure,” I choke out.

“Whoa, that view is incredible.” Ryan leaves his conversation with Adrian about naked bungee jumping and heads out to the balcony. I couldn’t care less about the view. I’m in the same room as Verena and Darius and have so much to fangirl about. But I can’t speak a single word with the shock of seeing Zac and Hannah together. Using Ryan as a buffer, I follow him to the balcony.

I don’t know why I want to cry all of a sudden. It’s pathetic. *I* am pathetic. Zac doesn’t have romantic feelings for me. We’re friends. I need to get over my stupid obsession with him before I ruin everything between us.



“I love the pink hair,” Hannah says.

I turn around to see she’s entered the balcony, bringing Zac with her. My gaze drops to their hands, woven with each other’s. No sooner than I look there, Zac pulls his hand back from Hannah’s.

So, this is how he acts on a *real* date; he’s not a fan of public displays of affection. Zac is always touching me when we’re parading our fake relationship in public. I guess he puts on a good show for the paparazzi. Now it seems he was probably cringing on the inside every time he touched me in front of people.

Our eyes meet, and again, all I see in them is tension. Tonight, he’s not the Zac I know, and I hate it.

I thank Hannah for the compliment on my hair and try to ease into chit-chat. “How do you two know each other?”

“Verena set us up,” Hannah says.

“Oh, nice. Um, Adrian, do you mind showing me to your bathroom?”

“Yeah, it’s right down there.” Adrian points to a hallway on the far side of the living room.

“Hey, I’ll follow you. I need the ladies too,” Hannah says.

Great. Now instead of escaping to cry, I have to suck it up and play nice with Zac’s date.

We head to the bathroom together. I don’t say much to Hannah, only simple one-word answers when she asks about my outfit. When I’m finished with the bathroom, I use the hallway mirror to mess with my hair and pretend like I’m fixing my makeup because I’m not ready to face the pressure of socializing.

A moment later, Hannah exits the bathroom and steps up to the mirror, adjusting her appearance too. She makes eye contact with me through the reflection and grins. “Now that we’re alone, give me all the details on Zac. What’s he like in bed?”

My cheeks burn, though I do find some relief in Hannah’s question. She hasn’t had him yet. “Zac and I haven’t slept together,” I say, not wanting to share the personal details.

“Wow, that’s a surprise. Why not? He’s hot.”

“Because we’re friends and colleagues.”

“I’m still surprised. Zac doesn’t stop talking about you.”

That knowledge should make me feel better. But it doesn’t. How much time have they spent together for him to talk about me so much? “How long

have you been seeing Zac?”

“Oh, I only met him tonight. We both came over early to Verena’s place to help with the dinner party preparations. Verena was upfront with me when she set us up. Said he’s not looking for anything serious after his divorce, just a good time. I’m in the same position.”

I guess that defines the sex between me and Zac: just a good time. I *knew* this, and yet I’m still hurt. Again, I mentally kick myself for getting swept away with my feelings and forgetting Zac isn’t looking for anything deeper.

Hannah fluffs up her hair. “When Verena asked if I’d go on a date with Zac, I couldn’t say no. I mean, it’s Zac Delavin. I’m DTF.”

“DTF?”

“Down to fuck. Look at him, he’s got to be a good fuck. He’s a good kisser, right?”

“Oh, um, yeah.”

“Alright, I’ll see you back out there.” She winks at me and heads back to the party.

The second Hannah is out of sight, I return to the bathroom and shut the door while tears pool in my eyes. This is by far the most awkward moment of my life, confined to a bathroom in Verena Valentine’s home because I don’t want anyone to see me crying over the guy I’m falling in love with. The guy who is going to have sex with another woman tonight. I dab a tissue to my eyes to blot away the tears, not allowing them to ruin my makeup.

When I finally finish crying, I have to wait before I can leave the confines of this bathroom, due to my red eyes. With one look at me, it’s obvious I’ve been crying.

After ten minutes, once I’ve decided that I look normal again, I open the door, and dammit, Zac is right there, leaning against the opposite wall. “Hey, you’ve been gone a while. I wanted to check up on you.”

“You left everyone to check up on me?” I ask.

“Of course. You all good?”

“If you call *good* being ambushed by Hannah and made to listen all about how she plans to sleep with you tonight, then yes, I’m fantastic.”

“Shit. Sorry about that.”

His answer ignites the fury of a wildfire in my chest, which burns its way into my voice. “Wow, you’re not even trying to deny that you’ll have sex with her tonight. I guess you would be into her. You’re Zac Delavin and she looks like a porn star.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He half-laughs but sounds confused and taken aback by my sharp tone. “I’m some man-slut? Aside from you, I’ve only been with one woman for the past twelve years.”

“I don’t know why I said that. I’ll admit, it was kind of mean and not a valid point at all. But I had no idea you’re dating again. I thought we were friends and tell each other about our lives.”

All the laughter leaves his voice, and now he’s as blunt as I am. “Like how you told me you’re dating Ryan? Or about the roses you’ve been receiving from Connor?”

“I already explained that I didn’t want to worry you about the roses. And I did tell you about Ryan.”

“Not outright. I don’t understand what your problem is with me being on a date with Hannah. She’s an attractive woman. What’s the issue if I do sleep with her?”

I laugh in bitter disbelief and shake my head, walking away. As soon as I pass Zac, he grabs my wrist and spins me to face him, his strong arms pulling me in so close that my body is almost pressed against his. Close enough to feel his breath on my face.

“What’s the issue, Mina? Maybe I *want* to fuck her,” he says in a deep, taunting whisper, like he’s trying to get a reaction out of me.

Whatever Zac is playing at, he’s winning. I despise every word out of his mouth. I want Zac for myself and can’t stand the thought of him being with anyone but me.

His gaze lowers to my lips, lingering there like he’s thinking about kissing me. Instead, he continues speaking in that same sharp whisper. “You’re quiet. Do you not like the thought of me fucking another woman? She’s the kind of woman that will let me fuck her however I want. She’ll let me do *anything* to her. And I’ll enjoy every moment of it.”

I reach my limit, unable to listen to another word, even though I’m certain he’s messing with me. “I hate you,” I hiss, my words riddled with lies and jealousy.

Zac’s gaze returns to mine, his eyes fierce and dark but not with anger. There’s a look within him that says he wants to do a lot more than kiss me. Despite being furious with him, my lower regions stir with arousal. Whatever he’s thinking, I want him to do it to me. I *need* him to do it to me.

One corner of Zac’s mouth rises into a smirk, like he’s got me right where he wants me. “I know this look on your face,” he says. “It’s my *favorite*

look.”

“Tell me what it means,” I whisper.

“It’s how you look at me when you want to be fucked. You don’t hate me, baby. You know what? I think you *like* me. Not as much as I like you; that’s impossible. But you spend every night at my apartment riding my cock, and I know you love it. So, let’s talk about what’s really happening. You’re jealous that I’m here with Hannah. You don’t like seeing me with her just as much as I don’t like seeing you with Ryan. And let me be clear—I fucking *hate* seeing you with Ryan. That’s what this is all about, isn’t it?”

I can’t speak, I’m so hot inside and caught up on how Zac admitted he likes me. My heart is fluttering, knowing he’s territorial of me.

“Isn’t it, Mina?” he repeats with force.

“I hate the idea of you wanting anyone but me—”

Zac’s lips bear down on mine before I finish speaking, the weight of his body slamming me to the hallway wall. No one can see us here, hidden behind a corner, so I give myself over to the heat of this moment. Our breath tangles as I open my lips and invite Zac in. The way he accepts the invitation is with urgency, as if it will be torture to spend another second without having all of me.

“I want you to know…” His words are spaced out and broken as he kisses me. “I only invited Hannah tonight because I thought it would lessen the pain of seeing you with another man. I never wanted her. I was going insane with the thought of Ryan’s hands on you.”

His lips press fevered kisses to my jaw. My neck. Even lower, to my cleavage. I take the opportunity to be truthful with Zac too. “I was only with Ryan as a distraction from you. I planned to tell you tonight that I want to be with you.”

“*Be with me,*” he growls while kissing my breasts, repeating my words like they’re the most heavenly thing he’s ever heard. “I *love* hearing that. But Mina, you’re already mine. You’ve been mine for weeks, you just didn’t know it yet.”

I quiver, weak all over at his claim over me. The slit in my gown falls open as Zac hooks one of my legs around his waist and slides his palm up my thigh, grabbing my ass with no care for being delicate.

“I love how rough you are with me,” I murmur.

“I’m about to get rougher.” Zac’s hips press against me, bringing a moan from my lips when I feel how hard his dick is. The entrance between my legs

aches at the tease. “The sounds you make send me fucking feral, Mina.”

He pushes us into the bathroom and locks the door, lifting me onto the basin. The next thing I know, Zac is hiking my dress up around my hips and clawing at my panties. He shoves them down my legs and onto the floor, then unzips his fly.

Everything happens so fast that I don't get a view of Zac's cock. While kissing me, he opens a condom from his pocket, rolls it on, and guides his dick to the wetness between my thighs. Zac wastes no time and thrusts deep inside. We both gasp, the initial pleasure bursting through me as his cock stretches me open.

“Fuck, Mina. I'll never get used to how tight your little pussy is.” He pulls out and grabs my hips for leverage, then thrusts back into me, his size making me whimper. “I am so crazy about you.”

His words alone send a rush of pleasure to my clit. I cry out as his dick enters deeper this time, hitting my back wall. My hand flies up to cover my mouth, realizing too late how loud I was.

Zac removes my hand. “Don't you dare cover that pretty mouth. I want to hear what my dick does to you.”

“No, Zac. You feel too good. People will hear us.”

“There's music playing in the living room. Don't hold back on me.” He thrusts again, his eyebrows drawing together and his jaw tense as he groans with need.

I place my hands on the basin and lean back, watching Zac's cock slide in and out of me. The very sight of us joined together only heightens my arousal, sending electric pulses to my groin.

“Look at you, desperate for my cock. You know, I jerked off thinking about you every night that I didn't get your body this week.”

“I touched myself over you too.”

He hisses through clenched teeth at my words and pushes into me again. “You have no idea how much that turns me on. Tell me what you thought of when you touched yourself.”

“Everything.” I buck my hips, needing Zac to move faster. “Being a slut for you and letting you fuck me in every position. Me touching myself while you watch. Your cock in my mouth.”

He groans and slams his dick into me harder, the sound the most masculine, animalistic thing I've ever heard. “I *am* going to fuck you in every position. I'm going to fuck you every day. No one else. Just you, Mina. I only

want you.”

Hearing Zac say those words draws me closer to my peak. His grip grows firmer on my hips as his pace increases, his hands so desperate that I think they may leave bruises. The thought of Zac bruising me during sex only builds my orgasm further, I don't care how wrong the concept may be. I want a reminder of this moment when I look at my naked hips in the mirror later and see his handprints on me. This moment that is so incredibly erotic.

“We shouldn't be doing this,” I pant, despite angling my hips in a better position to make him thrust harder. I squeeze my thighs tighter, teasing my orgasm as it builds low in my center. “We're on dates with different people.”

“Why are you so wet, then? Your legs are locked around my waist, pushing me deeper.”

“Because I need to come on your dick.” I tilt my head back and moan.

“You will come, Mina. Don't you worry about that. You sound so good taking my dick.” His hand slides down to my clit and I gasp his name out loud. “I love the way you say my name when I'm fucking you. You want to know what the hottest part about all of this is? You're here on a date with another guy, but my cock is inside you. You know what we're doing is wrong, but that's what turns you on, isn't it?”

He's right. I'm so desperate for Zac to make me come that I've lost all my morals. I'm a crazed girl over the way he looks at me with each sharp thrust.

“I want him to hear me fucking you,” Zac says. “Him and every man on this planet need to know you're mine. Mina, I fucking adore you.”

And that's all it takes for me to lose control. My legs tighten around Zac's waist and the muscles in my core clamp onto Zac's erection as he thrusts through my orgasm.

“That's it, baby, come for me,” he groans. “I'm coming too. You feel so good. So tight. *Fuck.*”

Unlike every other time we've had sex, when Zac reaches his peak, he doesn't glance away from me or distract himself by kissing my neck. Zac gazes straight into my eyes, and I see every raw emotion in him and how much he worships me.

His cock plunges into me, gradually slowing down until our only movements are nothing but ragged breaths. “That was incredible.” Zac's forehead rests on mine. “*You are incredible.*”

“I hope you were serious when you said I'll get this every day.”

“I was serious about everything I said. Mina, you are like a drug.” Zac's

lips brush against mine. He attempts to pull out, but my legs wrap tight around his waist, keeping his cock deep within me. He chuckles at the lock I have him in. “We should get back to the party.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I sigh, laughing, and release my legs.

Zac lowers my feet to the ground and slides my dress back down, then zips his fly and disposes of the condom in the bathroom bin. A smirk finds its way to his lips as he looks me over, the smug expression making me want to have sex with him all over again.

“You look... like I fucked you.” He runs fingers through my hair to tame the mess he created and wipes a slow thumb beneath my bottom lip, fixing my lipstick.

Someone knocks on the bathroom door, making my heart jump into my throat. Both of us are too startled to form an answer for a good few seconds. Right as Zac opens his mouth to speak, the door opens, and footsteps enter.

“Hey, Zac, are you in here—” Verena yelps at the sight of us.

I step away from Zac, mortified. I thought the door was locked. What if she’d entered a minute earlier and found Zac and me having sex? From the startled look on Verena’s face, it’s clear she already knows what we were doing in here. Zac has helped me tidy up my appearance, but his hair and suit are still disheveled.

Needing to escape the awkwardness of this moment as quickly possible, I rush past Verena, out of the bathroom and back to the party, leaving the two friends behind.

## Chapter Sixteen

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### Zac

“Practicing for the show?” Verena teases as we stand in her bathroom.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t start. Also, what the hell, you walk into locked rooms?”

“First of all, this is my home. I can walk into whatever room I please. Secondly, I knocked, and no one answered. And third, the lock on this door has never worked.” She laughs, but there’s no judgment in her eyes. She seems pleased. “I *knew* you two were more than friends. Kind of risky of you to have sex with her at a party when you’re both on dates with other people.”

“We didn’t have sex.”

“Uh-huh. I guess that would explain why her panties are lying on the floor.” She nods to my feet.

I grab the panties and hide them in my pocket, feeling how wet they are in the process. Realization dawns on me—Mina’s out there at the party with no panties. Fuck, that’s a turn on.

“How long has this been going on for?” Verena asks.

“About a week.” There’s no point lying anymore. “I didn’t plan for this to happen tonight. Don’t worry about Hannah. I won’t lead her on.”

“Good.” Her gaze trails down to my crotch where I’m still hard, and she laughs again. “I’ll see you back out there once you’ve calmed down. Oh, and you’ve got Mina’s lipstick all over your face.”

I glance at myself in the mirror, finding it hard not to smile at Mina’s mark. It’s a shame that I have to wash away the traces of her lips on me.

A couple of minutes later, when I return to the living room in proper form



again, I receive a wink from Darius. No doubt, Verena already informed him of what she walked in on between me and Mina. If Adrian's smirk is anything to go by, he knows too.

When dinner begins, I'm seated across the table from Mina, with her directly in my eye line. I try my hardest to not sit quietly and admire her the whole time or have flashbacks of how good she looked when I was inside her not so long ago.

There's discussion of Verena and Adrian's wedding. Hannah starts a conversation with me about *The Velvet Cigar*, which I engage in on autopilot, my attention on Mina the entire time. Mina is laughing with Ryan about some kombucha thing. I'm not focusing on the details, nor do I give a shit about him anymore now that I'm convinced he's no one to be jealous of.

Well, that's not *entirely* true. I wish I was sitting where he is, right next to Mina, so I can hold her hand beneath the table. I would sweep the pastel pink hair back from Mina's shoulder and whisper in her ear, asking if she'll blow this party off to come home with me. But I understand the need for us to keep up appearances with our dates.

Occasionally, Mina sneaks a glance at me. Naturally, she already finds my gaze on her. Our eye contact shares unspoken words, and I know she too is thinking about what we just did in the bathroom. With each glance, she presses her lips together to avoid a smile, and looks back at Ryan. That's how the majority of the evening goes. I don't get her to myself like I so desperately want to.

After dinner, we all move to the sunken lounge for cocktails. Mina sits with Ryan, on the armrest of his armchair. Everyone is engaged in one of Ryan's travel stories, but I can't listen to another minute of him talking about his trek around Nepal or how he swam the English Channel. I hide my phone in my lap and text Mina.

ZAC

Sit next to me.

Mina retrieves her phone and reads my message. Her reply comes through seconds later.

MINA

I can't. There's a wet patch on my dress because of you. It will be in everyone's eye line if I stand.

Your dress is black. No one will notice.

Black material still shows wet patches.

Fine, you win. If you need your panties back, they're in my pocket and still wet.

I don't want them back. I left them for you to jerk off to when I'm not around.

Fuck. She's sexting me. We're in public, surrounded by friends, and she's *sexting* me. At least when we had sex, it was in the privacy of a bathroom. I love how dirty she is. Blood rushes to my cock and I groan.

Everyone looks in my direction. Shit. My reaction to Mina's message was too loud.

"You all right?" Verena asks.

"Yeah, Zac?" Mina asks with an innocent tone but directs a secretive smile my way. "Is everything all right?"

"My drink went down the wrong way."

Once everyone returns to the conversation. I send Mina a reply.

ZAC

Come home with me.

MINA

Believe me, I want to. But that won't look good for either of us. We're here with dates. Ryan and I are living together and I don't want to ruin our friendship. I need to end things with him amicably. Jordan will also be pissed if I cause issues with her brother.

Dammit. I know she's right. Doesn't mean I have to like it. There's one thing I *can* do to make this situation easier on us.

"Hey," I whisper to Hannah beside me. "Can I talk to you on the balcony?"

"Sure." She follows me outside with her martini glass.

I rest my forearm on the railing. "I need to be honest with you. I think you're great and attractive, but I can't pursue anything further with you. I don't want to lead you on. Maybe this could have worked out between us if I wasn't so..."

"In love with Mina?"

I rub the back of my neck and laugh, caught off guard by Hannah's

assumption. “I’m not in love with her.”

“You sure about that? She’s all you talk about. You haven’t taken your eyes off her tonight. Hey, look, it’s no problem. I was only here for some fun. If I were into girls, I’d probably be in love with Mina myself. She’s incredible.”

“I don’t love her.”

Hannah smiles as if she doesn’t believe me. I don’t even believe myself. “Okay, sure. Anyway, I really need to have sex tonight, so if you’re not in the mood, I’m gonna head off to find someone else.”

Wow. I almost laugh at how forward she is and how surprisingly well this conversation has gone.

As soon as we return inside, Hannah announces she’s leaving.

“We should be off, too,” Mina says to Ryan.

Verena stands from the couch and everyone else follows. “It’s been amazing meeting you both. So, we’re good for tomorrow? We’ll meet at my office and I’ll size you up for some designs.”

“Yes,” Mina says. “Text me the address and I’ll be there.”

Everyone hugs each other goodbye. Everyone except me and Mina. We don’t go near each other. I can’t hug her goodbye. If I do, I know I won’t be able to let her go.

Instead, I say to her, “Let me walk you guys to your Uber.”

“Zac, you’re coming back here, right?” Verena asks, eyeing me with a look that I know means *we need to talk about Mina*.

“Yeah. I’ll be back in a moment.”

I leave the penthouse with Mina and Ryan. The elevator journey is painful because all I want to do is kiss Mina.

When we’re on the street, Ryan shakes my hand and climbs into the backseat of an Uber. “Good seeing you again, dude,” he calls from the farthest passenger seat.

Right before Mina joins him, I lean one arm on the open door, confining her between me and the car, and whisper, “You’re seriously going to make me spend the night alone, aren’t you?”

She smiles back at me, speaking in a hushed voice, “You’ve got my panties. You’re all set.”

“They’re not enough.”

“I want to go home with you, but I can’t. Despite my earlier slip up in the bathroom, I’m a woman of integrity. Ryan deserves that from me, and so do

you after Penny. I'll see you tomorrow for our morning run." She kisses my cheek, the warmth of her lips radiating all through my body. "Goodnight, Zac."

Mina slides into the Uber and the vehicle speeds off. I hate that she's gone. I'm instantly on edge, worrying about her safety again. Connor or his gang could come after her. Yes, she can take care of herself, but she shouldn't be in a position where she has to fight anyone off. I want Mina with me, where I know she's safe. Yet at the same time, I admire her morals. If it's somehow possible, I think I might like her even more for taking this stance and showing me she's a trustworthy person.

Not even five seconds after I return to the penthouse, Darius starts. "Bathroom sex at a party. I'm impressed."

He's sitting on the couch with Verena and Adrian, the three of them with a drink in their hands and all watching me. Waiting.

"What's your deal with her?" Adrian asks. "She's going home with another guy."

I take a seat with them. "Mina is ending things with Ryan."

"Are you two together?"

"I don't know. Yes... I think. We haven't had an official conversation about our relationship, but the way we were speaking tonight... We only want each other."

Verena squeals. "I am so damn happy for you. We need to hear the details."

I sink back into the cushions, staring up at the chandelier as my head leans on the couch's back rest. "Fuck, I'm so... addicted to Mina. Her personality is amazing. She's gorgeous. The way she smiles at me... I swear she doesn't smile at anyone else like that. And she's such a fucking tease. She was walking around with no panties all night and sexting me."

Verena laughs. "Okay, maybe a little too much information at the end there."

"Speak for yourself." Darius leans forward, resting both elbows on his knees. "These are the exact details we need."

"Agreed," Adrian says. "If Verena can't handle the details, I say we need to plan a guys' night."

She swats his arm. "I can handle the details."

"I still say we need a guys' night."

"You know what, I agree." I haven't been the greatest friend these last

few months, wrapped up in my own dramas and having no energy for anyone else. “Drinks at my place. When are you guys free?”

“I’m busy for the next few days,” Darius says. “How about Tuesday night?”

Tuesday works well. Gives me Sunday and Monday to spend both nights with Mina in bed. “I’m good with Tuesday.”

“Let’s lock it in,” Adrian says.

Verena folds her arms and huffs. “So jealous right now. Can we get back to the important details about Zac and Mina? It sounds like you’ve found yourself a woman who is the complete opposite of Penny. Sexually adventurous and honorable.”

“You don’t understand. It was never like this with Penny,” I say. “We met in high school and everything was always just sweet and romantic between us. In the few years when we were happy together, all we ever had was sweet sex. I never experienced this urge to... own her in the bedroom like I do with Mina. Or how Mina makes me drool after her when we’re not in the bedroom. And it’s not just about the sex. She’s so fun to be around. There’s never a dull moment with her. She’s... my best friend.”

Adrian sucks in a comical sharp breath while squeezing Verena’s leg. “Oh, burn. You and Darius have officially been replaced,” he says to them.

Verena grins at me. “Remember in Australia when I said you’d find someone who makes you happy? If only your past self could see how happy you are now.”

Darius adds, “Don’t fuck it up because I want Mina to be my number four.”

“Number four?” Verena asks.

Darius holds up his hand, ticking off four fingers. “Verena, Zac, Adrian, Mina.”

We all laugh.

“Don’t worry,” I tell Darius. “I like Mina too much to ever fuck it up with her.”

## **Mina**

There’s no rose on the doorstep when Ryan and I return home from the dinner party. Thank God. Hopefully Connor has received the message to not

fuck with me. I hope he's bleeding out in a gutter somewhere from the stab wound I gave him.

"That was fun," Ryan says, locking the front door.

I smile to myself, thinking about Zac and me in that bathroom. "Yeah."

He turns to me and gazes at my lips. "Can I kiss you?"

I take one of Ryan's hands in mine and give him a warm smile. "Thank you for being my date tonight. As much fun as I had with you, nothing sexual is going to happen between us."

"Okay, I get it, you're still crushing on Zac. I saw the way you were looking at him at the dinner party. But maybe if we kiss, that will take your mind off him. You look so good in this dress, Mimi. I've been thinking about sleeping with you all night."

"Shit. Ryan," I laugh. "It's not going to happen. I had sex with Zac."

"What? When?"

"At the party. I'm sorry."

He bursts out laughing. "Don't apologize. I'm actually impressed. When did you find time for sex with nobody noticing?"

"Oh, they noticed, all right. You were too busy taking in the view from the penthouse and talking to Adrian to realize."

"Fair point. That view was incredible. My only question now is what the fuck are you doing coming home with me instead of Zac?"

"I came home with you because I value your friendship and I wanted to explain the situation properly to you."

"Mimi." Ryan rests both hands on my shoulders and looks straight into my eyes. "I think you're hot. That's no secret. You're good in bed and we've had fun with each other over the years. When you asked to have sex with me, I wasn't going to turn down the offer. But there are no romantic feelings on my side. You and I have been friends for years. We're the kind of friends who can see each other once every few years and pick up right where we left off. I think you should turn around and go straight back to Zac."

The suggestion is tempting, but I shouldn't leave my apartment alone at this hour of the night. "I promised Zac I wouldn't be reckless with my safety."

"Invite him here."

"To this shoe box? I'll spare myself the embarrassment of you listening to me getting busy with Zac." Jordan is at work, but she'll be home soon enough, and I don't want to expose her to my sex sounds either.

“You’re more considerate than I am,” Ryan says. “I guess we’ll just be two people going to bed with sex on our minds. I am totes DTF with someone.”

How is it that I’ve never heard that acronym before, and now, in the space of one night, two people use it in front of me? My eyes widen with an idea. “Contact Hannah. She told me she’s DTF.”

Ryan laughs. “Are you serious?”

“I sure am,” I say while drafting a text to Verena, thanking her for the evening and asking if she’ll give me Hannah’s number to pass on to Ryan.

Less than a minute later, Verena replies with Hannah’s details. I forward them to Ryan.

“Shit. You really think I should contact Hannah?” he asks.

“I told you, she’s DTF. Her words, not mine.”

Ryan chuckles and dials Hannah’s number. She answers his call quickly, so I retreat to the bathroom to prepare for bed. I have a shower and take my makeup off, then crawl into bed smiling as I attempt to fall asleep. But I’m too buzzed for sleep. I grab my phone and text Jordan in the darkness of my room. I don’t expect her to see the message immediately. She’s probably on stage right now. But I need to tell someone about my night.

MINA

So... I had sex with Zac.

A second later, I get the fright of my life when my bedroom door bursts open and Jordan flies into my room, jumping on my bed.

“Girl, you nearly gave me a heart attack.” I clutch my chest, sitting up. “I thought you were at the club.”

“I finished early. What the fuck is this? Explain now.” She holds her phone up to me, the screen light blinding me in my dark room.

“It seems pretty self-explanatory to me.”

“I need context. How did it happen? Are you together or was it a heat of the moment, one-time thing?”

“We’ve been sleeping together for the past week.”

“Bitch, what?” she shouts. “How could you have kept that information from me?”

“I didn’t want you to ask questions I didn’t know the answers to.”

“What, and you know the answers to them now?”

I shrug. “We haven’t discussed labels. Zac just got divorced. I’m sure he

doesn't want to dive straight into another relationship."

"I *need* labels. Please tell me Zac Delavin is your boyfriend. Your *real* boyfriend."

"We're seeing each other. That's the only label you'll get for the time being."

"Ugh, fine." She climbs beneath the covers with me like we're two teenage girls having a sleepover. "Okay, details. Tell me *everything*."



## Chapter Seventeen

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### Zac

I have the worst blue balls known to mankind. Jerking off to the thought of Mina offers no relief. I need the real deal, and for the entirety of Sunday she's busy. So busy she had to cancel our morning run because she needed to make time for her fitting with Verena and Darius before helping Jordan film an audition tape.

I barely hear from Mina throughout the day except for a couple of sexts which only worsens the ache in my cock. I don't blame her for helping Jordan; she's being a supportive friend. But the distance from Mina is a challenge, not only because I'm craving her body but because every moment she's not with me is a moment where I worry about her safety. The only time I get with her is a late-night FaceTime, so I take it, and enjoy every second of her hypnotic laugh and beautiful smile.

Come rehearsals on Monday, the need for Mina is real. Over the last week, we've rehearsed our sex scene multiple times in front of the director, and every time, we receive some variation of positive feedback like "great, guys," or "well done." Nothing too extraordinary. But nothing problematic.

Today, the sexual tension between us in rehearsals is heightened. Our characters have a knife fight that leads into the sex scene. Talon infiltrated The Velvet Cigar, searching for a murderer, and discovers Seraphina has been playing him this entire time and she is the one he's been hunting.

We run through the choreography: I have a knife to Mina's throat; she

outwits me and runs for her escape, failing when I pin her to the floor; Mina reaches up to distract me with a kiss, then I roll onto my back, bringing her on top of me, and so begins the passion of our characters making out.

Each time we practiced this scene last week, there was always a line of professionalism we respected. I still respect that line. I'm Talon and she's Seraphina. We're performing for people.

Which is why I'm caught off guard when Mina grinds her hips against mine and moans in the same breathy way when I slid my dick into her on Saturday night. I break character for a moment, frozen beneath her kisses, shocked that she's riding me during rehearsals because we've never practiced the scene this way before. Then I catch the slightest trace of a mischievous grin on her lips, and my cock gets hard, knowing she's doing this to me on purpose. And fuck, all I've been able to think about since Saturday night is burying my dick in her, so I give in and go with the flow, kissing Mina back and bucking my hips up into hers.

When the music finishes, I force myself to end the kiss with Mina, otherwise I'll never stop.

There's a wolf whistle from the director. "Wow, that was amazing. I don't know what you did differently that time, guys, but I loved it. I'm getting hot over here watching you. Okay, everyone, let's call it a day."

As soon as people are busy packing up, I meet Mina's eyes and whisper, "Dressing room. *Now.*"

Without speaking a word, she leaves the rehearsal space and I follow at a distance. Once we're both in the dressing room, I close the door behind us and lock it, this time checking the lock works. I pull Mina into my arms and kiss the fuck out of her, all while grabbing her ass and crushing her to my hard cock. I'm so desperate to get her out of this dress and naked beneath me.

Mina leans back to speak, but I kiss her again, too hungry for her body. She laughs against my mouth, placing her fingers between our lips. "As fun as our last time was, I don't want to create a habit of having sex in public. Especially not at our workplace."

"You make a good point," I say. "Though, I think you enjoy teasing me. What were you thinking, grinding against me like that in front of people?"

That mischievous spark returns to her smile, and she adopts an innocent voice. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Were you trying to make me hard in front of everyone? Because it worked."

“I got carried away.”

“Come to my place tonight,” I say with another kiss.

“Shit, I can’t. Jordan’s audition tape is due at midnight, and she isn’t happy with it yet. I told her I’d help her with it tonight. What about tomorrow night?”

“Fuck,” I growl. “I can’t do tomorrow. I’m having Adrian and Darius over at my place for a guys’ night.”

Mina’s hands slide down to my bulging cock, for no other reason than to tease me. “Don’t worry. It will make the next time we’re together even better. You’ll like me more.”

“Impossible.”

“Any word from Adrian?”

“Not yet.” Darius says, lighting a cigar as he lifts his legs up to rest on my balcony table.

It’s nine o’clock and Adrian was due to arrive at my apartment forty-five minutes ago for the guys’ night. Ordinarily, the late arrival wouldn’t bother me, but I could be with Mina right now instead of waiting around for him. It’s been three days since I’ve had sex with her, and I am going insane not having her body.

“I’m starting drinks without Adrian. You want one?”

Darius puffs on his cigar. “Yeah. Dick Sucker.”

“I’m sorry, *what?*”

He shrugs, as if *I’m* the one being absurd. “I’ll have a Dick Sucker, the cocktail.”

“I meant do you want a Jack Daniels? I’m not making cocktails, nor do I know the ingredients for a Dick Sucker.”

“Well, you ought to. It’s a delicious drink.”

I open my fridge and grab the Jack Daniels, then take a seat next to Darius on the balcony. Mr. Fluffy jumps on his lap and snuggles into a ball.

Darius laughs, stroking him. “I still can’t believe you chose a Toy Poodle.”

“Mina chose him.”

That makes him laugh harder. “Of course she did. How are things going

with her?”

“There’s not much to report on since Verena’s dinner party. I could have seen her tonight. Be flattered that I’m giving up sex for this.”

“You know, Mina didn’t stop talking about you all throughout her fitting on Sunday with me and Verena.”

“What did she say about me?”

He chuckles. “This doesn’t get back to her, okay?”

Wow, it’s that juicy. “Sure.”

“She said, and I quote, *Zac is my favorite person.*”

I take a sip of my drink, smiling around the rim.

“I think she’s in love with you.”

My heart thumps faster at his theory. “Hannah made the same comment about me being in love with Mina.”

“And are you?”

“I said no. To be honest, I don’t know if it was the truth. All I know is it nearly killed me when I saw she’d been attacked.” After Verena’s party, my friends spent a good hour listening to me recount the Connor situation, so I don’t go into detail with Darius now. “I hate that the police won’t do anything to protect Mina. I hate that *I* can’t do anything to protect her. I’m constantly worried about her.”

“That’s shit, man. I wish I could help.”

No sooner than Darius speaks, the front door opens with Adrian’s arrival. He knows the building’s code, and I left my door unlocked for him.

“Hey. Sorry I’m late. I got caught up with Verena.” Adrian joins us on the balcony, pouring himself a whiskey.

Darius raises an eyebrow, inspecting Adrian’s appearance. His hair is disheveled and there are traces of pink lipstick on his collar. “You mean having sex with Verena?”

Adrian grins. “Fine. I was having sex with my girl. Worse things have happened.”

Fuck my life. I tip my head back, gulping down whiskey.

“What’s the issue?” Adrian asks in response to my drinking.

Darius answers before I can. “Zac is giving up sex to hang out with us.”

“Shit. I’m going to get straight to the point, then. I’ve been meaning to ask you something,” Adrian says to me. “Verena and I have been discussing the wedding. She isn’t having a maid of honor. That role is going to Darius.”

“*Man* of honor.” Darius winks at me. “Verena asked me the other day,

though I already assumed I was taking the role. It was straight after you told her Mina is your best friend.”

I kick the leg of his chair and laugh. I assumed as much as well, and I’m not offended. Verena has known Darius longer than she’s known me.

“So,” Adrian continues. “I want you to be my best man at the wedding.”

I smile and nod, bringing my drink to my mouth. “Yeah, of course I will be.”

I’ll proudly stand beside Adrian as he makes an eternal commitment to Verena. It’s surreal how only a few weeks ago I struggled to be in the same room as Verena and Adrian, miserable over how my own marriage had ended. At the time, if someone told me that feeling would quickly disappear, I wouldn’t have believed them.

“I’m excited about your wedding,” I tell him. “Only a few months to go. How are you feeling?”

Adrian folds both hands behind his head and leans back. “The wedding can’t come soon enough. I want to call Verena my wife already.”

My phone beeps with a message alert.

MINA

I miss you. Hope you’re having fun with the guys.

ZAC

Miss you too. I’ll call you when I’m done.

“Mina?” Adrian laughs.

Darius exhales smoke. “Obviously. Look at the smile on his face. You too, Adrian. You’re still smiling from talking about marrying Verena. Shit, you guys look happy.”

He’s right. I don’t know where this thing with Mina will lead, but I’m not dwelling on the future or rushing to put labels on our relationship. It feels so damn good to be happy for a change.

“What about you?” Adrian asks Darius. “You seeing anyone?”

“I’m always seeing people. But no one special. I’ve actually been contemplating coming out to my family and the public.”

“Wow. Good for you,” I say. “Why the change of heart?”

“Because I’m surrounded by happy couples. It makes me sick, and I want to be in on the action.”

Adrian grins. “You’re going to break a lot of hearts.”

We all laugh and take another sip of our drinks.

“How’s the musical coming along?” Adrian asks. “How long till opening night?”

“Just over three weeks. The show is going to be incredible. Actually, you’ve just reminded me that I have to text Verena about something.”

I pull out my phone and send her a text while Adrian and Darius continue discussing the wedding.

ZAC

Opening night for The Velvet Cigar is coming up. I know it’s short notice, but is there any chance I can pay you to design a dress for Mina to wear to the after party? I want the night to be amazing for Mina since it’s her first big show.

VERENA

This is what you guys are talking about on your boys’ night?

Among other things.

I would love to design a dress for Mina.

You’re incredible. Can we keep this a secret? I want to surprise Mina with the dress on the night.

No problem. I already have all her measurements. Oh, and I’m not accepting your money.

Yes, you are.

No. Goodbye. Get back to talking about dicks and vaginas or whatever you guys couldn’t bear to have me around for.

“Verena thinks we’re talking about dicks and vaginas. Her words, not mine.”

Adrian laughs. “Sounds like something she’d say.”

The three of us continue drinking and chatting, and although I miss Mina, it’s nice to enjoy the company of friends again.

Our evening comes to an end at midnight. I say goodbye to Darius and Adrian and am left alone in my apartment, my thoughts instantly jumping to Mina. I don’t know if it’s too late to call her, but I’m longing to hear the breathy tone of her laugh. I want to hear how she spent her night. Fuck, I’m so desperate to see her, I’m willing to travel to her apartment right this second if it means I can hold her in my arms.

Taking my chances, I dial her number.

“Hey, this is Mina. Leave a message after the beep.”

Dammit.

The beep comes, and I'm about to hang up, when a better idea comes to mind. "Mina, hey," I say into the speaker.

## **Mina**

When I step out of the shower, I realize there's a missed call from Zac on my phone. I'm about to call him back but stop when I see he's left a voice message. I press play and continue drying myself with my towel.

"Mina, hey. I was hoping you would answer the phone so I can come see you tonight. But I guess you're asleep, so I'll have to find another way to entertain myself. You know, I haven't stopped thinking about you all night. I keep visualizing your smile and how amazing it is. How I love making you laugh. How your voice sends shivers up my spine whenever I hear it." His voice pauses, and when he continues, the tone is deeper and with a gravelly texture. "You want to know what else I've been thinking about? You on your knees in front of me."

I freeze, my eyes darting to the phone on my basin. Is Zac... leaving me a sex voicemail? My lips curl upward. A second later, he groans from the speaker, the husky sound toying with my senses and making me tingle all over.

"I can't stop thinking about how good those pretty lips of yours would look wrapped around my cock. God, I want to fuck you so badly. You know, I've been jerking off day and night to the thought of you."

My skin grows hot. I just came out of the shower and dried myself but thinking about Zac touching himself over me has me wet between my legs again. I'm tempted to hang up the phone and return his call this instant, telling him to get to my apartment straight away. But I'm also extremely turned on by this voicemail and want to hear what else he has to say. How far he'll take this. I wrap the towel around myself and sit on the edge of my bed with the phone beside me.

"Do you want to know what I think about when I jerk off?" His breath turns heavy, and the sentences have brief pauses in them, filled with subtle moans. Shit. Is he... touching himself while recording this?

I cross my legs and squeeze them together tight, shivering at the sudden spark of pleasure the tension creates in my groin.

“I think about that perfect body of yours and how I want everyone to know it’s mine to fuck. I want them all to know that *I* get that tight ass and even tighter pussy. That *I* make you moan and beg to be fucked. And then I think about you naked and bouncing up and down on my dick, working up a sweat because you’re exerting yourself so hard. I’ve drained my dick so many times thinking about you like this. You turn my thoughts so dirty, Mina. I don’t even recognize myself when I think about you.”

Hearing Zac speak those words makes me quiver. Keeping the tension in my squeezed thighs, my eyes slide shut, and I rock back and forth slowly, attempting to gain friction that will ease the deep ache within me.

“I could make myself come so quickly when I think about you. But I’m never quick when you’re on my mind, baby. I like to draw it out and tease myself. The release is never as good as the real thing, though, and when I’m finished, I always want more. I can’t count how many times I’ve beat off to the thought of you in these last few days. You know what I’m thinking about right now? When I fucked you in that bathroom on Saturday night.”

That’s what I’m thinking about too. I rock faster, until the ache between my legs is painful and my clit is begging to be touched.

“I swear I can still hear the sounds you made each time I thrust into your tight cunt, and how you moaned my name. You know—” The sentence breaks off as he hisses with pleasure. “I’ve been stroking my cock since the start of this phone call. You’ve got me so worked up. But I don’t want to be the only one having fun.” Zac chuckles darkly, the sound untamed. “If I know you, Mina, this voice message is turning you on. So why don’t you lock your bedroom door, get one of your toys out, and ride it. Imagine it’s my cock that’s inside you.”

My rocking stops, and I open my eyes with welcome surprise. Did Zac seriously say that? I’ve done some pretty out-there things with previous guys, but never has a guy done this to me before.

I hurry to lock my bedroom door, not wanting to miss anything Zac says. The towel drops from my body, and I grab a dildo from my underwear drawer, then climb onto my bed. All the while, Zac’s groans remain in the background, escalating in speed. There’s a bottle of lube in my bedside table, but I’m so wet I don’t need it.

I turn all of the toy’s settings onto the slowest speed—vibrate, rotate, and thrust—and kneel over the head, lowering myself onto it. A shiver rolls through me at the sweet sensation of the dildo opening me wide. The head of



the toy gyrates, burrowing its way in deep to build my orgasm. This motion is always enough to get me off, but I want to come *hard* tonight, so I add in the slow repetition of squats, working in time with the dildo's thrusting as I listen to Zac's voicemail.

"I'm so hard thinking about all the things I'm going to do to you when I get you alone next. You have no idea how much I want to taste your pussy again. Please tell me you're on the pill, baby, because I'm desperate to fill you with my cum." Another groan. "You're making my dick feel so good right now. Rub your clit for me. Grab your tits and imagine it's my hands touching you."

I increase the speed of the dildo and squat faster, feeling the muscles in my groin tighten without my doing, pleading for release as I follow Zac's instruction and rub my clit. My other hand comes up to my chest and strokes my nipples.

"That's it, baby. Ride my cock. Fuck, you've got me so close to coming."

The deep tone of his voice has me edging. I rub faster, clapping the other hand over my mouth to hide my uncontrollable moans from my roommates.

"Now be a good girl and come for me. I know you want to."

My bouncing increases until I can't hold off any longer and the orgasm claims me. I can't think properly. I don't even know my own name as my body shakes with ecstasy. All that passes through my mind is the sound of Zac's staggered breathing and grunts while I imagine it's his cock I'm coming on.

I know he's coming too when his groans get louder and his breath heavier. I wish I was there with him, seeing the look on his face as he lets go. At the same time, I find it so incredibly hot that he left this voice message for me.

"Fuck, Mina," he growls in climax, then goes quiet, all but for the sound of his rough breathing.

I fall back onto the bed, my heart racing away in my chest. After a few moments of silence, he laughs softly. "Give me a call when you get this message."

The message ends, and a voice instructs me to save or delete the message. I select save, knowing I'll listen to the message *many* more times.

## Chapter Eighteen

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### Mina

I didn't see Zac at rehearsals today, which is probably a good thing, otherwise I would have been grinding up against his dick in public again. We were scheduled to rehearse scenes we don't share. Then I had costume fittings. But the separation didn't stop us from texting each other.

I buzz myself into Zac's building, rereading our conversation as I ride the elevator to his floor.

MINA

I listened to your voice message.

ZAC

Oh, yeah?

That was the hottest fucking thing I've ever heard in my life.

The sound of us together is better. I need to see you again.

Is tonight good for you?

Yes. My place at 8? I'll make you dinner.

And you'll make me come?

Obviously. Didn't think that needed to be stated.

I'll be there at 8.

I check the time on my phone as I step up to Zac's front door. I'm an hour early, but there was no point returning to my apartment after work. I would

have needed to leave five minutes after arriving.

I knock on the door and wait for an answer, hoping Zac is home. When I don't hear anything, I knock again and call out his name. There's still no answer, only a yap from Mr. Fluffy. No one is home, I guess. Zac's spare key is in my purse, so I let myself inside.

Once I'm in Zac's living room, I call out his name again, kneeling to hug Mr. Fluffy. When I'm met with silence, I turn on the TV and start typing out a text to let Zac know I'm at his place early. Not even half-way through drafting the message, the faint sound of someone's voice comes from a different room of this apartment.

I call out Zac's name for the third time. The sound comes again, so I wander through the apartment, peeking my head into each room and finding no one. I check Zac's bedroom last. It's empty, but now I hear another sound: the shower faucet. And then... a moan.

*Zac moaning.*

I step right up to his bathroom, the door ajar and with steam floating through the crack.

His moans grow louder. "Fuck. Yeah... Mina... Fuck."

Needing to know what perfect sight awaits me on the other side of the door, I push it open, finding Zac in the shower with his back to me and his right arm moving fast, jerking off his cock. I lick my lips and smile, not knowing how to announce myself or if I even *want* to announce myself. Watching Zac touch himself over me is so damn hot. But my groin throbs, needing to be in on the action.

"Can I join you?" I ask.

Zac spins around, startled. There's no embarrassment on his behalf when he notices my presence, only desire in his eyes.

As for me, I get distracted by the water trickling down the contours off his broad shoulders, over his defined abs, and lower to his erect cock. I gulp at how perfect it looks—*he* looks. My mouth salivates almost as much as my panties are wet. Somehow, I manage to form coherent speech.

"I came by early. You didn't answer the door, so I assumed you weren't home and let myself in."

Zac doesn't say anything. Doesn't grab a towel. He steps out of the shower dripping wet and stalks toward me, his dark eyes pinned on me every step of the way.

## Zac

Still wet from the shower, I wrap two firm arms around Mina's waist and kiss her hard, my stiff cock poking into her stomach.

"You were jerking off right before I arrived?" Mina laughs, phrasing her words like a question. She has no care factor that the water dripping from my body is making her clothes wet. I suppose wearing damp clothes doesn't matter, not when I'll have her naked within a few seconds. "Doesn't that ruin the fun of our night together?"

"I wasn't expecting you for another hour, and I wasn't planning on having sex with you immediately. You've had me so worked up these past couple of days. I needed to come so I could last longer with you tonight."

"Sorry for ruining your plans. Should I leave and come back later?"

"Definitely not." I pick Mina off the ground and carry her to my bed, laying her beneath me.

My needy hands slip Mina's dress over her head, and I find the best surprise waiting for me. She's dressed in the most dick-teasing lingerie—black, lacy, and sheer. The slit between her thighs is visible through the material, along with the outline of her nipples. I pull one bra cup down and bring the peaked flesh into my mouth, groaning with pleasure. She arches into me and pulls my head closer when I sweep my tongue over her nipple. I love knowing she wants this, and pull the other bra cup down, making sure to give the second side all the attention it deserves.

Mina presses up onto her elbows and unclips her bra, freeing one of my favorite parts of her body. Her breasts are so perky. Not too big. A perfect handful that I grasp. My other hand grabs her panties, pushing them down in a rush. As soon as I've got them off, she responds by wrapping her legs around my waist. My cock lines up perfectly with her entrance. She's dripping wet, and it coats the tip of my cock, the sensation drawing a hoarse groan out of me.

I push gently against Mina's opening, not entering her warmth but toying with danger. The urge to slide my bare cock into her is so strong that it's almost overpowering. She already feels incredible when we have sex using a condom; I'm going insane thinking about how intense the pleasure will be without one. How I want there to be no barriers between us and to come inside her.

I give another light thrust against Mina's pussy, jerking my dick back

when the tip enters her. *Shit*, that was too close. I have to be so careful I don't push harder. Mina is *that* fucking wet, all it would take is a lapse in concentration and my dick would be deep inside her. As much as I'd love to have Mina in that way, I won't take what she doesn't give me freely. I won't ever do anything to make her uncomfortable or feel unsafe.

But then Mina's legs squeeze tighter around me, drawing my hips flush against hers. My cock slides into her by accident, all the way to the base of my shaft. The rush of pleasure that starts in my cock and shoots to every nerve ending in my body has me roaring Mina's name. Nothing has ever felt this good in my life and I want more of it, but I can't. I attempt to pull out, for Mina's sake, not mine. I'm loving every second of this. But her legs remain locked around me, making me realize this was no accident. Mina wants this as much as I do.

"Holy shit, baby," I grit out. "You feel incredible, but we can't do this." I can think of nothing better than to pull out and thrust back inside her. I won't be that irresponsible, though.

Seeing the shock in my eyes, Mina says in a breathy voice, "I couldn't resist you. And to answer your question, I am on the pill."

"What?" I ask, barely able to concentrate on anything because I'm focusing so hard on not coming.

"In your voicemail you asked if I'm on the pill because you want to come inside me without wearing a condom. You have no idea how much that turned me on. I've listened to your voicemail three times and touched myself each time."

Mina releases the tight lock of her legs. Temptation wins and I slide my cock out, thrusting back into her in one slow and deep movement. My entire body shakes from how incredible this feels.

"More," she begs in the sexiest little whisper, so I continue thrusting, building up a medium pace. I can't *stop* thrusting. My cock loves being buried inside Mina.

"*More, Zac. Please.*"

The power this girl has over me whenever she opens that dirty mouth of hers.

I press up onto my hands, straightening my arms to give myself more strength to fuck Mina. This position provides a better view of her too. I can see her writhing beneath me and her perfect tits moving with each thrust. I gaze lower, watching where my dick enters her tight opening. The sight is too

much, and I have to clench my ass to prevent myself from coming. When I look up at Mina's face again, she's glancing off to the side. I follow her gaze, realizing she's watching me fuck her in the floor-length mirror.

"You like that?" I rasp. "Watching me fuck you?"

"We look so good together." She gazes back up at me and tilts her hips, lifting them off the mattress.

The position tightens her muscles around my cock and allows me deeper access. My eyes widen at the shock of pleasure that bursts through me. "Fuck, baby, you really know how to drive me wild."

"You're so deep, Zac. I love the way you fuck me."

"If you keep talking like that, I won't be good for much longer. I'm already worked up from thinking about you in the shower. I have no self-control when it comes to you."

I slide my fingers between Mina's thighs, giving attention to her clit. The muscles in her groin tighten even more around my cock. And those high-pitched sounds she's making are not helping me.

"I'm going to come if you keep moaning like that," I tell her.

"Good. Because I'm about to come. I want your cum in me and dripping down my thighs. Then I'm going to use it as lube to touch myself again and you're going to watch."

Fuck. How does she even think up these things?

She squeezes her thighs around me, and her pussy grows even more blissfully tight, choking my cock. "Zac," she pants my name. "I'm coming."

And that's it, I'm a lost cause. The contractions of her orgasm milks my cock. The two of us are moaning together as my dick thrusts into her, filling her with my cum. There's something so primal within me, so possessive, that loves placing my mark on Mina.

Mina's hips fall back to the mattress, and I collapse with her, my vision filling with stars. When I can think again, I roll off Mina and pull her into my arms, our chests rising in rapid succession as we catch our breath.

"I have *never* come that hard in my life," I manage to say. "I swear you dabble in witchcraft or something because there is no way any woman can feel that good."

Mina looks down at my cock and grins. Amusement coats her voice. "You're hard again already?"

"I don't think you understand how much my cock likes you."

Without speaking a word, she climbs on top of me, straddling my abs.

With her legs separated, I get a full view of her pussy and my cum leaking out of her. And just like that, I need to have her again.

Mina's hand slides down to the softness between her legs and circles her clit. Her eyelids close and her head tilts back as she releases a moan. Then her fingers move lower, disappearing inside herself.

The show she's putting on for me is amazing, but I'm too greedy to only watch. I push her hips back until they align with my cock, ready to take her.

Mina peers down at me, seeing the desperation in my eyes. My reaction only makes her smile. She removes my hands from her body and continues touching herself. "You can't have me."

"You love playing with me."

My hand finds my cock and begins pumping, but Mina grabs both of my wrists and places them on the mattress. She bends forward until her peaked nipples brush my chest, and whispers in my ear, "No touching yourself, either. This time, you only get to watch."

She leans back, working her pussy with two hands, one plunging inside and the other rubbing her clit. Then she does the hottest thing of all and brings one soaking wet hand up to rub her breasts.

"Your cum is all over me," she says.

"Fuck," I whisper. I hate to admit it, but after this display, I now understand why she has a crazy ex-boyfriend stalker. She's so *fucking* addictive.

Right when I thought I couldn't become any more turned on, she brings her fingers to her mouth and sucks on them. "You taste so good, Zac. I'm aching to feel your cock inside of me again."

From the strained look on her face, I can tell she's about to come.

"Fuck, Mina," I growl this time. "A man has his limits and you've just crossed mine." I grab her by the hips and push her onto her back, shoving my dick inside her.

"Took you long enough," she laughs, but the high-pitched sound quickly shifts into a gasp as my dick slams into her, fucking her hard. She comes on my cock seconds later, with me following right after.

## Chapter Nineteen

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**Zac**

Three weeks of mind-blowing sex with Mina every day. I cannot get enough of this girl, in or out of the bedroom. We're always with each other, whether it be at my apartment or hers, at rehearsals, or our morning jogs, and I love it. I love being around her friends and having her around mine. And the best part about these three weeks is she hasn't heard from Connor once.

I wake in my bed the morning of *The Velvet Cigar's* opening night and roll over to hug Mina. But her side of the bed is empty. It doesn't surprise me; she's probably full of adrenaline for the busy day and night ahead of us. Though I always get a little nervous before a performance, I've done this for so many years that I've learned to deal with it. A lot more rides on this performance for Mina. It's her debut and I want it to be the best night of her life. I've paid a florist so that when the show is over and Mina returns backstage, she'll be greeted with a dressing room filled with flowers—no roses. Which brings me to my next thought. I send Verena a message.

ZAC

Is Mina's dress for the after party finished?

VERENA

Of course. The dress will be waiting for her backstage after the performance tonight.

Thanks for this. I owe you.

No, you don't. Anything for my best friend's girlfriend.



I stare at the last word in Verena's message, knowing she wrote *girlfriend* to gain a reaction from me. Verena has been asking me for days now whether I'm officially dating Mina. I keep blowing off the question because I don't know how to answer Verena. Mina and I haven't discussed labels, and I know it's not because either of us have commitment issues. We're so deeply into each other. The topic just... hasn't come up. We've been having fun and living in the moment. But I want that extra tie with Mina, and tonight after the show, I will ask her to officially be my girlfriend.

I pull on a pair of pants and poke my head into the bathroom in search of Mina. She's not there.

"Mina?" I call out, heading to the living room, and find her sitting on a stool at the kitchen counter with her back to me. She's wearing one of my shirts and her legs are bare, her hair messy from sleep. Fuck, she looks good. I come up behind her and slip my arms around her waist, kissing her cheek.

When she doesn't respond, I know something is wrong. I spin her around and wipe the tears from her face. "Baby, what happened?"

She shows me her phone. "This Tweet has gone viral."

**Opening night for The Velvet Cigar has arrived. We all know Zac Delavin will be amazing. But the truth is about to come out about Mina Midnight. Is she really that talented or just a good fuck?**

"Shit." I place Mina's phone on the bench and cup her jaw with my hands.

"I can't do this. I thought I was ready to be in the spotlight, but I can't deal with all the bashing."

"You can. Ignore what they say. You're going to get up on that stage tonight and give the best damn performance of your life."

Her bottom lip trembles. "What if I forget my lines?"

"Not going to happen. You could do this performance in your sleep."

"Zac... I'm so nervous. I thought I would be excited for opening night. I've never felt like this before any of the other shows I've done. I'm dreading what people will say about me."

I stroke her hair behind her ear. "That's because this is the first time you're being a lead. Mina, you were born to do this. You're a star."

"I'm scared. How do you deal with the nerves?"

"No matter how many good reviews you receive, there will always be people who have something negative to say. You have to block them out and remember why you do this: because you love to perform. You're performing

for *you*. No one else. Tonight, imagine it's just you and me on the stage. Imagine we're in rehearsals."

She nods and wraps her arms around my neck, hugging me tight. "It's just you and me."

## **Mina**

Zac was right. When I get on stage for the first public performance of *The Velvet Cigar*, I'm singing for me. We've taken a step back in time with the 1920s set. I've mentally transformed into Seraphina, in costume with a black wig and a sultry red gown. With Zac by my side, it's so easy to pretend I'm back in rehearsals and the audience doesn't exist. I'm giving the best performance of my life because I'm doing what I love.

When intermission arrives, cast members are already telling me how well I've performed. A few early reviews are posted on Twitter, gushing about Zac's and my performance. After the second half of the show, when the musical is over and it's time for the curtain call, the audience cheers louder than anything I've ever heard.

The second the curtains drop, Zac lifts me off the ground and spins me in circles. I can't believe this moment is here. Years of hard work and kicking self-doubt to the curb have finally paid off. I'm living my dream and can officially call myself a Broadway star.

"We did it, baby. You were amazing!" Zac says, returning me to my feet.

"We were amazing together." I reach up on my toes and kiss him.

Cast members swarm us with hugs. We share congratulations with everyone and listen to a few celebratory speeches. Once all production members disperse, Zac leads me backstage through the corridors to my private dressing room, the entire time raving about my performance.

"You were a star. Did you hear how loud everyone was cheering for you during the curtain call? You received a standing ovation."

Zac's enthusiasm has me even more excited; I'm basically prancing along behind him. "This has been the most amazing night ever."

"Your night is only going to get better. There's a whole after-party waiting for you." We arrive outside my dressing room and he turns to face me, holding both my hands in his. "I have a surprise for you. Close your eyes."

I smile and follow the instructions, hearing the door open. Zac guides me inside and shuts the door, then stands behind me with his hands on my waist.

“Okay. Open your eyes.”

I do, and gasp with delight at the sight of hundreds of bouquets scattered around the room. “Zac, this is amazing. You shouldn’t have.”

“You deserve every single flower. And that’s not the only surprise. Look inside the closet.”

I cross the room and open the closet, in love with what I find. A strapless floor-length gown awaits me, tight and sparkling with golden fringe tassels. The dress is a modern day take on 1920s fashion—the perfect homage to *The Velvet Cigar*. Attached to the front is a note: *A beautiful gown for a beautiful girl. Verena xoxo*

Zac steps up behind me. “I asked Verena to design you something for the after-party.”

“It’s gorgeous. I love it. Thank you.”

I hug Zac. He’s making tonight so special. This whole evening goes beyond my wildest dreams. It’s ironic how I’ve spent most of my life dreaming of this moment; here it is, there’s an after-party waiting for me, but the only person I want to celebrate with is Zac.

I take my black wig off and remove the hairnet, letting my natural hair tumble over my shoulders. Kissing Zac again, my fingers travel down the length of his chest, his torso, and hook onto his belt.

Zac groans with desire when my fingers graze the skin beneath his shirt. “Mina—” He grabs my hands, preventing them from moving any lower.

“I don’t want to seem ungrateful, but do we really have to go to the after-party? I mean, isn’t there something else you’d prefer to do?” I whisper, teasing him with my tone.

“You’ve been telling me for days now how excited you are for the after-party.”

“Wouldn’t it be more exciting if the two of us celebrate in your bed?”

His breath grows heavier. “While you make an extremely tempting argument, the bedroom celebrations can wait. This is your moment to shine.”

I sigh, knowing he’s right. “Unzip me so I can change out of my costume?”

He does, and I step out of my dress, remaining in my bra and panties as I take a seat at my dressing table. I wipe a wet cloth over my cheeks, removing my stage makeup to re-apply a fresh face. In the mirror’s reflection, Zac is

staring at me. It's the same look he always gives me, like he's undressing me with his eyes.

We make eye contact and I smirk. "You sure you don't want to skip the after-party?"

"If you're attempting to seduce me by walking around half-naked, it won't work," he says.

"It was worth a try."

There's barely an inch of free space on this dressing table. As well as all the flowers Zac filled this room with, there are dozens of presents and bouquets from other people—public figures, colleagues, friends, and family. I shuffle some of the flowers around to make space on the table. A note on one of the bouquets catches my attention.

"That's so sweet. My mom sent me flowers."

"Of course she did."

"I should FaceTime her quickly." I open the top drawer to retrieve my phone, but gasp when finding a single black rose.

Zac rushes to my side. "What is it?"

I pick up the rose, reading the note attached.

*You sang beautifully tonight, sweetheart. I'll be seeing you soon.*

## Chapter Twenty

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### Zac

Right when I was starting to drop my guard about the Connor situation and that perhaps Mina had scared him off with the stab wound, he returns to our lives. Of course the police do nothing to help. They give us the same line as last time, that anyone could have sent the rose. They even access footage from the security cameras of the backstage area, but there's no sign of Connor in any of the recordings. A florist delivered the black rose, and the police inform us the florist will not share who ordered the rose, due to privacy reasons.

I'm fuming inside, but I try to hide my temper for Mina's sake. I promised this would be the best night of her life, and I meant it.

Mina is stunning when we arrive at the after-party. Everyone wants to take our photo. They all want to talk to us. We agree to a couple of small interviews and kiss for the cameras. But I never let her out of my sight. I'm done taking chances with her safety.

At two in the morning, Mina whispers to me, "Have we put in enough of an appearance at this party?"

"I think so."

"Good. Let's go back to your place." She walks past me for the exit.

"Wait." I grab her hand and pull her back to me, weaving our fingers. "I can't stop thinking about that note from Connor. I want you to reconsider living with me. My apartment is safer than yours, and we spend all our time

together, anyway. This arrangement doesn't need to be permanent. Just... make my place your home for a little while, starting tonight."

She smiles. "I like this plan if it means I get more of you. We should stop by my apartment first so I can grab a bunch of clothes."

We arrive at Mina's apartment an hour later. With no one home, all the lights are off. She grabs a bag and starts tossing clothes in it, then heads into her bathroom to collect toiletries. I take a seat on her bed, startled when I sit on something hard. I look beneath me, finding a bulge in the sheets. When I pull the sheets back, I can't resist smirking. There's a pink dildo lying on her bed.

"Okay, I think I've got everything." Mina returns to the room, halting as soon as she sees what I'm staring at.

"Not everything." I grab the dildo. "Take this with you."

She laughs. "I highly doubt I'll need it."

"When did you even find the time to use this? We've had sex every day for the past three weeks. I've barely let you out of my sight."

"A day or two ago. You were with Adrian and Darius at the gym. I got hot thinking about you lifting weights, so I listened to your voicemail again."

I hand the toy to her. "You won't be *needing* this, I can promise you that. But I want to see you use it later."

She one ups me, replying with an impish grin. "You can see me use it right now."

Before I can say anything in return, Mina slides her dress off and removes her undergarments, standing naked in front of me. My jaw clenches and I'm unable to look anywhere except at her perfect body. Without any effort, my dick lengthens, pressing painfully against my zipper.

Mina advances on me, pushing me onto her bed so that I'm leaning against the headboard. She kneels in front of me on the mattress and slides the dildo along her pussy, the silicone glistening with her wetness. Then she turns it on, and the damn thing vibrates, rotates, and thrusts.

I lick my lips and laugh. "How can any guy compete with that?"

"Believe me, this thing has a hard time competing with *you*."

Mina mounts the toy, releasing a lengthy sigh as she lowers onto the shaft and I watch it disappear inside her.

“Fuck, baby,” I groan, feeling my cock throb. “You look so good.”

“Yeah?” She moans. “This is my favorite way to get myself off. I play your voicemail and imagine it’s your dick I’m riding.”

Every time she lowers, more of her wetness coats the toy. She closes her eyes, and if it weren’t for me knowing Mina so well, I would assume the loss of eye contact is because she’s embarrassed. But the way she fucks that thing tells me otherwise. She’s not shy about her performance one bit.

My hands are begging to reach out and touch her. At the same time, I’m enjoying this display of hers too much to interfere. So, I take matters into my own hands.

Hearing my fly coming undone, Mina opens her eyes, and a smile takes hold of her at the sight of me stroking my cock. “Now you’re teasing me,” she says. “I want the real thing.”

“You’ll get my cock when we get back to my apartment. *Our* apartment. But for now, let me see you be a good girl and play with your toy.”

She moans again and increases the speed of her bouncing, now adding her hand to the mix as she rubs her clit. I match her pace, pumping my dick faster. Her sounds get louder. Her body is going feral on that toy.

“That’s it, Mina, come for me,” I say.

Her hand works harder. Her brow creases, but not with pleasure. She looks strained, like she’s almost annoyed.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I ask.

Her movements stop. She gazes at me with determination, and all the frustration within her washes away. A second later, Mina slides the toy out of her and tosses it on the bed, then climbs on top of me and sinks onto my cock, her sweet sighs filling the room as I groan in surprise.

“I couldn’t come,” she pants.

The frantic pace she was traveling at a moment ago disappears and she rides me slowly, her inner walls squeezing my shaft with each lift of her hips. It feels as if her pussy is clenching onto me. She follows a pattern, releasing and tightening, over and over again.

“I told you, I need your cock,” she says. “I need your cum in me. Let me come *on* you. Please, Zac.”

“Anything for you. I adore you, Mina. I will give you the world. Anything you ask for, it’s yours.”

I grab her ass, guiding her movements. Each time she rises, I press her back down and hold her in place, her breathy moans escalating as I hit her

deepest places. Mina's delicate muscles continue to squeeze my hardness with each pump.

"Whatever you're doing, don't stop. It feels fucking amazing."

"Kegels." Her body trembles as she tightens again. "Zac, I'm so close."

Our lips are hot against each other's as we share breath, making love. Because that's what this is. It's different to every other time we've had sex. And I realize I *am* in love with this girl. I think I've known all along; I was just too afraid to admit it because that would mean she holds the power to break my heart.

"I'm going to come like this," she whispers, slowly moving up and down and clenching around my dick. "Just like this."

Her pussy grows even more impossibly tight and she's gasping my name with her peak, drawing the cum out of me. It shoots up inside of Mina, marking her as mine. At least, that's what I tell myself in this moment because I want her to be mine. I need this girl to be permanent in my life.

Our breaths become one. I feel the remnants of her orgasm twitching around my cock. Even when our bodies grow still, she remains on top of me, kissing me softly.

"Zac, you have no idea how amazing this night has been for me. I have everything I've ever wanted because of you."

"That's not true. You worked hard and are so talented."

"I know I am. But you've helped me so much. You make me so damn happy."

"Mina..." Her name lingers in the air as I hesitate to say these next words. "What are we doing? I'm crazy about you. No, it's more than that. I'm in love with you."

Her eyes brighten with disbelief, and the most amazing smile rises over her lips. "I'm in love with you too."

My heart pumps faster, spreading warmth throughout my body. While I knew we shared deep feelings for each other, a part of me was scared she didn't feel as strongly for me.

"So, what are we doing?" I ask.

"I didn't want to push the subject. You just got divorced and I understand if you need time."

"Time for what? To be alone? Sleep with other women? I don't want either of those things. You once told me you want to climb Machu Picchu and see the Pyramids. Mina, I want to be there with you for all of it. I want to



be wherever you are. I want to call you my girlfriend. What do *you* want—”

She presses her lips to mine to shut me up. “I want a boyfriend if it’s you.”

I kiss her back, the two of us smiling against each other’s lips. I’ve never been this happy in my entire life. Not when things were good between me and Penny and I asked her to be my wife. Not on our wedding day. I’m so fucking happy and it’s all because of Mina.

## Chapter Twenty-One

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### Mina

My name is everywhere. TV. Social media. I can't look anywhere without seeing it. The reviews of *The Velvet Cigar* are amazing. They love my performance. They love the chemistry on stage between me and Zac. For the first time, I don't struggle to pay my rent. On top of my income from the musical, I'm being paid thousands of dollars to promote brands on social media. Zac and I are booked for more photoshoots and interviews. It's all happening for me. I've made it.

"Look who decided to stop by," Jordan says, cooking soup at the stove as I enter the front door of our apartment. "I was starting to forget you live with me."

Fair enough. It's been two weeks since opening night, and this is the first time I've returned home from Zac's apartment. "I know, sorry. I've just been so busy with performances and—"

"Having sex with Zac?"

"Essentially, yes."

"And I suppose you're returning to his place after you get more clothes?"

"Yeah. Look, I'm sorry I haven't been around more," I tell her.

"That was the whole plan, right? To hide from your stalker. Any word from him since you've been at Zac's?"

"No. Thank God."

"Good. How is everything going with the boyfriend?"

I smile, still getting used to that label. I love hearing it, which is so strange because I was sworn off having a boyfriend for so long after Connor.

“He’s incredible.”

“I am so jealous right now. Babe, I haven’t seen you this happy in... fuck, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you this happy.”

I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and take a sip. “I was this happy when I found out about being the lead.”

“Yeah, but that was a different kind of happy. You look great. Your skin is glowing.”

“That’s from all the orgasms Zac is giving me.”

She flips me the bird and laughs. “So, can I book you in for a girls’ night sometime?”

“Of course—” I’m cut off by my phone ringing. “Shit, it’s my agent. I need to take this. I’m so sorry. We’ll continue our conversation straight after.”

“Don’t apologize. Go.”

“Hey,” I answer the phone, closing my bedroom door behind me.

“Mina, I’ve got some amazing news for you. Are you sitting down?”

## Zac

The understudies are performing tonight, so I’m cooking dinner for Mina. Pasta primavera because I know it’s her favorite. She lets herself into my apartment while I’m busy in the kitchen. A bag is slung over her shoulder, filled with clothes she picked up from her apartment. Mina places the bag in our bedroom, then jumps up to sit on the kitchen counter right beside where I’m cutting vegetables.

She gives me a greeting kiss and says, “This looks amazing.”

I pour two glasses of wine and hand her one. “Dinner will be ready in thirty minutes. How’s Jordan?”

“Good. I feel kind of bad. I’ve barely seen her these last few weeks.”

“Am I being too greedy, keeping you all to myself? I can learn to share more.”

She laughs, but it’s not her usual carefree laugh. Something is on her mind.

I place the vegetables aside and step between Mina’s legs. “Hey, there’s more than enough food for Jordan. Invite her over. I can leave you two alone for a girls’ night.”

“You’re sweet. But Jordan is working at the club tonight.”

She drinks her wine, and I resume the cooking, bringing the vegetables to the stove. “Next time, then. Hey, I’ve been meaning to tell you, I booked our flights to Australia for the wedding.”

Verena insisted on paying for our airfares, but I refused the offer. She’s always going out of her way to do favors for me. That’s the kind of friend she is, and I appreciate her kindness. But now that *The Velvet Cigar* is a success, money isn’t an issue for me anymore. I’m nowhere near as wealthy as I once was, but I’m able to live a comfortable life again.

“Three months till the big day,” I say.

“I’m so excited to see Verena and Adrian get married.”

I crack pepper into the pasta sauce. “I’m surprised I’ve never asked you this before, but what’s your stance on marriage?”

“I don’t know. If I found the right guy and it was what we both wanted, sure. But marriage isn’t something I’ve spent my entire life fantasizing about. I’ve never been a fan of the whole big white wedding thing. If I ever get married, I want to elope on a beach somewhere beautiful like Bora Bora or the Maldives. What was your wedding with Penny like?”

I raise my eyebrows and laugh. “Take a guess.”

“Oh, damn. She wanted the big wedding?”

“Yeah. I didn’t know half the people there. Your vision sounds much nicer.”

Mina swirls her wine and takes a sip, adding nothing to the conversation.

“Do you want to know *my* stance on marriage?” I ask.

“I kind of assumed you would never want to be married again, and I’m okay with that.”

“Well, you assumed wrong. I’m not rushing back to the altar, but I’m not shut off to the idea of marriage in the future.”

She chuckles. “Could you imagine if we get married? I’d be so pleased with myself, not because you’d be my husband, but because I could make millions selling my seventeen-year-old self’s manifestation techniques.”

Fucking hell, I love her sense of humor. “You’re going to make your millions long before we get married, trust me.”

I realize how my words sound as soon as I’ve said them. Mina pauses right before taking another sip of wine and smiles. “Oh, so we *are* getting married, are we?”

“You know what I mean.”

She laughs, but there's something off about her tone. Silence creeps in when I stir the food on the stove, and now I know something is wrong, because there's never a quiet moment when Mina is in the room.

Before I have a chance to ask what's on her mind, she says, "I got a call from my agent today."

"Oh, yeah? Everything good?"

"You'll never believe this. I've been offered the lead in the movie remake of *The Alley Cats*."

My gaze whips to her. *The Alley Cats* is a famous musical set in the Jazz Age, about a group of courtesans who murder their clientele. "Baby, that's incredible. When does filming start?"

"I turned the offer down."

"What? Why?"

She shrugs, her voice apathetic. "It's filming in LA. I don't want to leave New York."

"Filming would only be for a couple of months. I don't understand the issue. You're obsessed with that musical." I give her hands a squeeze of encouragement. "Mina, you have to take the role."

"*The Velvet Cigar* is my priority."

"*The Velvet Cigar* is only on Broadway. We don't know how long it will last. Starring in a movie as big as *The Alley Cats* will open so many more doors for your career. The previous film adaptation won several Academy Awards."

She exhales loudly. "I'm not sure if you've noticed, but my career is doing amazing already. And not everything has to be about my career. What about what I want in my personal life? I don't want to have a long-distance relationship with you."

"I'm not letting you turn down this role because of me. I know how important your career is to you."

"People change, Zac. My dream was to be a star on Broadway, and I'm currently living that dream with the guy of my dreams. I know I'm career driven, but I don't want to jeopardize what I have with you."

I take a deep breath and sigh, contemplating what other reasoning I can use. "I'm not bound to New York. You want to travel for your career? I'll come with you."

"You can't do that. The whole reason you're doing *The Velvet Cigar* is to recover financially after your divorce. You need to stay here, so, I'm staying

here too.” She slides forward and wraps her legs around my waist, kissing me. “End of discussion.”

“This is not the end of the discussion.”

“It is if you want to get me in bed tonight.” Mina pulls her shirt over her head. She’s not wearing a bra, and as I’m sure she planned, my gaze drops to her breasts. I’m instantly struggling to think clearly.

“Mina, that is so not fair. The stove is on.” I try to maintain my ground, but from the way my dick swells, I know it’s a losing battle.

“I guess I can take care of myself.” She climbs down from the bench and heads for the bedroom, winking at me over her shoulder.

I growl and turn the stove off, then chase after her.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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### Mina

ZAC

Enjoy your night with Jordan. See you tomorrow, beautiful.

I reply to his text with kisses and tuck my phone into my pocket. I'm surprised his message doesn't say something like *Please be safe*, or *Call me if you need me*. Zac wasn't pleased about me spending the night away from him—for Connor reasons—but I promised him I wouldn't leave my apartment and would keep all the windows and doors locked. I don't blame him for being protective, but at some point, I have to live my life, and he knows that.

I grab my bowl of takeaway Thai off the coffee table and lean back on the couch with Jordan beside me. Ryan is out on the town tonight, off with his backpacker friends somewhere. I don't know what his deal is with them, but Jordan told me he's been spending a lot of time with them lately. Hannah too. They really hit it off after that night they spent together.

I bring a spoonful of Thai to my mouth. "Okay, put the show back on."

"That's real flattering, talking with a mouthful of food. Are you this sexy when you're around Zac?" Jordan asks.

We both laugh, the TV playing in the background. "No talk of Zac tonight," I say.

"Babe, he's your boyfriend. You're allowed to be obsessed with him. I'm happy for you."

"Yeah, but I feel like the world's shittiest friend. I've been so busy with him and the musical that I haven't had a chance to watch your solo routine at

the club.”

“Mina, it’s okay. Things are happening for you. Speaking of which, what’s the deal with *The Alley Cats*?”

“There is no deal. I already told you, I turned down the job. Zac is still pestering me to reconsider.” That’s all he’s been talking about since I shared the news with him three days ago. “I’m just starting to find my feet with Broadway. *The Alley Cats* is too much for me right now.”

“Zac could be right. All I’m saying is, he’s the most famous Broadway star there is, but his fame kicked-started when he did the movie adaptation of *Equinox*. If there’s anyone you should take advice from on this, it’s him.”

I stare straight ahead at the TV. “Subject change, please. Tell me about your audition. Have you heard anything back about it?”

“Actually, I got an email today saying I’ve been moved to the next round of the selection process.”

“Ahh! See! Things are happening for you, too. But also, what the fuck?” I grab a cushion and throw it at her, narrowly missing her food. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because I’m nervous and don’t want to get my hopes up. If I get on this show, it will be groundbreaking for me.”

“You *will* get on the show. Look at us, we’re total girl bosses. I expect to be the first person you tell when you receive the good news. Not Steel.”

She laughs but doesn’t say anything. Of course she’ll tell Steel first. The truth is, I’m Jordan’s best friend, but this guy she’s talking with, although they’ve never met, they share a bond that Jordan and I don’t.

“Can you fucking meet him already?”

“Too late.” She swallows her food. “Steel isn’t in New York anymore.”

“I’m sure he’ll fly right back here if you ask him to. What about Mr. Handsome who always watches you at the club? What’s his name again? Oh, that’s right. Daxton Hawk. Has he propositioned you for another date?”

“I haven’t seen him for the last few nights. Guess he found some other girl who would accept his money.”

“Shame, ’cause he was hot—”

Jordan’s phone rings. She looks at the screen and swears. “It’s the club. What the hell do they want? Hello?” she answers the call.

I sink into the couch cushions and enjoy my food while watching Kris Jenner get high off weed. God, I love that woman.

“Yes, I’ll be there in an hour,” Jordan says into her phone before hanging



up. “Bad news. One of the dancers called in sick, so I have to take her place tonight. Sorry to ruin our night.”

Shit. “No, it’s okay. I understand. Go get ready.”

“Love you.” She heads to her room and reemerges ten minutes later, dressed for work. “Call Ryan and tell him to come home and keep you company.”

When she walks out the front door, a better idea comes to mind. I’ll surprise Zac by turning up at his place. I agreed to not leave my apartment, but I’ll only be walking from my front door to an Uber. How unsafe can that be? He doesn’t want me at my apartment, anyway. I’ll be safer with him.

I clean up the Thai food and grab my belongings, then scope the stairwell, finding it empty. With no one in sight, I head out, singing a tune from *The Velvet Cigar* as I lock the front door.

“Good evening, sweetheart.”

I gasp, spinning around. Just like when I was attacked in the alleyway, I don’t need to see a face to know who owns that voice. Connor steps into view, having hidden behind a corner. His savage shape blends in with the poor lighting of the stairwell, dressed in black and with a hood pulled over his head.

My blood pumps fast with fear. I reach for the knife in my purse, but Connor is prepared this time and claws a hand around my wrist, yanking my purse from me.

“Don’t touch me.” I attempt to pull my wrist out of his grasp, but he’s too strong.

“Sweetheart, I touch what is mine. You might just need reminding of who you belong to. And if you think you can fight me off this time, you’re wrong. Your little stunt with the knife in the alley only angered me more.”

Before I can even attempt to knee Connor in the groin, he presses his body against mine, shoving me against the wall so hard that I’m winded. As I gasp for air, Connor takes both of my wrists and pins them above my head, trapping them in place with only one of his hands. His free hand comes up and presses something cold and sharp against my neck. I stop fighting, terrified once I realize it’s a knife.

Connor licks his lips and smiles at me from beneath his hood—a hair-raising smile I forgot could be so intimidating. I haven’t seen his face properly in a year, and that year has only made him fiercer. The way he speaks is low and smooth, adding to his threatening demeanor. He’s bigger.

*Stronger*. And there's a look in his eyes like he's out for vengeance.

"You've been a very bad girl, Wilhelmina," he whispers. "It took me a few weeks to recover from our last meeting. Maybe I should draw blood from you. Would that turn you on? Nothing like a bit of knife play to get us in the mood."

"Stop this, Connor. This isn't a game."

"Oh, but it is. You've been teasing me, sweetheart. Every night, I wait on this doorstep for you. But every night, you're off with another man's hands all over you."

"Get away from me." I try to sound strong and like I'm not afraid of him, but my voice wobbles. He's hit me before. There's nothing that will stop him from hitting me again, or worse.

"Here's what's going to happen, sweetheart. You will end things with that boyfriend of yours. End it or *I* will see to it that you two are no longer together."

"What's that supposed to mean? You're on the cops' radar. If you go near either of us, they'll put you behind bars."

A snide smile curls his lips. "Funny, that, seeing as I'm with you right now. And as I recall, the cops have done nothing to stop me from sending you roses. They think I've transformed into a moral citizen. You thought you could get rid of me with that restraining order, but I never really left. I've been watching your every move. You know why? Because you're mine, baby girl. I can't wait till the day I get to fuck you again. And trust me, I won't be gentle."

I spit in his face. "That day will never come."

He removes the knife from my neck, wiping my saliva from his face, and licks it off his fingers. "Mmm, so sweet. You want to keep that boyfriend of yours safe? Break up with him."

"I'm not going to let you scare me. You're all bluff."

He chuckles. "True, *I* won't do anything to him. But I have connections who will do my dirty work for me. I have friends in law enforcement who will turn a blind eye. End it with him. Otherwise, he'll be taking his last breath soon. You know my friends have killed before. Do you understand me?"

My stomach clenches, terrified at the threat towards Zac. If Connor was to do something extreme, I thought *I* would be the target.

"Do you understand, sweetheart?" he asks again, emphasizing each word.

I nod, too scared to speak.

“Perfect,” he purrs, leaning forward, and presses a delicate kiss to my forehead. Revulsion sweeps through me when his hard cock digs into my stomach, but I stay still. “Now, be a good girl and run back inside.”

As soon as Connor lets me go, I rush through my front door and lock it behind me, hyperventilating over everything that just went down.

I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve dial 911 and erased the number before pressing the call button. I spend the entire night pacing around my bedroom, considering all my options. But I don’t see any way out of this. I’ve turned to the police many times over the last few weeks, asking for their help, and not once have they been useful. Even Connor knows that. He has systems in place. Friends in the police force who help him slip between the cracks of the system. Connor wants Zac out of the picture or else he’ll have someone kill him.

All I can do is break up with Zac.

But then what? I’ll still be working with him. I’ll still have to kiss him on stage every night. Connor won’t like that. And breaking up with Zac won’t stop Connor from stalking me, or... I shiver at the thought: forcing himself on me.

But I need to protect Zac. He is my number one priority. So, I come up with the only plan I can think of to keep him safe. A lie that will make Zac believe I don’t want him anymore.

## **Zac**

I texted Mina with a goodnight message last night, hoping she enjoyed her evening with Jordan. I didn’t hear back from her, which didn’t bother me at the time. I even took it as a good sign, that she was having fun with her friend. Now, at eleven a.m. the following morning, I’m trying to decide whether I’m overreacting at how I still haven’t heard from her. I’m used to having Mina around me, and during those occasions when we’re not together, she’s texting me constantly. But I don’t want to be “that guy” who needs to

know everything his girlfriend does.

When Mina turns up at my apartment twenty minutes later, I'm relieved to see her and know she's all right.

Except she's not all right.

Her eyes are puffy. I can't tell if it's from lack of sleep or because she's been crying. Perhaps both. The smile that's always plastered to her face is replaced with a look of concern.

"Baby, what's wrong?" I pull her into my arms. She sinks into me, not saying a word, so my mind jumps to the worst. "Did you receive another black rose?"

Mina shakes her head. I stroke her hair and kiss her forehead, running through different scenarios of what has her so troubled. The seconds tick by and Mina remains silent, so I take her hand in mine and guide her to the couch, pulling her onto my lap.

"Can I make you a hot chocolate with pink marshmallows?" I ask, attempting to make her laugh.

Another head shake.

I have no idea what's upsetting Mina, but I hate seeing her like this. Whatever the issue is, I need to get her talking. "How was your night with Jordan?"

"Jordan got called into work. I ended up spending most of the night by myself. It was... good... being by myself. I haven't had time for myself in a while. It gave me clarity about a few things I've been unsure of." She shuffles off me and stands up, pacing back and forth around the living room while nervously twisting the ends of her hair.

Shit. I stand up. "Mina, tell me what's wrong."

"Listen, I'm feeling overwhelmed with everything in my life right now." She doesn't look at me once as she speaks the words. They come out of her mouth frantic, just like the way she won't stop pacing. "I've got so much happening in my career and personal life. What we spoke about the other day—me declining *The Alley Cats*—it seemed like the right thing to do at the time, but it's been dwelling on my mind, and I regret making that decision. I came to New York with all these hopes and dreams and told myself I wouldn't let anything get in the way, and now I'm turning down roles because my heart wants to stay with you. It's not right. I'm doing things that aren't me. I don't recognize myself."

Dread rises from the pit of my stomach because I know what this is. I

know what's about to happen. I try to remain calm, but my voice turns blunt. "Where are you going with this speech?"

"I'm saying that things are moving too fast between us. We need to slow down."

Okay, I can deal with this. The back of my neck prickles, telling me otherwise. "Things *have* happened fast between us. Tell me what you need from me. Am I being too overbearing about protecting you from Connor? Are we spending too much time together? I know you haven't seen Jordan much over the last few weeks and miss her. If we need to spend more time apart... I'm fine with that if it makes you happy."

"It's not that," she says. "I mean, yes, I miss Jordan. But this is more about my goals in life. I'm letting them slide away because of my feelings for you."

"I thought I made it clear I won't stand in the way of your career. I was the one who encouraged you to take the role in *The Alley Cats*. I even said I would move to LA with you if that's what you need."

She's still pacing my living room. Her words are just as frenzied. "I'm not making myself clear. I thought I was ready to be in a relationship with you, but I'm not."

And there it is, the words I was fearing. But I don't believe them for a second. I know what we have is real, and that she does want us. She told me she loves me. It was only a couple of days ago that we were joking about getting married. Even right now, her bottom lip is trembling, and her sentences are broken as she attempts to be strong.

None of what she's saying makes sense, and frustration gets the best of me. "You're lying. This is pathetic, Mina. Do you see yourself right now? You're trying not to cry. Even *you* don't believe the words coming out of your own mouth."

The first tears finally fall down her cheeks. She wipes them away. "I'm upset because I don't like confrontation. Distance from you is what I need and want."

I step up to Mina and gently cup her jaw in my palms, forcing her to look at me. "Tell me what this is really about."

She gazes straight back into my eyes, and within them I see all the sadness in the world. "I'm telling the truth."

I let go of her and step back, my chest aching with every breath. "So, what, I'm supposed to continue with my life like we never happened? You

expect things to go back to the way they were before we got together? You're living in a dream world, Mina. How do you expect me to kiss you every night on stage when you've broken my fucking heart?"

She turns her back to me, I suppose so I don't see how much she's falling apart right now. But I can see it all too well. Her shoulders are shaking. She's wiping her face. Her voice is so damn weak.

"I don't expect you to do that," she says. "That's why I've contacted my agent and told her I'm accepting the role in *The Alley Cats*. I'm moving to LA. I want you to stay here with *The Velvet Cigar*."

I step up behind Mina, caressing both hands to her shoulders. "I don't care about the damn show. I need you more than I need that musical."

"I have to leave." Without looking at me, she heads for the front door.

That's it? That's how she ends things between us, by not even letting me see her face one last time?

I rush after Mina and grab her around the waist, pulling her chest flush to mine. "I'm not letting you walk out on this conversation until I get the truth from you. Tell me what's going on."

Instead of trying to push me away, her gaze lowers to my lips, and that's when I know for sure that I'm right about her still loving me. I give her what she wants and kiss her. As soon as our lips meet, she's the Mina I know again, knotting her hands through my hair and drawing me in close.

I guide her backward until her legs bump against the couch, and I get her lying beneath me on the cushions. My hands are as desperate as our kisses, unbuttoning her jeans. She doesn't stop me. Instead, she's raising her hips, grinding against my cock. I don't know what this is between us right now. Break-up sex? It can't be. I'll do whatever I can to make her stay.

She moans into my mouth, still working up a rhythm on my dick. But right before I lower her jeans, she pushes space between us. Her breath is staggered as she looks up at me with pained eyes. I know from that look that there's nothing I can do to convince her to stay. This is it between us. This is the end.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, and hurries out the front door.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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### Zac

For one week, I perform *The Velvet Cigar* with Mina's understudy and hate every moment of it. Kissing Mina's replacement feels wrong. It's a constant reminder of what I've lost. I can't perform with passion and the reviews have noticed. So, I take a leave of absence from the show.

Nothing has ever hurt as bad as losing Mina. Not when I discovered Penny cheated on me. Not when she asked for a divorce.

Mina won't speak to me. She's not answering any of my calls or texts. I've shown up at her apartment four times, determined to see her before she leaves for LA. Each time, Jordan and Ryan turned me away, with direct orders from Mina. She's lying about not wanting me, and I won't give up on our relationship. But I don't know what else to do about us right now.

The media are a nightmare. I can't turn on the TV, use social media, or even walk outside my apartment building without seeing speculation of our breakup. As a coping mechanism, I confine myself to my apartment. I make friends with a bottle of whiskey. If I'm drunk, the breakup doesn't hurt as much. I hardly leave my bed, since sleeping is better than reality. The only thing I'm decent at is giving attention to Mr. Fluffy because Mina loves him. He's all that I have left of her.

I'm in bed when I hear the front door unlock. Mr. Fluffy jumps off my bed and runs for the door. The sun is up but I have no clue what time it is or day of the week. Everything has turned into a blur. But at the sound of the door opening, I sit up immediately, filled with hope that Mina has changed her mind and is returning to me. She never gave back her key. I didn't ask for

it, secretly wishing this very scenario to happen. But when Verena calls my name, I fall back to the mattress, dead inside.

A moment later, Verena, Darius, and Adrian are standing in my bedroom doorway. “Go away, please,” I beg them. I haven’t spoken to any of them since the breakup. They’ve called, but I haven’t answered. I suppose they’re here because they heard gossip in the media.

“We’re worried about you. You haven’t answered any of our calls,” Darius says. “Mina told us what happened.”

“I don’t want to talk about it. It hurts to think about her.”

Verena whispers something to Darius and Adrian. The two of them head out to the balcony, then Verena sits on the ground in front of me, resting her hand on mine. “I know it hurts. I hate seeing you like this.”

My eyes catch on the massive diamond engagement ring sparkling on Verena’s hand. This is the world’s way of laughing at me and kicking me when I’m down.

“Shit.” Verena pulls her hand away. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to wave the ring around in your face. I’m sure it’s the last thing you want to see.”

“You don’t have to hide your happiness just because my life is a mess.” I roll onto my back and stare at the ceiling. “She was the one, Verena. I never felt this way about Penny.”

“I know.”

“None of this makes sense because I know Mina loves me too. She gave some bullshit excuse about our relationship interfering with her career. I know she doesn’t believe that. Even if she does, I made it clear that I would drop everything to support her. I need to figure out why she really broke up with me.”

“We’ll help you find out why. I told you in Australia that you’d find happiness again. Now I’m telling you, you’ll get Mina back. I promise. But the first thing you have to do is get out of bed, take a shower, then meet me out on the balcony.”

Surprisingly, a shower and a clean set of clothes does help my mood. I step out to the balcony with a bowl of cereal and take a seat with Verena, Darius, and Adrian.



“Sorry to hear about Mina,” Adrian says.

How do I reply to that—with a *thanks*? That feels so final. So defeated, like I’ve accepted Mina and I are over, which I haven’t.

I shrug off the topic and answer with, “How is everyone?” The question comes out in a sarcastic tone, even though I don’t mean it that way.

“No doubt, better than you,” Adrian says. “While you’ve been living under a rock, you missed out on a massive event. Darius came out to the public.”

My eyes flash to Darius. “Seriously? Shit, I’m sorry I’ve been absent.”

Darius dismisses my apology with a wave. “You have a good excuse. Don’t worry about it.”

“How did everyone take the news? More importantly, how are *you* feeling about coming out?”

“The public was great.”

Adrian snorts. “Aside from the thousands of females Tweeting about how depressing it is to lose such an attractive guy to the other team.”

“My family was another story,” Darius says. “They took it as well as I could have hoped for. They accepted the news and told me they love me, but I could see traces of disappointment in their eyes.”

“Sorry, man,” I say, scooping a spoon of cereal.

“It’s okay, really. I’ve always feared they would disown me. At least I’m not lying to myself or anyone anymore. The truth is freeing. I feel good.”

“I can’t wait for you to start dating,” Verena tells him.

“I’m not rushing into anything,” he says. “Baby steps. Anyway, I feel like crap talking about this, considering Zac’s situation. Can we focus on his drama? Zac thinks Mina is lying about her reason for breaking up with him.”

Verena adds in for my benefit, “I filled Adrian and Darius in on the breakup details while you were showering.”

“What do you think the truth is?” Adrian asks me.

“I’m not sure. All I know is we were so happy together. The other thing that’s driving me insane is Mina has a stalker ex-boyfriend and I have no idea if she’s safe.”

“Wait. You don’t think…” Darius trails off, deep in thought. “Could Mina have ended your relationship because of her stalker ex? What if he said something to her that triggered the breakup?”

I shake my head. “Mina told me she hasn’t heard from him.”

“Would she tell you if she had?” Verena asks. “She’s lied to you about

him before.”

Adrian rubs his jaw, contemplating something. “Weren’t some of those notes she received from him pretty messed up? *I don’t like when people touch what’s mine*. You said she received one on opening night that said he’d be seeing her soon. I’m just saying, Darius’s theory is an avenue to explore.”

I haven’t been thinking straight since Mina left me and never considered she would break up with me because of Connor. Mina was so adamant she wouldn’t let him control her life. But... my friends do make a good point. Hell, Darius’s suggestion is the only decent theory so far. What could Connor have done that would cause Mina to break up with me?

Threaten her?

Harm her?

If that’s true... My hands ball into fists at the thought of Connor doing either of those things to her. “You guys might be right. I need to talk to Mina.”

## **Mina**

I haven’t heard from Connor for two weeks, since that night he showed up on my doorstep and threatened Zac’s life. The silence is all a part of his plan. I know him. He’s trying to intimidate me and keep me on edge so I never know when to expect him next. I hate to admit it, but his tactics are working. I’m scared. I haven’t left my apartment in well over a week. I’ve barely left my room.

Even if I were to leave my apartment, I’d only be hounded by the media as to why I’m no longer performing in *The Velvet Cigar*. I’ve avoided watching the news and checking social media, but Jordan let me know Zac took leave from the musical too, and now the public are speculating that our disappearance from the stage is because we’ve broken up.

“Babe, you can’t stay in bed all day again,” Jordan says, inviting herself into my bedroom. “This is the fifth day in a row.”

I pull the sheets over my head and ignore her. Usually, hiding under the blankets works and she leaves me alone. But this time she says, “I’m calling Zac.”

I rip the sheets off and sit up. “Don’t you dare call him.”

“I don’t know how to get you out of this mood.”

“Zac is not the solution.”

“Fine. Will you *please* tell me why you broke up with him. You’re clearly still in love with him, otherwise you wouldn’t be this miserable.”

“I’m not discussing this with you.”

A knock on the front door makes me jolt, my thoughts jumping to Connor. “Look through the peephole before you answer that.”

Jordan leaves my room to answer the door, calling back to me, “This conversation isn’t over.”

Yes, it is. I take a sip of the water on my bedside table, listening out for the visitor’s voice, and almost choke when I hear Jordan answer the door with a, “Hi, Zac.”

My heart races faster with both my need for Zac and panic at him being here. I thought Zac had taken the hint to stop visiting after the fourth time Jordan closed the door in his face but apparently not.

He answers her in a rushed voice, trying to fit a word in because she turns him away. “Jordan, I know Mina doesn’t want to speak to me, but I need to —”

“Actually, I was about to call you. Mina will be furious with me for letting you inside, but you need to fix whatever has happened between you two. Mina is not acting like herself.”

Motherfucker. I get out of bed and pull a dressing gown on. My hair is a mess, so I run my fingers through it to look semi-presentable. A moment later, Zac steps into my room and I can’t breathe from the way he’s looking at me. There’s so much pain in his eyes, and I hate that I’m the cause of it.

Zac closes the door behind himself. He’s not dressed in his usual suit, but the casual attire of lounge wear. He looks worse for wear, with untamed hair and a few days’ worth of stubble. Yet, any look on Zac is one I love.

“Hi,” he says.

“You shouldn’t be here.”

“Why not? Is it because of something Connor said to you?”

Shit. He’s more intuitive than I thought. “Connor has nothing to do with this. I haven’t heard from him since opening night. I doubt I’ll hear from him again once I move to LA.”

“And when is that?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I don’t know yet. I’m still arranging accommodation.” Lies, lies, and more lies.

What makes this situation extra depressing is that there is no position for

me in *The Alley Cats*. I spoke to my agent and asked if I could reconsider the role, and she said the offer was no longer available. So, on top of losing Zac and *The Velvet Cigar*, I'm losing what would have been an amazing career opportunity.

Zac digs his hands into his pockets. "I'm worried about you, Mina. I just spoke to Jordan, and she's worried about you. What's going on?"

"Exactly what I've told you." He's adamant to fight for us, so I have no choice but to hit him where it hurts, and I hate myself for it. "I'm moving to LA with Ryan."

He takes the bait and repeats Ryan's name in a medley of confusion and jealousy. I guess he hasn't heard that Ryan and Hannah have been seeing each other. "You're moving to LA with Ryan as friends?"

"No. We're... more than friends."

"Cut the crap, Mina. You're not into him."

"You know Ryan and I have always seen each other casually over the years. I'm not committed to him. We're just..."

"Fucking?" That one word is brutal out of his mouth and makes me cringe.

"If you have to word it so bluntly, yes."

Zac laughs in disbelief, but there's no missing the venom in his tone. "This is fucking bullshit. I can't listen to this for another second." He walks out of my room and exits my apartment.

Of course Ryan arrives home at this exact moment. I hear him cross paths with Zac with a, "Dude, good to see you." But it goes unanswered and the front door slams shut.

I peer out my window and watch Zac leave, then return to my position beneath the blankets and break down in tears.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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### Mina

I think Zac finally got the message to stay away. I haven't heard from him in days, not since I told him I'm sleeping with Ryan.

Jordan and Ryan are out tonight at the burlesque club. They tried to drag me along to get me out of the apartment, but I can't face the public. I'm more comfortable being alone.

It's when I'm carrying clean laundry up from the basement that I get a text message that makes me realize I might not be so alone.

NO CALLER ID:

Tonight is the night, sweetheart.

I stop mid-stairwell, my heart in my throat as I read the words. What do they mean—Connor is coming for me tonight? A worse thought enters my mind. What if he plans to go after Zac tonight? I did what Connor asked and ended my relationship with Zac, but what if Connor doesn't believe it? What if he saw Zac leaving my apartment the other day and thinks I'm still involved with Zac?

I run the rest of the way back into my apartment and lock the door, then dial 911. It's a risk asking for police help, considering Connor's cop friends, but I figure it's a risk worth taking. The way I see it: either I don't call the police, leaving myself vulnerable to Connor, or I do call, and have a chance of being protected by one of the good guys. Zac's safety is at stake here too,

and I have to protect him.

The operator tells me they'll send someone to both mine and Zac's apartments. As soon as I hang up, I dial Zac's number, needing to warn him about Connor. But the call goes to voicemail.

## Zac

The club where Jordan works at is busy tonight. In hindsight, I shouldn't have come here with Verena, Darius, and Adrian. As soon as our presence is noticed, people are staring at us, more so than I'm used to since Verena and Darius are with me. Her bodyguards are with us too and it's making a scene.

"A night out at a strip club?" Adrian says as we take a seat on a group of couches in front of the stage. "Not really what I had in mind when I suggested we do something tonight. Isn't this what single guys do? I thought you were fighting for Mina."

"I *am* fighting for her," I say. "That's why we're here—to speak with her roommate. And this isn't a strip club."

A member of the waitstaff takes our drink order and no sooner than she returns to the bar, Ryan approaches us. I wasn't aware he would be here tonight. His shirt is unbuttoned half-way, revealing his pecs, and his long hair is ruffled, as if he's just had sex. I fucking hate it.

Ryan greets us all with a grin. "My dudes, it's good to see you all again."

Verena's bodyguards ward him off, but she dismisses them with a nod. "It's okay. He's a friend."

Ryan takes a seat in an armchair. "What brings you guys by the club?"

Though I'm fairly certain Mina was lying about sleeping with Ryan, I still can't look him in the eye without feeling territorial. There's no way I can match his friendly demeanor.

"I'm hoping to speak with Jordan," I tell him. "How can I find her?"

"She's backstage. I'll call her." He holds his phone to his ear and speaks a few words into it before hanging up. "Jordan's coming to see you now. You want a kombucha while you wait?"

The four of us raise an eyebrow at Ryan. "I'm sorry, what?" Darius asks. "Kombucha at a club?"

Ryan pulls a bottle out from the inside of his jacket. "I carry kombucha with me everywhere. This is my own recipe. It's amazing for your gut. Life

changing. I'm going into business with some backpackers I met. They love the product." He points to a group of people across the seating area. "They're my business partners. I've been trying to get Mimi on the kombucha. Her gut biome is all out of whack. I keep telling her the kombucha will help shake off this depression she's in."

My teeth grind together when I hear Ryan's nickname for Mina. I hate that he has a pet name for her, even more than I hate his sex-worn appearance.

Adrian scoffs at Ryan's words and mutters, "Right, because Mina's lack of kombucha is why she's depressed."

"Bloody hell, Ryan," Jordan laughs, arriving at our side in a sparkly costume. "Put the damn kombucha away."

I stand to greet Jordan. She looks relieved to see me and gives me a hug. "How's Mina doing?" I ask while the others continue chatting about Ryan's kombucha.

"The same as the last time you saw her. I tried to get Mina to come out tonight, but she's not leaving the apartment. I don't know what's going on with her."

"I need to find out the truth before she leaves for LA."

Jordan's gaze narrows on me, confused. "LA? What are you talking about?"

"For the role in *The Alley Cats*. She said she's moving there with Ryan and that she's seeing him again."

"What? Zac, Mina isn't moving to LA. Ryan is seeing Hannah. And Mina doesn't have the *Alley Cats* job."

I fold my arms and swear. More lies. The only times Mina has lied to me was when Connor was involved. A gut-wrenching feeling crawls over me. The change in Mina's behavior has to be because of him. I'm furious with myself for not seeing the truth sooner. For not pushing harder to protect her.

I scrunch both hands through my hair in panic. "I need to see Mina again. Like, right now. Can I get your number so we can keep in contact over Mina's situation?"

"Sure."

I pull out my phone, swearing the second I see a missed called from Mina.

"Is everything all right?" Jordan asks.

"Mina left me a voicemail." I already know something is wrong because

she's been avoiding me for weeks. I hold the phone to my ear and listen.

"Zac, it's me." Her voice is hysterical. She's speaking so fast I have to listen carefully to what she's saying. "I received another message from Connor, and I'm scared. He said tonight is the night. I don't know what that means, but he's either coming after me or you. I'm so sorry for putting you in this situation. I ended things with you because I was trying to protect you. I love you and I hope you can forgive me for hurting you. I'm not involved with Ryan and I'm not doing *The Alley Cats*. They were both lies to get you away from me. Connor doesn't want me anywhere near you, and I'm scared that he saw you at my apartment the other day. He is insane, Zac. He said he would have his gang kill you. I sent police to your apartment. I don't know where you are, but you need to get someplace safe. I will never forgive myself if something happens to you."

Fuck. The blood rushes from my face. I was right. Connor got to her, and he's the reason she broke up with me. And now he's coming after her. After me. Though the threat on my life is frightening, I'm more terrified of the danger Mina is in.

I call Mina back, feeling sick in the stomach when my phone rings out.

"What's wrong?" Jordan asks.

"Connor. I need to get out of here." I bolt for the exit. Every second wasted is a second that Mina could be in danger. Mina's voicemail was sent an hour ago. I'm so angry at myself for missing it.



## Chapter Twenty-Five

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### **Mina**

I pace back and forth around my apartment, waiting for the police to arrive and for Zac to return my call. But it's been ages since I left the voicemail and there's no word from him. He's either angry with me for what I said about sleeping with Ryan and is ignoring my call, or Connor has gotten to him. I can't bear to think about the second option.

I'm about to try calling Zac again, but a knock comes from the front door, followed by a male voice. "Mina Midnight? This is the police answering your call."

I toss my phone on the kitchen counter and open the door, freezing as soon as I see Connor in the open doorway in his black hood. My skin prickles hot with fear. He tricked me, disguising his voice with a tone that doesn't belong to him. I race to shut the door, but Connor holds an arm out, forcing himself inside my home.

"Get out of my apartment. I've already called the cops. They'll be here any second." I just hope I sound confident because I don't even believe my own words. The police have never been prompt with their arrival.

Connor shuts the door behind him and engages the lock. "No, they won't be. I've made sure of that," he says in that deep but calm tone he always uses. "I've also been watching you and your roommates for a few weeks now. I've studied your routines. Jordan is at work and won't be returning till sunrise. Ryan is with her, and based on his track record, I've got a few hours with you to myself." He glances around, inspecting my apartment. "Nice place you've got here. Tell me, is your boyfriend planning on dropping by later?"

“I don’t have a boyfriend anymore.”

“Good girl. I knew you would be smart and listen to me.”

My phone lights up with an incoming call and Zac’s name appears on the screen. Connor reads the name and *tsks*. “Or perhaps you haven’t been a good girl. Turn your phone off.”

With reluctance, I do what he says.

“Now hand the phone to me. I don’t want you getting any ideas about trying to call for help.”

I gulp back my nerves and pass him the phone. He slides it into his back pocket. With Connor’s guard slightly dropped, I make a run for the door, but he’s too fast and grabs my hair. I cry out when he shoves my chest against the wall and presses his body to mine, chuckling.

“Mina.” Connor’s lips are flush to my ear as he speaks in a whisper that sends chills over my body. “Sweet Mina. When are you going to get it in your head that you can’t escape me? You put a restraining order on me, but I’m still here. I think you like it, having someone this obsessed with you. I see the way you walk around your bedroom in nothing but lingerie. You undress in front of your window, knowing I’m watching. You ride that little toy of yours and come so hard, knowing I’m watching. You even fucked that boyfriend of yours with the curtains open, taunting me.”

My stomach twists with horror. All this time, I’ve been wondering how Connor has been keeping such a close eye on me. He’s delusional if he thinks I did any of those things for him.

“You’re a sick freak,” I say. “What have you got, cameras outside my window?”

“I like to watch what is mine. But you see, sweetheart, I need to draw the line somewhere. Even if it was all foreplay for you, I don’t take well to other men fucking my woman. The foreplay is over and now I’ve come to collect what’s mine.” He pulls me off the wall, holding both of my wrists in one of his huge palms, then forces me into my bedroom and throws me on my bed.

Connor rolls me over so that I’m facing him with both of my hands above me, trapped beneath his grip. I kick and scream and do anything I can to get him off me, but his knees pin both of my legs to the mattress. His free hand unbuckles his jeans and pulls out his cock.

My body locks up with dread. This is really about to happen, and I can’t do anything to stop it. “Connor, stop this,” I beg. “I don’t want you.”

“You do, sweetheart. You love my cock. I remember you used to beg me

to fuck you. You'd scream out my name and tell me how no other man has been in you this deep or made you come so hard."

He grabs my dress and hoists it up around my waist, then yanks my panties to the side.

"Stop it! Connor, you're hurting me. Somebody help!" I shout, but the sound barely makes it out of this room when Connor smothers a hand over my mouth.

"The only shouting you'll be doing is when I rip your cunt to shreds with my cock."

A door bangs open somewhere in the apartment. "Mina?" Zac shouts.

Connor swears. We both look to the source of the sound and find a crowd of people standing on the other side of my bedroom doorway, staring at us shocked. Jordan, Ryan, Verena, Adrian, Darius. There are two other people I've never seen before—large men in black suits who are shielding Verena. But the only face that truly stands out to me is Zac's, filled with rage. Before Connor has a chance to get off me and pull his jeans up, Zac runs up to him and punches him in the back of the head.

"Get the fuck away from her," Zac snarls, throwing another punch. This time, the impact knocks Connor to the ground. Zac climbs on top of him and winds his fist back, striking again. "You don't *fuckin*g touch her, you hear me? You will *never* touch her again. I'm going to *kill* you." He fires another punch and then another one. So many punches that I lose count.

"Zac, stop," Adrian says, pulling at Zac's shoulders with Darius. The two men in black suits join in, and I realize they're Verena's bodyguards. "He's out cold. I've got it from here. Go to Mina."

But Zac doesn't stop. He keeps bashing Connor's bloody face, and although Connor deserves it, I don't want Zac to pay for the consequences of killing a man.

"Zac!" I shout, my voice breaking with tears.

His eyes land on me and he rushes onto the bed, frantically cupping my jaw in his hands. "Did he hurt you? Please tell me I'm not too late. I will never forgive myself if I didn't get here in time."

"I'm fine."

A tear spills down Zac's cheek. He brings me into his arms, cradling my head to his chest. "You're safe now."

## Zac

Verena's bodyguards detain Connor. They call the police—their *personal* connections to the police—and this time, I can rest assured that true help is here.

It's two a.m. when we're through with the cops, Connor has finally been arrested, and I bring Mina back to my apartment, settling her on my couch with Mr. Fluffy.

She strokes his head and gives him a kiss, telling him she's missed him.

"He's missed you too," I say. "Baby, *I've* missed you so much."

I wrap a blanket around Mina's shoulders and bring her a hot chocolate with pink marshmallows, trying every method I can think of to comfort her because I can't imagine what's going through her mind right now.

I take a seat beside Mina, desperately wanting to touch her, but I'm not sure what lasting impact the sexual assault has on her, so I refrain from making contact. Her cheeks are still wet with tears from the attack, and it breaks my heart. I'm just relieved she's safe now. No more Connor to worry about.

With the assistance of Verena's bodyguards, the police listened and are now going after Connor's gang too. They're determined to identify the corrupt cops that are working with the gang. I'm so angry at myself for not thinking to seek out Verena's bodyguards for help sooner. But I don't want to focus on anger right now. Mina needs comfort and support.

"Do you want to talk about what happened?" I ask.

"I'm sorry about everything," she says, staring at her drink. "I never wanted to hurt you, but Connor threatened to have you killed. Zac, I didn't know what else to do. The police weren't helping. They were working against me because of Connor—"

"Mina, it's okay. I understand. You don't have to apologize or relive any of it."

She wipes her eyes and looks at me, whispering, "I was so scared for you tonight."

"I was scared for you. You have no idea how... furious I was when I saw Connor on top of you. Furious doesn't describe it. I wanted to kill him."

"Thank you for stopping him. I didn't expect you to show up at my apartment. When I called and you didn't answer... I thought it was because

I'd hurt you too badly."

I stroke her hair. "I missed your call. I was at the club, trying to get answers about you from Jordan. I came as soon as I heard your message. Mina, I promise you this, I will *always* come when you need me."

She places her drink on the coffee table and snuggles into my arms. "I love you."

I pull Mina onto my lap and hold her tight. Finally, all is right in the world. Mina is in my arms where she belongs. "I love you."

"I don't want to be without you."

"You won't have to, baby. Not ever."

# Epilogue

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## 2 Months Later

### Zac

Right after the assault, it became official: Mina permanently moved in with me. Everywhere I look, there are traces of her in our apartment, whether it be her makeup in the bathroom cabinet, her clothes that occupy eighty percent of our wardrobe, or her ridiculous food choices in the pantry. And I love it. I love how this girl has taken over my life and made me so fucking happy.

Neither of us are living in fear of our safety. The police tracked down Connor's gang and weeded out the cops who were working with them. All of them—the gang, corrupt cops, and Connor—have been charged and are facing conviction.

We're both performing in *The Velvet Cigar* again too, which was no problem to initiate since sales were slipping with two no-name understudies playing our parts. Our passion is back in the theater, and even more so in the bedroom.

I've never seen anything more beautiful in my life, sweat glistening on Mina's brow as she rides my cock in a teasingly slow manner. It's one p.m. on a random Tuesday afternoon and I'm fucking the girl of my dreams.

I lean back against the headboard of our bed and watch her enjoy herself. She bunches her hair up off her neck, then lets it tumble down over those perfect tits of hers. Her muscles clench around my cock each time she rises, choking my shaft in the most addictive way. I feel the build of an orgasm, but I can't let go, not until I know Mina is satisfied first. My thumb swirls around her clit and she lets out a gasp. I don't stop there and bring her nipple into my

mouth, circling my tongue.

“Zac,” she moans my name, and it sounds so good on her lips. I love knowing that my cock is getting her off.

“That’s it, baby,” I tell her. “Fuck, you look good.”

Suddenly she’s shaking, clutching the headboard behind me. Her neck arches backward and she’s making the most delicious sounds as she comes. I grab her hips for leverage and jerk my dick up into her in slow slamming motions, letting go of my self-restraint and coming with her.

With each thrust, my cum spurts deep into her, and I’m seeing stars, it feels that good. “Fuck... Mina... Fuck...”

I love this girl. I won’t rush things between us. I don’t have a ring yet. But I know this for sure: one day, I’m going to ask her to marry me.

## **Mina**

I lie in bed with Zac after the most amazing sex. He traces a finger up the arch of my spine and kisses my shoulder. There’s a hunger in his eyes as he gazes at my naked body.

I chuckle. “What’s that look for?”

“We leave for Verena and Adrian’s wedding in a few days. The last time I was in Australia was a disaster. Terrible memories.”

“I’m confused. You’re thinking about bad memories while looking at me as if you’re ready for another round of sex?”

He smirks. “Can I finish what I was about to say?”

“Sorry. Continue.”

“Did I ever tell you about how Adrian proposed to Verena?”

“No.”

“They visited their hometown for Verena’s parents’ twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Long story short, Verena hated her childhood and that town. So much bad history took place between her and Adrian there. But Adrian was determined to erase those memories by replacing them with good ones. He proposed to her during that visit and now whenever she thinks of her hometown, her memories are happy ones.”

I laugh softly and bite the corner of my bottom lip, playing with him.



“What are you saying, you’re going to propose to me in Australia?”

He presses a kiss to my mouth and climbs on top of me, stroking his cock between my thighs and making me quiver. “I’m saying I’m going to create new memories that look a lot like this, with you naked and moaning beneath me.”

“I can’t wait for this trip to Australia, then.” I wrap my legs around Zac, inviting him in for another round. I could stay in bed with him all day if it weren’t for the interruption of my phone ringing. “Shit. I should get that. Jordan is supposed to be visiting.”

Zac glances at my phone. “Yeah, that’s Jordan calling.”

“Don’t forget this position. We’re returning to it as soon as I’m done with her.” I slide out from beneath Zac and grab my phone.

“Hey. You here?” I say into the phone.

“Yeah,” Jordan replies.

“Hold on, I’ll buzz you into the building.”

I brush my lips over Zac’s and get dressed. He doesn’t move, and instead remains in bed, watching me with a lazy smile. “When you’re done admiring me, put some clothes on and join us,” I tell him.

I head to the front door and open it, swearing when I find Jordan in tears. “Babe, what’s wrong?” I ask, pulling her into my arms.

“I heard back about my audition. I didn’t make it onto the show.”

“I’m so sorry. Come inside.”

I lead her out to the balcony. No sooner than we take a seat, Zac joins us, fully dressed. Seeing Jordan’s tears, he says, “Should I give you two some alone time?”

Jordan fans her wet face. “You can join us if you want to hear me have a total breakdown.”

Zac pulls up a chair beside me, resting an arm around my shoulders. “To be clear, I’m staying because I want to offer support, not because I want to witness you having a breakdown.”

She smiles at the joke, and I love that about Zac, that he cares about my friend and can make her laugh during tough times.

I fill Zac in on the situation. “Jordan didn’t get onto that TV show she auditioned for.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he tells her.

Mr. Fluffy walks onto the balcony. I pick him off the ground and place him on Jordan’s lap. “Doggy cuddles make everything better.”

She twirls his furry ear with her finger and sighs. “I’m such an idiot for letting myself get excited for the show and believing I stood a chance. I feel like the producers led me on. They kept emailing to tell me how impressed they were with my audition tape.”

I rub her arm. “I know it’s hard to think like this at the moment, but a better opportunity will come along. This wasn’t the right one.”

Jordan wipes her eyes. “I know you’re right. But I also can’t stop thinking about the money I’ll be missing out on. My gig at the club doesn’t cover the rent.”

“What are you talking about? We discussed money before I moved out.” Even though moving in with Zac was one hundred percent what I wanted to do, there was no way I would have done it if it meant placing Jordan in a bad financial position. “Ryan said he would stick around and cover half the rent while setting up the kombucha business.”

“He said he would be in the city for a couple of months. That time frame has passed and the kombucha business is set up. He’s back to traveling for his YouTube channel. Hannah has gone with him. They’re an official couple now.”

Jeez, who would have ever thought. I’m happy for him, though.

“Can we help you find another roommate?” Zac asks.

Jordan pinches the top of her nose “That won’t help. Even if I find someone, I can’t cover my half of the rent. I just came from the club and they’re cutting my solo, which means I’ll earn less money.”

“Shit. Why are they cutting your act? You’re great on stage.” I finally got the chance to watch Jordan perform, and she has the best solo act at the club.

“The boss says my solo routine isn’t right for the clientele.”

“So? They can give you a new routine. That’s bullshit.”

Zac takes my hand in his, giving me a gentle squeeze to calm down. “Okay, here’s what’s going to happen. We’ll lend you the money till you can get back on your feet.”

Both Jordan’s and my eyes flash to Zac. I would have made the same suggestion sooner or later, but I’m instantly more in love with him for offering to help my friend in such a way.

Jordan shakes her head. “I can’t take your money.”

“Why not?” Zac says. “We’re earning enough of it. And if you’re going to be a pain about it, you can pay us back.”

“No. Friends and money don’t mix. That’s one thing I know.”

I gently kick one leg of Jordan's chair. "Babe, I don't mean to be a bitch right now, but from the way I see it, you don't have any other options. We're giving you the money."

"I do have another option," she says. "Remember the guy from the club who offered me money if I'd be his date for these business dinners he has? Daxton Hawk. The entrepreneur."

My jaw drops. "No. Jordan you can't do that. You don't know anything about that guy. He could be a creep. What if he expects you to have sex with him?"

"Then I'll say no."

"What if you feel pressured? Imagine if you're short of money one week. He offers to pay you more money for sex in return, then the next thing you know, you're doing something you don't want to just to pay the rent."

She presses the heels of her palms to her eyes and groans. "It's not going to get to that. Stop worrying about me. I can take care of myself."

"I *am* worried—"

A message alert goes off on Jordan's phone. She readjusts Mr. Fluffy on her lap and grabs her phone out of her pocket, smiling at the screen.

"Jesus Christ," I laugh. "I can't keep up to date with you and your men. That's Steel texting you right now, I assume. Her online pen pal," I explain to Zac.

"I remember, baby."

"What does Steel think about this paid date?" I ask Jordan.

"Steel doesn't know and I'm not telling him."

"You really should meet him. Meet him and date him like you so badly want to. Then you won't have time for this other guy. Oh my God, imagine if you've already met Steel in real life but didn't know it was him. Swoon."

Jordan types a quick text and returns her phone to her pocket. "How many times do I have to tell you, I am *never* meeting Steel. And I appreciate your concern regarding Daxton, but there's nothing you can do to change my mind."

Zac interrupts our back and forth bickering. "Let me get this straight, Jordan. If you're getting paid to go on a date with Daxton Hawk, does that mean you'll be fake dating him?"

"I haven't thought about the technicalities yet, but I guess it does mean I'll be fake dating him."

Zac laughs, weaving his fingers with mine. "First Verena and Adrian.

Then Mina and me. Now it's you and Daxton. I think we all know how this is going to end."

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\*Swoon\*

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\*Swooning again\*

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## About the Author

Skyla Summers is an Australian author who lives with her husband and daughter in the sunny state of Queensland. Like many others, she fell in love with reading as a teen girl when discovering the likes of Edward Cullen and was convinced that book boyfriends were better than the real deal. When she was in her early 20s, she began her career as a music teacher in a small country town where she felt isolated from society, and it was here where she found her passion for writing. Before long, writing became her whole world, and she realized her true joy in life came from storytelling and making characters fall in love. Skyla loves hearing from her readers. If you enjoy her work, you can message her at [www.skylasummers.com](http://www.skylasummers.com) or find her on social media at the links below.

