



CC
CRIMSON
CLUB

fakers with
BENEFITS

WILLOW DIXON

FAKERS WITH BENEFITS

CRIMSON CLUB #2

WILLOW DIXON

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NICK

MINDLESSLY, I scrolled down on my phone, barely seeing the various items for sale.

“Nick?”

“Ow!”

The door to my room flew open and Aiden, my BFF, hurried inside. He skid to a stop and grinned. “Did you drop your phone on your face again?”

I rubbed my nose and sat up. “Would you believe me if I said no?”

“No.” He looked around my tiny room, his gaze lingering on the messy piles scattered on every available surface. “I thought you were cleaning your room? It looks like a bomb went off in here.”

“I was, but then I found this.” I motioned to the worn leather jacket at the foot of my bed. “I haven’t seen it in *years*.”

“And let me guess, you got distracted and started looking at jackets online. Then you got distracted again and you were looking at...” He tilted his head, a studious look on his face. “...sexy-times stuff?”

“What kind of sexy-times stuff, if you’re so smart?” I tried to glare at him but couldn’t help grinning.

“I’m gonna go with lingerie, but you started by looking at something a little more steampunk. Maybe a harness? Or one

of those strappy belt thingies you're currently obsessed with."

That was...scarily accurate. "You're annoying." I rolled off my bed.

"Not on purpose. I just know you." True story. After nine years as besties and five of being roomies, Aiden knew me better than I knew myself. "Ready to go?" he asked.

"Now?" I checked the time on my phone. "Shit!"

Chuckling, Aiden leaned against the desk that had been covered with crap since he helped me assemble it back in high school. "I thought you were going to set an alarm?"

"I did." I tossed my phone on my bed and raced across the room to rummage through a pile of clean clothes I'd neglected to put away. "But I turned it off and forgot about it." I sniffed a pair of sweatpants then stepped into them.

"Is there an event at work tonight, or is it a regular night?"

"An event. Same as tomorrow. I think tonight is a party of some sort. Birthday, bachelorette, something like that." The crop top I'd bought last month but hadn't worn yet caught my attention. I grabbed it then hurried over to my dresser for undies and socks.

"Are you good to get a ride home tonight?"

"Yup." Hurriedly, I stripped off my "It's Britney, Bitch" shirt and tossed it into the corner that was currently serving as my hamper.

"What about tomorrow?" he asked as I tugged on my clothes.

"Got it covered." I didn't, but that was future Nick's problem. I shoved my feet into a pair of old sneakers. I didn't bother dressing up when I was working at the club. I wouldn't be wearing my clothes long enough for anyone to appreciate my outfit.

"Ready?" he asked.

I shrugged on my newly found jacket and nodded. It was the beginning of June and way too hot for a leather jacket, but

whatever. Fashion over function, right?

Aiden pointed at my phone still on my bed.

“Oops.” I tucked it into my pocket. “Now I’m ready.”

In the hall, I closed the door out of habit so he wouldn’t be subjected to my mess. Aiden was a bit of a neat freak and I tried really hard to make sure the common areas of the apartment stayed tidy, but my room was a lost cause.

“Did you eat?” he asked.

“Dammit.” I sighed. I’d meant to, but forgot, again.

He pointed to a takeout container on the kitchen table. “You can eat that in the car.”

“Thanks, babes.” I peeked inside the box. He’d brought me a club sandwich and a pile of sweet potato fries from work. “You’re the bestest.”

“I know.” He twirled his keys around his finger. “There’s an iced tea in the fridge, too.”

I retrieved the drink and cradled my dinner in my arms. We locked up and headed toward the main entrance of our building. “How was your shift?”

“Not bad. Had a total Karen in my section right in the middle of the dinner rush. That was fun.” He made a face.

“Gross.”

“Oh yeah. She comes in and the first thing she does is yell at Melanie because she didn’t have a reservation and it was a forty-minute wait. I mean, what did she think would happen on a Saturday night during the dinner rush?”

“Obviously the restaurant should have anticipated her arrival and put aside the best table for her.”

He pushed open the main doors and waited so I could exit first. “Obviously.”

“So what happened? Did she wait?”

“Yeah, but not getting her way must have activated her Super Karen setting. Didn’t let me finish my greeting,

wouldn't let me tell her the drink specials, but then got mad when the other people in her party had to ask me for them.”

“Big yikes. I'm guessing she didn't stop there?”

“Hell no.” He pointed left. “I'm that way.” Our building didn't have a parking lot or any dedicated street parking so Aiden usually had to park on one of the side streets. “She ordered tea, but in a glass with ice, two packets of sugar, and three lemon wedges, one in the glass and two on the side.”

“So an iced tea?”

“Yup. But she lost her shit when she saw an iced tea on the bill. She demanded to only pay for tea because according to her, ice, sugar, and lemons are free. It's two bucks for brewed tea and less than three for iced tea, and we have free refills. All that to save ninety cents. Like, why? What could possibly happen in someone's life to make them yell at a server and throw a tantrum to save less than a buck?”

I shot him a commiserating look. “I don't get it either. Did she chill out after she got her drink?”

He snort-laughed. “I wish. The first one I bought her was too cold and had too much ice in the glass. Second try didn't have enough ice. I ended up just bringing her everything so she could make it herself, which she loudly complained about.”

“Ten bucks says she made a crack about getting paid because she's doing your job for you?”

“You'd win that bet. It's like they work off a script or something! After the drinks were settled, I spent two minutes trying to explain to her that the kitchen staff couldn't make the seafood linguine vegan and still have seafood and cream sauce in it. Oh, and she left me seventy-two cents in small coins as a tip. On a nearly hundred-and fifty-dollar bill *and* they stayed at the table for over an hour after they finished eating.”

“And *that's* why I swing around a pole twice a week.” I sipped my drink as Aiden unlocked his car. “I can't with those types. I can barely handle the ones we get at the café.”

“I'd be right there with you if I had any sense of rhythm.”

We slid into our seats and buckled up.

Aiden was my ride-or-die, but the guy couldn't dance to save his life. He could barely clap along to a song in a steady beat without messing up. I'd tried to teach him a simple box step when we were sixteen and he stepped on his own toes and fell on his face. Twice. He was lucky he was so hot his lack of dance skills didn't matter.

"Was the rest of your shift good at least?" I asked, then shoved a handful of fries in my mouth.

He shrugged. "Same shit, different day."

I scarfed down my food as he drove the rest of the way to work. I'd just finished my last sip of iced tea when he pulled up to the entrance.

Leaning across the console, I pecked a kiss against Aiden's cheek. "Thanks for the ride. Love you."

"Love you." He took the empty containers from me. "Have fun slutting it up."

"Always." I winked and pushed the car door open.

The club wasn't much to look at from the outside. The squat building stood on a private lot and was flanked on three sides by greenspace. The neon sign simply said "Crimson Club" in bright yellow script, which always struck me as weird. Shouldn't it be red? The brick façade was devoid of any windows, and blackout cling film covered the main doors. Nothing about it screamed *strip club*, but that's exactly what it was.

My gaze fell to a spot near the side of the building. A shiver of unease passed through me and I quickened my step.

A week ago, Dash, one of the other dancers, had come flying into the back room screaming about how some assholes were trying to kill Gray, my other bestie and work hubby. The memories of rushing outside with the rest of the crew and seeing him on the ground as two guys beat the shit out of him were as fresh now as they had been that night.

The attack had been an isolated thing, but it still freaked me out that he'd been targeted by those jerks because he was a stripper.

Gray was healing from his injuries, but seeing my big, strong friend bleeding on the ground and barely able to talk from the wound on his head was going to stay with me for a long-ass time.

Shaking off those thoughts, I hurried into the club.

“Yo.” Mitchell, one of our bouncers, upnodded me as the main doors closed behind me.

“Hey.” Keeping close to the walls, I made my way toward the back room, our staff area.

The inside of the club matched the outside in that it was boring and a little campy with wood paneling and grungy carpets, but whoever organized this event had obviously spent a small fortune sprucing the place up.

It had been transformed into a magical garden of sorts with sheer panels of material covering the walls, all folded and draped in ways that created intricate patterns and the illusion of elegance. Swaths of the same material and what looked like vines of ivy were draped over the bars that held the lights to the ceiling, hiding the sound and light equipment. Strings of fairy lights twinkled whimsically as they dangled from the ceiling and several huge panels with lights and vines in them had been set up so they created room dividers and blocked all the unsightly parts of the club, including the bar, from the area around the stage.

About half the tables had been removed. The ones left had been rearranged to create a cozy area around the stage and were draped with fancy tablecloths and had floral centerpieces on them. It even smelled good in here, like they were diffusing real flower scents. The usual chairs had been replaced with bougie-looking gold ones, and in the middle of the space honest-to-goodness *thrones* and ornate wooden side tables now sat on a platform facing the stage. In front of it sat a smaller platform, with a pole.

That wasn't part of the club's design. The only pole we had was the one on stage.

"You made it," Kai said as I slipped into the back room. "Only five minutes late."

"Did you see all that stuff out there?" I motioned to the door as it banged shut behind me. "What kind of event is this?"

"Bachelorette party," Zane said.

"I hope they're loaded. I really need the tips." I stripped off my jacket and carefully hung it on the rung near the door.

River, Zane's twin, grinned. "They are. Some guy in a tux screeched at me when I shoved one of those hanging plant things aside to get past it. Apparently, they're not only delicate, but also super expensive."

"They're real?" I asked.

"All of it is." Blaze didn't look up from the book he had his nose buried in. "I'm no florist, but that many orchids, lilies, and roses would be expensive as fuck. Not to mention whatever those vines are."

"No wonder it smells so good out there," I noted. "Let's hope these Richie Riches didn't blow their budget on flowers and'll actually tip us."

"Unlikely. Rich people don't tip. That's how they stay rich." Zane tugged on the hem of my crop top. "Only you could pull this off."

I struck a pose. "That's the bonus of not being built like a brick shithouse. I can wear pretty stuff and not look like I accidentally shrunk it in the wash."

"Has anyone ever seen a brick shithouse?" River asked. "What does that even mean?"

"No clue." I shrugged off my top and wiggled out of my sweats.

"It means that whatever the structure it's referring to is more sturdy than necessary." Knox glanced at Kai, who

nodded. Along with Blaze, they were the brains of the crew.

“Huh. So I look like a brick building? And why not just say ‘brick house’ and not shithouse? Is that a poop-kink thing?”

Kai, who’d just taken a big gulp of water, coughed and spit it out in a fine spray.

“You’re lucky you’re so pretty.” I patted River on the head and went to put my clothes away in a locker.

“Really?” Knox wiped water off his bare chest and shot Kai an unimpressed look.

“Sorry.” Kai pounded his chest. He cleared his throat. “I just got the worst mental picture in my head and it was either spit, or choke.”

“That’s what she said.” Zane’s tone was teasing, but his expression was blank, as usual.

The twins were opposites in every way except their looks. They were identical right down to their birthmarks and tattoos. Zane had told me they were mirror twins, which made sense. Zane never let his emotions show unless he was with people he trusted completely. He reminded me of a big jungle cat, like a jaguar or something. Scary as fuck, but only until you got to know him. River was a total golden retriever with his quick smiles and sunny demeanor, but piss him off and he could be just as intense and terrifying as his brother.

River spun toward Kai, still smiling in his happy River way. “Really? *You’re* kink shaming? Aren’t you the one who likes to chase your boyfriend around and fight each other before you fuck?”

“Primal play is a bit different from scat,” Blaze said. He snapped his book closed. “I keep hoping we’ll have one shift without the conversation going weird, but alas, today is not that day.”

I shut my locker and leaned against the cool metal surface, listening as my coworkers discussed primal play and whether they’d be into it.

I didn't get it, but whatever. I wasn't the type of person who ran for anything, and getting all sweaty and tired only to have some guy jump on me and want to wrestle was a giant nope.

"Where the fuck is Nick?" Corey, our manager, burst into the room. "I swear to Christ that kid is lucky chicks are into jailbait because he's the—"

"Watch your mouth," Kai snapped, his demeanor going from chill to *fuck around and find out* in an instant.

Usually he would have calmly interrupted Corey by pointing out that I was in the corner and he was freaking out over nothing, but we were all a little, or a lot, salty at him.

Not only had he let those jerks who'd beat up Gray leave, he'd tried to stop the twins from taking him to the ER.

If that weren't bad enough, we'd also found out he and his asshole husband had been skimming our tips and stealing from us for months. We didn't get paid by the club, only in tips.

I'd never liked Corey, or Ray—his husband and the other owner of the club. I hadn't been able to put my finger on why they gave me the ick, but my instincts had been right and now I hated them.

"Or what?" Corey turned his ire on Kai. "You think you're not replaceable too? Do you have any idea how many guys out there can do what you do, and probably better? I could have your spot filled in an hour."

"So do it." Kai pulled himself up to his full height. Zane and River moved to stand behind him like his personal bodyguards. "Replace me."

Corey glowered at them, his face going bright red.

"Nick's right there," Knox said coldly, pointing to me.

Corey ignored him. "The first set starts in ten. Don't fuck things up. These are VIP guests. I expect you to do everything they want. And I mean *everything*. Otherwise you can all find new jobs in the morning." He flounced out of the room before anyone could reply.

“Why did that sound ominous?” Blaze asked.

“Because it was.” Kai rolled his shoulders and flexed his hands, like he was stopping himself from punching something.

“What do you think he means by that?” Knox was the newest dancer and had only been on the crew for a few months. He hadn’t been around the last time there was a VIP event.

“He means we’re supposed to let them do whatever they want to us. The no-touching rule goes out the window for rich people,” Kai said tightly.

“No fucking way.” Knox glanced around the room. “Seriously?”

“Yup.” River’s expression matched Zane’s hard one. “Most of the VIP groups are respectful, but some can’t keep their hands to themselves and think we’re hookers, not just dancers.”

“I really hope tonight isn’t like it was on Valentine’s.” I scurried over to Kai and tucked myself against his side. Wrapping his arms around me he squeezed me tight. “I don’t wanna deal with that again.”

Knox looked between us. “Dare I ask what happened?”

“Let’s just say they were willing to tip as long as we did what they wanted.” Kai rubbed my arm comfortingly.

“That’s... Is it as bad as I’m thinking?”

“Are you thinking that someone wanted to pay us to fuck on stage?” Zane asked flatly.

“What?” Blaze and Knox said. Blaze had started before Knox but hadn’t been around for that fiasco, either.

“Like, they wanted *you* guys to fuck *them*?” Blaze said, carefully.

“Among other things.” River’s eyes were as blank as his voice, which was so unlike him, it proved just how upset he still was. “But that offer was for me and Zane to fuck each other.”

They gaped at him.

Zane squeezed my shoulder. “Gray, Nick, Kai, and Eddie all got propositioned too,” he said. “It was wild the shit they thought they could get away with because they had money.”

“Eddie?” Knox asked.

“He used to work here,” Zane said. “He quit the next day.”

“We all almost quit.” Kai held me tighter. “Thank fuck Biggs showed up and shut that shit down before it got too crazy.”

Biggs, our head bouncer and club dad, hadn’t been scheduled to work that night, which was the first sign something shady was going on. He’d also thought so and came by to check on things about an hour into the event. And sure enough, yeah. He shut the whole thing down and threatened to report everyone to the police, including our asshat bosses.

Stripping was legal in the state. Sexual touching and solicitation were not.

“I don’t give a fuck who they are, I will lay out the first person who crosses any lines.” Zane’s eyes were bright with anger. “No one is putting hands on any of us. Never again. From now on, we go outside in pairs or more, and everyone carries a weapon or something that can be used as one. We’re not taking any chances. Not after what happened to Gray. Our asshole bosses won’t do shit to protect us, so we’ll do it ourselves.”

The lights in the room flickered, our cue that we had sixty seconds until the first set started.

“Who’s up first?” I asked. I’d forgotten to check the schedule when I came in.

“You are, Angel Face.” River grinned.

“What?!” I shrieked. “Why didn’t anyone tell me to get ready while I’ve been standing here in my skivvies?”

Patting my butt, Kai nudged me toward the prop closet. “Because it’s fun to watch you go into Tasmanian devil mode.”

“I hate you!” I ran into the closet for a costume.

“No you don’t!” Kai yelled back as the others laughed.

I found a pair of briefs with sticky strips on the waistband and around the legs to keep them in place while I did my thing on the pole, then snagged the first pair of tearaway pants and tank top I saw.

I’d just finished wiping my hands clean after patting some body glitter on my chest and stomach to help make my muscles pop when the light on the wall next to the door that led to the stage flickered.

The guys called out various encouragements but I blocked them out and pulled in a deep breath to center myself. Time to entertain some rich people and hopefully get paid for it.

EVAN

“COULD you put that thing away for a few hours and actually be present with me?”

Sighing, I put my phone face down on the table next to my chair and turned to my sister.

Emily threw me a bland look. “You have to be the only young, single, gay man who’d willingly spend the night staring at their phone while at a strip club.”

“The stripping hasn’t started yet. How do you know I wasn’t going to put my phone away when it did?”

“Because I know you,” she said flatly.

“You’re wrong. I fully intended to.”

“Bullshit.” A cough came from my left. “See, Vlado agrees with me,” Emily said triumphantly. “Forget about work for a few hours and have fun. Please.” She gave me the puppy-dog eyes that had always worked when we were kids. “It’s my bachelorette party.” She grinned mischievously, flipping expressions on a dime. “As the man of honor, you’re obligated to participate.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Being here isn’t the same as participating.”

“She’s got you there, Ev.”

I turned to my bodyguard and oldest friend. “Aren’t you supposed to be on my side?”

“You’re a workaholic.” Vlado shrugged and scanned the room. “We all know it.”

“I am. And a very successful one.”

“Maybe,” he gave me that much, “but you and I both know not micromanaging everything for a few hours won’t make or break anything.”

“That’s the nice way of saying put your phone away, dumbass,” Emily said.

I gestured at the phone in my defense. “I—”

“*Away*,” she repeated, scoldingly. “Face down is such a lame attempt at being present, it’s almost worse.”

I traded one more furtive look with Vlado, who discreetly nodded. This wasn’t just about work, and if he felt I could let my guard down for the night, I could. “Fine.” I flashed a smile at Emily.

They waited silently as I unlocked my phone to shut the open programs down, then tucked it into the pocket of my slacks.

“So, what do you think of the place?” Emily asked me. “You were so busy with your stupid phone you’ve barely looked around.”

I took in the lavish room. The décor reminded me of a wedding reception, elegant and a bit whimsical with touches of luxury. The ridiculous platform we were sitting on had been set up across from the stage, and a smaller, lower stage with a pole sat directly in front of us.

“It’s nice.” My eyes roved over the people next. Gorgeous men in tiny briefs wandered around taking orders for the bar and the catering that had been brought in. A crowd of women mingled about, sipping drinks and eating. Some were already at the tables. Others danced in an area that had been set up at the far side of the space. “It’s exactly what I would have expected from you,” I added.

She grinned. “What could be better than a night out with my girls at a private club where the men are purely for eye

candy?”

A stunningly handsome man with long silky hair and wearing nothing but a tiny apron, a white jockstrap, and a smile came up to the platform.

“Can I get you some drinks before the show starts?” he asked, his gaze on Emily as he flashed her a million-watt smile.

She beamed back at him, eyeing his cut torso. “I’ll take a glass of champagne. He’ll take a bourbon sour.” She pointed to me. “And he’ll have a screwdriver.”

“Make that an orange juice,” Vlado said. “I’m on the clock.”

“No you’re not.” Em rolled her eyes. “Come on, Vlado. You’re as bad as my brother sometimes.”

“Ouch.” He put his hand over his heart. “Fine. One drink. But I’m switching to juice after because I’m responsible for driving your ass home tonight.”

“Deal.” She turned back to the server. “Thank you.”

“You can relax,” I told Vlado. “The place is secure, you said so yourself.”

Emily’s perfectly shaped eyebrow curled upward. “Please tell me you’re just being your usual paranoid self and I don’t have to worry about why your bodyguard is on high alert at my party?” Her stare ping-ponged between Vlado and me.

“It’s all good, Em,” Vlado said. “You know this looks like the weirdest head table ever, right? You’ve got the bride, her gay brother, and his bodyguard all up here like we’re some sort of throuple.”

I grimaced. “Never say the word *throuple* when speaking about myself and my sister again.”

“Gross.” Em shuddered in horror. “But man, if I could convince Mal to have some fun with another guy, I’d be *all* over that.”

“And if you could never mention anything sexual to me ever again, that would be great.” I scrunched my nose at her.

“Don’t be such a prude,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. She looked past me, to Vlado. “And it’s not like you’re complaining about being up here.”

“Hell no. How many times in my life am I going to be able to sit on a platform like a king and watch pole dancing?” He motioned at the pole platform in front of us. A smirk split his face.

“I thought you were straight?” Emily said.

“I am.” He leaned back in his chair and spread his legs out, relaxing, finally. “I can still appreciate the athleticism and skill it takes to do a pole routine without having to be attracted to the dancer.”

“But it’s way more fun to appreciate all that when you *are* attracted to them,” Em mused.

“True.” He nodded. “I thoroughly enjoyed Malcolm’s bachelor party. Way more than Ev did.”

“Yeah, Mal told me. *Someone*”—she stared at me pointedly—“sat in the corner all night working instead of enjoying the party.”

I shrugged. “His party was this, but from the male gaze. Once the catering was done there wasn’t much left that interested me.”

The lights lowered slightly, just enough to get our attention.

“Welcome, everyone, to Crimson Club,” a silky-smooth female voice came over the loudspeaker. “On behalf of everyone here, we want to wish the best to Emily, the bride-to-be. We’ll be starting tonight’s festivities in a few minutes, so grab a seat, a drink if that’s your jam, and get ready for the night of your lives.”

Several of the women in the room whooped and cheered as the lights dimmed more and red spotlights lit up the stage.

Our server reappeared with our drinks as the guests found seats and the servers rushed about filling and delivering orders.

I set my glass on the small table conveniently located beside my chair. Emily really had thought of everything.

“Now, we have a few housekeeping items to take care of before we can start the evening,” the woman, who I assumed was the DJ, said in her sultry timbre. “Here at Crimson Club, we appreciate and encourage audience participation, but we also respect boundaries.

“At your seats you’ll find two fans. You can use these to signal to the dancers what your comfort level is. If you’re interested in being brought on stage or having any sort of interaction with our dancers, flip open the green fan and put it in the holder so the boys can see it. If you’re not wanting that, flip open the black fan and display it instead. No fan means the same as a black one.

“The boys of Crimson Club love getting tips, and we have a few ways you can deliver them. You can toss it onto the stage while they’re dancing, or you can use that platform to the right of the stage to give the dancer a tip. And because we love rules here, if you choose to go on the platform, we ask that you stick to either handing the dancer the tip, placing it into their clothing, or you can put it in your clothing and they’ll fish it out.”

Several of the guests had already flipped open and displayed their green fans while the DJ was speaking.

“And the last little bit of housekeeping is the state has strict rules when it comes to clubs like ours. Touching is allowed only when the dancer gives you permission, and they will only touch you if you’ve given them consent. And lastly, all places covered by a swimsuit are off-limits, consent or no. Now, I invite you to get comfortable and enjoy the festivities. Let’s welcome our first dancer, Angel, to the stage.”

“Really? Angel?” I leaned a bit toward Vlado. “How uninspired can you get?”

“Don’t be such an elitist grump.” Emily sipped her champagne, careful not to disturb the plump strawberry sitting at the bottom of her flute. “It’s a stage name. It’s not supposed to be *inspired*.”

The red spotlights went out, plunging the stage into darkness. The crowd went silent as the music swelled, hit a crescendo, then faded into a pulsing beat.

Then came the familiar opening notes of “Toxic” by Britney Spears. Music filled the club. The guests screamed and cheered as a single spotlight revealed a blond man in the middle of the stage, his head down and posed. Thick smoke snaked around his ankles, and the stage lights flashed on and off in a pattern of colors that perfectly matched the song.

The man, Angel, looked up as Britney’s vocals kicked in. His eyes were big and bright and shone with playful innocence as he started his routine.

His movements were fluid and loose. Sensual, but also playful as he gyrated and rolled his hips in the dead-sexiest ways I’d ever seen.

With a slow grin, he yanked off his tank top and flung it into the crowd. I didn’t see where it landed or who got it because I couldn’t tear my eyes from his physique as he continued to dance.

His body was incredible. He wasn’t as big as most male strippers I’d seen, but he wasn’t small. He sat in that in-between stage where he had defined muscles and a tight core with the beginning of a six-pack. A classic twunk, rather than a twink.

He was mesmerizing as he moved about the stage like he’d been born to perform. His energy was infectious, and his facial expressions brought each move to the next level. He was an incredible dancer, but what really made him shine was how clearly he was enjoying himself.

The ladies whooped and hollered as he did some complicated moves followed by an impressive flip. My stomach and balls tightened as he worked the floor.

When he popped back up, he tore off his pants and tossed them aside, timing the move to the change in the song's tempo. The tiny green briefs barely covered his full ass and showed off his toned legs.

The crowd went apeshit. Several of the guests jumped out of their chairs and rushed to the stage to toss bills on it. Grinning at them, Angel sauntered over to the pole in the middle of the stage.

He moved in time to the music, rolling his hips and grinding against the pole. He leaned back, using the pole to stabilize himself, and ran his hand over his chest and abs as he mimicked fucking someone. The way he had his head thrown back and his eyes closed was as sexy as his dancing.

He worked the pole for another twenty seconds or so, whipping the crowd into a frenzy as he teased them. Then, he focused on the dais for the first time, his gaze flicking between me and Vlado. He tossed us a mischievous smirk and winked before turning his attention back to the throng of women currently making it rain on stage.

Emily had provided each of her guests with a stack of small bills to tip the dancers, and I'd brought along a float so people could exchange bigger bills as the night wore on and they worked their way through their stash.

During the short interlude about two thirds of the way into the song, Angel shoved away from the pole and jumped off the stage. His eyes on our table, he sauntered through the audience and right up to the small stage in front of us.

His smirk fell on Emily as he stepped onto the platform, but his gaze once again flickered to me, then Vlado, then me again. He held my eyes, then jumped onto the pole.

Lithely, and as if gravity weren't a thing, he scrambled up the pole to the top. Not missing a beat of the song, he flipped and spun around it, his legs and body a blur of movement as the pulsing lights in the club reflected off him.

He spent the next minute or so working the pole, his feet never touching the ground. He alternated between complex

moves that were pure art and bumping and grinding sinuously to the music.

As the song neared the end, Angel flipped so he was upside down, his extended legs gripping the pole, his arms out at his sides. This version had to be a remix, and rather than fade out, the famous string part overlaid the outro.

Without warning, Angel seemed to lose his grip. He slid down the pole, racing toward the stage floor head first. My breath tore from my lungs.

“No!”

“Oh my god!”

“Shit!”

Vlado sprang forward, as if to try to catch the dancer before he smashed into the hard floor.

The whole crowd drew in a sharp gasp but then, in a move that defied the laws of both physics and reason, Angel came to a sudden stop on the pole, his head only inches from the stage.

Time slowed. Vlado laughed and applauded enthusiastically as he settled back in his seat. The rest of the crowd seemed frozen, like me. We all gaped at Angel as he hung there while the last few notes of the song played.

The music shifted into an instrumental of a classic ballad I vaguely recognized. Angel put his hands on the floor and flipped off of the pole, a huge smile on his flushed face.

As Emily and Vlado clapped and cheered for him, the others in the club followed suit.

I sat there like a statue, my heart still pounding from that reckless move.

Angel jumped onto the platform and knelt in front of Emily. She giggled like a schoolgirl as he held out his hand for hers. He kept his smile playful as he kissed her hand, but the look he shot me was filled with heat and appreciation.

Em held out her hand in a “just a second” gesture and made grabby hands at me with the other.

Vlado already had a small stack of bills ready and passed them to me. I gave them to Emily.

Angel waited as she peeled off a few and motioned for him to stand. Still grinning, he moved closer so she could slip the bills into the top of his briefs.

Rather than watch my sister grope him, I dug my wallet out of my pocket and thumbed out a bill.

Angel glanced at my hand when Emily finished tipping him and shot me a teasing smirk.

I held the bill out to him. He moved to stand in front of me, but rather than slide the bill into his briefs, I pressed it against his hand.

Angel's smile faltered but was back so fast I wouldn't have noticed if I hadn't been so taken by his beauty.

His big blue eyes and mop of blond hair fit his moniker, but his smile was transformative. Vlado was the only person I knew whose smile completely changed their face. Angel's was big and bright and so stunning it was hard to look away.

Eventually, Angel broke our eye contact and turned back to the stage, where the line of women waiting for their turn on the platform grew and grew.

"Well, big brother, you still want to spend the night on your phone?" Emily said knowingly.

Ripping my eyes from Angel, I looked at my sister. "I suppose I can take a few hours off."

The server from before appeared, a fresh glass of champagne and a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries on his tray.

Only then realizing I hadn't touched my drink, I picked up my sweaty glass and sipped the cool liquid, barely tasting it as my mind spun.

Could Angel be the answer to my dilemma?

“Excuse me.”

I spun toward the soft voice. Angel stood a few feet away, his gaze fixed on me.

The party was over and most of the guests had already left. Vlado and I were near the bar and waiting on Emily to finish up whatever she and her party planner were discussing on the other side of the room.

“Yes?” I casually swept my gaze down his frame. He’d put on a pair of low-slung sweatpants and a sparkly crop top. Traces of whatever glitter he’d worn on stage shimmered on his cut stomach and slim hips.

Angel held out some bills. “You made a mistake.”

“Did I?” I asked, amused at his serious expression.

“Obviously.” He wiggled the bills at me. “No one tips this much.”

“I do.”

He shot me an exasperated look. “I’m sure the booze is making you think this is a good idea, but you’re gonna regret it when you sober up and I don’t want you coming after me to get your money back when you realize you were giving me C-notes like they grow on trees.”

“I’m not drunk, and I don’t take back tips. Ever.” I held up my hands in mock surrender.

Angel dropped his arm and looked at me suspiciously. “What’s your end game here, Mr. Fancy Shoes?”

“Fancy Shoes?” I choked out a surprised laugh.

“Yeah. I recognize those loafers. Tom Ford, right?” He shoved the bills into his pocket.

“Good eye.”

“But like I was saying,” he said, “what’s your end game? I talked to the other dancers and you weren’t slipping them hundos.”

“No end game. But...I do have a proposition for you.”

He glowered, crossing his arms. “No.”

“No? You haven’t even heard my offer.”

“Don’t have to hear it. I’m a dancer, not a hooker. If you think you can buy me, then you can fuck right off.”

“Who said anything about buying sex, or you?” I understood why he’d jump to that conclusion, but that wasn’t what this was about.

His glare softened as confusion crept into his features. “Huh?”

“Proposition was the wrong word. My apologies for how it sounded. I think it would be more accurate to say that I have a business proposal for you.”

Vlado held out one of my business cards.

Angel looked at my card, then at Vlado, then me. “Does your lackey talk, or just act like a human purse and hold all your shit for you?”

“I talk.” Vlado smiled in that soft way he usually reserved for kids or animals. “Just don’t have a lot to add to the conversation right now.”

“Other than being a human handbag?” Angel quipped, some of the suspicion leaving him. Some.

“Other than being a human handbag,” Vlado agreed.

Slowly, Angel took the card from him like he expected it to come alive and bite his hand. “A business proposal?”

“Yes,” I answered, dropping my arms. “An arrangement that will benefit both of us.”

Angel peered at the front of the card. “I think you’re barking up the wrong tree.” He flipped it over, gave the back a

cursory look. “What could I possibly offer a businessman who wears shoes that cost more than I make in a weekend?”

“I don’t want to go into too many details here.” I glanced around to make sure we were still away from prying ears.

Angel’s eyes narrowed into another glare.

“But I promise it’s nothing untoward or unlawful.”

“You use a lot of big words to say simple things.” Angel crossed his arms again, the card ending up tucked between his nice bicep and his pec, which was also very nice, even from beneath the glittering half-shirt he was wearing. “So this proposal isn’t about sex?”

I swallowed. “Not at all.”

He relaxed, marginally, at my assurance.

“I’d like to meet with you at my office to discuss things in detail. Are you free on Monday?”

“Monday?” His voice came out in an adorable squeak.

“Yes. I’ll be out of town for most of the week. Monday is my only free day.”

Angel’s eyes tracked my hand as I rolled down the sleeve of my dress shirt. “Um, I have to work on Monday.”

“When do you get off?”

“As often as my wrist will allow.”

Vlado burst out laughing and Angel slapped his hand over his mouth, his eyes wide with horror.

I chuckled at his reaction more than his statement and buttoned my cuff. He was witty. That would be a big plus.

“Oops. My filter seems to be taking a coffee break.” He cleared his throat. “I’m off work at six on Monday.”

“That’s fine. I’ll be at my office until late evening.”

Angel chewed on his lip, his façade dropping. Jesus he was young. Maybe younger than I thought. Was he even old enough to be working here?

“How old are you?”

“How old are *you*?” he shot back.

“You’re at least twenty-one, correct?” I pressed, fixing my other sleeve. Had I made a huge mistake? Even twenty-one was pushing it.

“I’m twenty-one.” When he paused, I knew to school my expression. “I’ll be twenty-two in October,” he added.

Eeshk. He *was* young.

“How about you think about my offer and contact me if you’re interested. The number on the back of my card is my personal cell. Text me tomorrow and we can work out a time to meet.”

“But you haven’t told me anything about the offer to consider. Just that it’s a business thing and it’s not about sex.”

“Like I said, I don’t want to go into too many details here, but this proposal comes with a job offer.”

“A job offer?”

“Yes. A three-month contract with a generous salary and the potential for a generous bonus.”

“Like how generous?” he asked, apprehension taking over his confusion.

“Let’s just say you’d be able to buy fifty pairs of my shoes and still have some left over.”

His jaw hinged and his big blue eyes doubled in size.

“Think about it and let me know if you’d like to meet Monday to discuss things more.”

Spinning on his heel, Angel sprinted away.

“I think you leaned a little too hard into mysterious and scared him away,” Vlado said dryly.

“Maybe. Hopefully he’s curious enough to text.”

“Hopefully.” Vlado’s tone told me he didn’t for one second think I’d ever hear from Angel again.

NICK

“COME ON, COME ON, COME ON,” I muttered, checking the time on my phone for the umpteenth time.

“I’m going as fast as I can,” my Uber driver said from the front seat, his tone cold.

“Sorry, that wasn’t directed at you,” I said quickly. “I’m late.”

He seemed to accept that and we fell back into silence.

Today had not been a good day. I’d spent most of last night obsessively reading everything I could about the handsome stranger who’d given me that damn card.

Evan Williams was the perfect man according to every source I found. He was thirty, single, and gay. And he was also rich as sin. He came from old money and owned a bunch of super successful companies.

His sister, the bride-to-be at the event last night, was a retired model. Their father owned some huge corporation, and their mother seemed to be a professional philanthropist and socialite.

Evan’s net worth was well into the millions, and his family’s net worth was in the hundreds of millions.

Hundreds. Of. Millions.

How in fuck would a guy like that have a job offer for someone like me? Unless he wanted pole-dance lessons, I

couldn't imagine a single thing I could do for him that wasn't sex related.

That question had kept me up most of the night. I'd barely slept, and I'd spent the day flitting about the apartment trying to keep my brain busy until work.

Since I'd been so distracted and tired all day, I'd forgotten to get a ride to work, even though I'd assured Aiden I was covered while he spent the night with his girlfriend.

Now I was late, again.

The car pulled up in front of the club. I thanked my driver and jumped out, nearly barreling into a dark figure on the walkway to the front entrance.

"Whoa," said the figure.

"Eeek!" I jumped away from him.

Shit. Was it one of the guys who'd beaten up Gray? Had they come back looking for more of us to hurt?

Strong hands grasped my shoulders, stopping my momentum as I stumbled over my feet and pitched backward.

Panic clawed at my chest. My vision went snowy.

"Nick! It's okay. It's me."

I blinked at the familiar voice and finally took a good look at the man. "Stone?"

"Are you okay?" He steadied me, concern written all over his handsome face.

"Yeah. I thought you were... Never mind." I shook my head rapidly.

He let go of one of my shoulders but steered me toward the door with the other, walking with me. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Just flustered." I shot him a look as he pushed the main doors open. "Wait a second. How are you late to your own event? You're never late."

He waved to Mitchell, who held the inner door open for us.
“Late?”

“Yeah...” I glanced around the club. I’d expected the event to be in full swing, but the patrons were quietly chilling at their tables and the stage was dark. Had I messed up the start time?

“We’re not late.” Squeezing my shoulder he brought me into the back room. “You’re good. No need to panic.”

The back room was bustling with people in various stages of getting ready, but Dash was the only one I recognized. Corey had said he was bringing in outside dancers for the event, but the twins were supposed to be here too. Where were they?

“You sure you’re okay?” Stone asked again.

“Yeah, thanks.” I smiled tightly.

He didn’t look convinced but gave his attention to a guy who’d called out to him.

I scampered over to the lockers and pulled out my phone to text the twins.

Nick: where r u?

River: c texted us an hour ago and told us not to show up

Nick: what??????

Zane: its because we helped gray

Nick: he said that?

Zane: didn’t have to

Nick: I hate him

River: we all do

Zane: you okay?

Zane: I don’t trust them. They’re up to something

Nick: yeah

Nick: just gotta get ready

Neither twin answered. I tucked my phone away, my head spinning.

Tonight was a pole showcase event. I knew the club was bringing in outside dancers because only Dash, the twins, and I did pole work, but cutting the twins off the roster was low, even for Corey.

Speaking of the roster, I went to the board to check when I was up. Dead last.

Fucking awesome.

This event was a feature night, which meant the rest of us dancers made way less than the headliner because the crowd wasn't there to see us. The final slot was a tip death sentence.

Sighing, I sank down on a nearby chair. At least I didn't have to rush.

“What's up?” Stone plopped down on the bench next to me.

“Nothing.” Wincing, I rubbed the back of my left knee. Two nights of pole routines was hard on the body, and the backs of my knees were raw.

“Are you sure?”

The event was almost over and I'd made a fraction of the tips I would have on a normal night. I'd also been cut from the final set so Stone could have an extra turn. I was salty at my bosses, but it wasn't Stone's fault.

“It's been a weird few days.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

I bit my lip. I needed to talk to someone about this thing with Evan and his “business proposal.” I would have talked Aiden and Gray's ears off by now, until I figured shit out, but didn't want to mess up Aiden's plans with Paige, and Gray was still recovering from his injuries. I couldn't bother him with this right now.

“I know we’re not close or anything, but I’ve known you for almost a year now,” Stone said softly. “You can talk to me if you need someone to listen.”

Guilt prickled at my chest. Stone had been nothing but friendly to me in all the times we’d worked together, but I’d been a total asshole to him.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He leaned back against the wall behind us.

“Why do you screw us over every week?”

“What?”

“You never show up for work and we always end up having to cover for you.”

He shot me a puzzled look. “I do show up for work...”

“You didn’t show up last week.”

“I wasn’t supposed to work last week.” His expression went shrewd. “You thought I was?”

“You’re supposed to work every week.”

He blinked at me.

“Aren’t you?” I said.

“No. I only work events.”

It was my turn to give him a puzzled look.

“I’m a headliner,” Stone said. “I don’t work for the club.”

I shook my head. “But Corey and Ray...”

“What about them?” He straightened up from the wall, his height looming as his shoulders went square. “Did they make it seem like something else was going on?”

Did they ever. “They put you on the roster every weekend,” I told him. “Then they make a big deal when you don’t show up and we have to scramble to fill the slots with extra sets.”

His lips folded into a tight line, his eyes narrowing. Hands pressed to the tops of his thighs.

“That’s not true?” I asked.

“No. I’ve never worked for the club. They bring me in to capitalize off my following, and I get compensated for that. Why do you think I’ve been subsidizing your tips on event nights?”

He’d been *what*? “We’ve never seen an extra dime,” I said.

His eyes went dark with what looked like anger. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. The last event we worked together I made less than two hundred bucks for five routines. I make way more than that on a regular night.”

“That’s... I give a cut of my tips to the house to offset that.”

“We’ve never seen that money.”

“Holy shit.” He raked a hand through his hair. “*That’s* why everyone is always so cold to me. Why no one seems to like me. I thought it was because I do porn.”

“Dude, we’re strippers. You really think any of us is gonna give a crap that you fuck on camera? Hell, I looked into it, and I know I’m not the only one who has.”

“I can’t believe they’d do that.” He paused. “Scratch that, I *can* believe it, but I had no idea any of this was happening.”

“Did you hear about what happened to Gray? And what they’ve been doing to our tips?”

“No.”

“Gray got beat up last week. A bunch of drunk alpha wannabes showed up and one of them started abusing his girl and Gray tried to stop him. He and his buddy beat him so bad he had to go to the ER and he can’t work for weeks.”

Stone’s eyes were so wide it would have been funny if we weren’t talking about something so serious.

“Then, after the twins took him to the hospital, we found out Corey’s been skimming our tips.”

He looked at me like, *What?*

“Yeah,” I said. “There was a whole scene and a huge blowout, but he’s been doing it for months when he collects the tips that end up on the stage.”

“Jesus. That’s...”

“He cut the twins from tonight’s roster too,” I blurted. Now that I’d started talking, I couldn’t seem to shut up. “Texted them an hour before I got here and said not to come in. They think it’s because they told him to fuck off and took Gray to the ER after Corey told them to finish their shift.”

“After hearing that, I honestly wouldn’t be surprised. I’ve always gotten a bad vibe off them.”

“Me too!”

He patted my knee. “No wonder you’re distracted tonight.”

“Oh, that’s not what’s distracting me.”

“No?”

I clamped my mouth shut. Should I tell him?

Stone was older than me, and I supposed he had a lot of experience dealing with businesspeople. Maybe he could help.

“We had a private event last night,” I started.

He nodded encouragingly.

“A bachelorette party. They were great. Super respectful and tipped well. But the brother of the bride...”

“Was he inappropriate toward you?”

“I don’t think so. He overtipped.”

Stone tilted his head but didn’t say anything.

“And when I went to him after the event to tell him he was a moron for handing me hundred-dollar bills like they were BOGO coupons and to give them back, he gave me his business card and said he has a job offer for me.”

“What’s the job?”

“He didn’t say. Just said to text him to set up a meeting at his office tomorrow to talk about it.”

“He didn’t give you any info?”

“None. But he said it wasn’t a sex thing.”

Stone pursed his lips.

“Yeah, I don’t believe it either. He said it paid really well and came with a huge bonus. That’s it.”

“Do you know anything about him?”

“I looked him up. He’s legit rich. Like one percent rich.”

“Can you tell me his name?” He dug his phone out of the sweats he’d thrown on.

“Evan Williams.”

Stone tapped on his screen a few times. “This guy?”

I looked at the photo. “Yup. Do you know him?”

“No, but I’ve heard of his family. They have a foundation and donate huge sums to a ton of charities. I’ve been to a few of their benefits.”

“Do you think he’s trying to buy me? Like, he said no sex, but what else could he want with me?”

“I don’t know but I doubt he’d give you his personal info if he was trying to proposition you.” Stone tucked his phone away. “He could get in a lot of trouble for that. Both with the law and in the corporate world.”

“I thought hookers and mistresses were normal for rich dudes?”

“They are, but...”

“Not when the hooker is another guy.”

He sighed. “Homophobia runs deep with some people. That world is old-school in a lot of their thinking.”

“Biphobia,” I corrected automatically. “Or I guess this would be homophobia because I’m a guy and he’s a guy so everyone would assume I’m gay too.”

“Most likely. A lot of people seem to forget about the B in LGBT.”

“Ugh. Why did he have to go all cloak and dagger on me? I want to tell him to go fuck himself with a cactus, but what if it’s legit? It’s not like I’m rolling in cash. I’d be stupid to turn down easy money. But what if it’s not easy money and it’s me who’s supposed to be easy? I don’t have a problem with sex workers,” I added quickly, “but if I was going to sleep with someone for cash, it would be someone *I* chose. Not some random with the audacity to assume he could buy my ass because he watched me spin around a pole.”

“It is rather presumptuous if that’s what he’s after,” Stone agreed.

“Has anything like this happened to you?” I asked.

“Constantly. This kind of thing is common for porn models.”

“Have you ever done it?”

He shook his head. “I made a rule for myself when I first started in the industry to not have sex for money outside of filming content. I have nothing against escorts, my stepbrother is one.”

It was my turn to gape at him. “He is?”

“Yup. But that’s not something I’m personally interested in. Sex on cam is work, and if I’m going to be with someone outside of my job, then I want it to be with someone who wants me, *Quinn*, not Stone.”

“Quinn?” I blinked stupidly.

“My name is Quinn. Stone is my stage name.” He bumped my shoulder with his.

“You look like a Quinn, way more than Stone.” I sat with that for a moment. “Thanks for trusting me with your real name. I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

“Sore?” He nodded to where I was still trying to work out the knot behind my knee with my fingers.

“Two nights of pole work catches up to you.”

Leaning back against the wall, he patted his thigh. “Want help working your muscles out?”

“So much yes.” I spun on the bench and stretched my legs over his lap, bracing my hands behind me. “Thanks.”

“No problem.” He ran his palm down the back of one of my calves, pushing just hard enough the muscle lengthened and stretched.

“So what do you do when you do get those kinds of offers?” I asked, circling back to my rich-dude problem.

“Most of my inquiries come from social media so they’re easier to deal with. If they’re rude, I ignore them. If they’re respectful, I politely decline. If they persist, I block them. When it’s a more personal approach, I explain my position and refuse to engage with them again if they don’t drop it.”

“So I should ignore him?”

“I think you should do what your gut is telling you to do. If you’re getting bad vibes, trust it. If you think you want to learn more, then do it, but make sure you put your safety first.”

“Gray says that to me all the time. Trust your gut. But my gut also told me that getting a perm last summer was a good idea, so what does that bitch know?”

Stone threw back his head and laughed.

“I think my FOMO will beat my brain up for the rest of my life if I don’t at least see what he wants.” I sighed as Stone—Quinn—used his thumbs to knead my calf. “Oh Mylanta you’re good at that.”

“You learn a few tricks when you’ve been around as long as I have.”

“Dude, you’re what? Twenty-five?”

“Twenty-seven.” He moved to my other leg. “But I’ve been dancing since I was a kid.”

“You have?”

I knew next to nothing about him, other than he was super popular in porn, had an OnlyFans, and stripped as a side hustle.

He nodded. “I was a theater nerd with ADHD. I did all sorts of lessons when I was younger. Dance, gymnastics, singing, acting.”

“A theater nerd?” I perked up.

“Yup. Even went to a performing arts high school. Were you into theater?”

“Oh yeah.” I nodded enthusiastically. “My parents couldn’t afford a lot of extras, but they managed to keep me in dance lessons until I was fifteen. I was a total theater nerd in high school.”

He gently cupped my foot. “Want me to rub your feet for you?”

“Oh my god yes. But fair warning, I’ll probably fall in love with you if you do a good job.”

He chuckled and squeezed my arch. “I’ll risk it.”

I bit back a moan. “Your hands are magic. I’m going to need you to clone yourself so I can get this after every shift.”

“What are you gonna do about that job offer?”

“Ugh, I don’t know. I think I need to hear him out, but I’ve watched way too many true-crime stories on TikTok that start out exactly like this and end up with the pretty stripper buried in a field under some endangered plants and a coyote corpse.”

“That’s...an oddly specific scenario.”

“You’d be surprised how many people think cops can’t dig up endangered plants if they’re looking for a body. Spoiler alert, they can. And they probably will if there’s some random endangered plant not native to the area over a fresh grave. That’s why you put an animal corpse in a shallow grave and bury the body in a deep one. They’ll stop when they find the coyote and move on.”

“Should I be worried about how much thought you’ve put into this?” He cocked his eyebrow at me, a smile on his handsome face.

“Bitch, please, I routinely plot the deaths and disposal of people who piss me off. I’m never gonna do it, but it’s fun to fantasize.”

“You’re kind of scary for someone who looks like a cherub.”

I batted my eyelashes and put on my best innocent look. “I have no idea what you mean, sir.”

“It’s always the sweet ones you need to worry about. And the quiet ones.”

“That’s definitely not me.” I snort-laughed. “I’m physically incapable of being quiet. Want to see me lose my shit? Tell me to calm down or be quiet. If you’re gonna steal my sparkle, I’m gonna *unleash* on you for ruining my entire week.”

“Understandable.” He flexed my toes, then stretched them back. “Do you have someone to go to the meeting with you tomorrow?”

“Um...not really. Usually I’d ask my roomie or Gray, but Aiden’s working tomorrow and Gray’s hurt.” I chewed the corner of my lip. “I could ask the twins, but Zane’s in overprotective mode and I’m pretty sure he’d beat Richie Rich’s ass if he offered me cash for sex.”

“When are you thinking of going?”

“I’m working until six, so it’ll be late.”

“I can drive you, if you want. And go in with you. I’ve dealt with men like him before. I’m also used to reading contracts.”

“Really?”

He nodded.

“That would be amazing. Thank you.”

He gave my feet a final squeeze then let go. “What’s your number?” He fished his phone out of his pocket.

I rattled it off.

“I sent you a text. Just let me know when and where you want me to pick you up. I’m free all evening. Do you have a ride home tonight?”

“Does Uber count?”

“Not at one in the morning.” He ruffled my hair.

I swung my legs off his lap and punched him in the shoulder. “Christ on a cracker, you’re solid.” I shook out my hand. “Warn a guy next time.”

“My bad.” He grinned. “Want a ride home?”

“Are you sure? You don’t even know where I live. What if it’s way out of your way?”

“I’m a big boy. I can drive extra miles to make sure you get home safe.”

“Stone!”

We both twisted to see Corey, who stood near the door to the back room, a big, fake smile on his stupid face.

“Yes?” Stone’s tone and demeanor became ice in an instant.

Corey’s gaze cut to me, then back to Stone. “Your last set starts in sixty seconds.”

Stone stood and turned his back on Corey. Corey shot me a glare and stomped out of the room.

Stone shucked off his sweats, revealing a pair of tiny red briefs.

I couldn’t *not* trail my gaze down his incredible body. All the guys I worked with were ridiculously fit, and Stone was no exception. Unlike Gray and the twins, Stone’s body was clearly the result of lots of gym time rather than working physical jobs, and the perfection of his sculpted physique was glorious to behold.

I wasn't ashamed to say I'd watched his porn. He knew how to use that body in every way that mattered.

I lifted my gaze to his face, to find him grinning at me.

"Like what you see?" he asked, a teasing lilt in his voice.

"Duh, dude. Have you seen you?"

With a wink he headed toward the prop closet to get the rest of his costume on before his set.

Usually the final number of the night was a group routine, but since Stone was the headliner, he got that honor all to himself, which would've had me sitting in the corner sulking and being mad at him. Except now that I knew the truth I felt guilty as fuck for being such a dickbag to him.

I'd never actually watched Stone dance unless I was on stage behind him playing backup. Even then, I'd been so focused on my choreography and not screwing up or smashing into anyone, I hadn't paid him much attention.

Curious, I hurried over to my locker and pulled on my clothes. No one noticed as I slipped out of the back room and made my way to the bar, sticking to the walls and shadows to keep out of sight.

"And now, to close out our night," JJ said over the loudspeaker. "Let's welcome Stone back to the stage."

The crowd screamed with the excitement of someone getting a free car from Oprah as the stage lights dimmed. A spotlight flashed on, revealing Stone as he stood in the center of the stage. The opening bars of "High for This" by The Weeknd filled the air. Red lights illuminated the background of the stage, growing with intensity and dimming in swells that matched the sensual flow of the song.

Stone had put on a dress shirt, a tie, and a pair of slacks, pulling off the sexy CEO look with flawless perfection. Confidently, he sauntered to the pole, his strides long and fluid.

Leaning against it, he mindlessly tugged off his tie. The beat kicked in as he tossed the tie aside. He spent the next

minute working off his shirt as he rolled his hips in time to the music. He kept his expression bored and his movements casual, like he was alone in his room after work and getting ready for some sexy times before bed.

The voyeuristic approach was a hit, and the crowd was hollering. One lady a few feet away kept yelling “I love you!” over and over. Another screeched about wanting to have his babies.

As soon as the flow of the song changed, Stone flung his shirt off and gripped the pole, hooked his knee around it, then slowly spun in a circle, still acting as casual as could be as the crowd went bananas.

He touched his feet back to the floor and rolled his body in a wave as he leaned back, grinding on the pole and working it with the same skill he used on camera.

My dick stirred with interest as he continued to tease the audience with the pole and on the floor. Holy hell he was incredible. No wonder people flocked to see him every month.

Just before the three-quarter mark of the song, when the music intensified and the tempo changed into a slightly faster but even more sensual tune, Stone tore off the dress pants and leapt at the pole.

Christ Almighty.

My jaw dropped as he spun and flipped around it. Not only was he impressively flexible, his technique was flawless. He was hands-down the best pole dancer I’d ever seen, and he deserved every single bill that rained down on the stage as he pulled off one seemingly impossible move after another.

When the song finally ended, Stone slid down the pole like a fantasy fireman heading off to put out a fire with his dick, but instead of going to the platform to get his tips, he strode to the edge of the stage and sank down onto his knees, his legs spread wide and his fingers laced behind his head.

Women rushed the stage. A line formed in front of him, hiding whatever was going on.

I lifted on tiptoe to see through the crowd. When that didn't work I jumped, trying to get high enough to see over them.

Finally, on my fourth leap, the throng parted enough I got a clear view. Stone was in the same pose, smirk-smiling as women stuffed bills into his briefs until they bulged with more than just his dick.

Something was off, though. He seemed to be enjoying the attention, but I knew that blank stare. He was disassociating hard.

Keeping to the shadows, I slipped into the back room to wait for the event to shut down and the club to empty.

It had been a weird-ass night, but in a good way. I had a solid plan for tomorrow, and I'd gotten to know Stone after all this time.

I just had to get through tomorrow. One more day and then I'd find out what Mr. Fancy Shoes wanted from me so my brain could finally stop obsessing over him and his mysterious offer.

EVAN

LEANING BACK IN MY CHAIR, I watched the security cam feed on my computer screen.

Angel had texted me this morning and agreed to meet me at my temporary office. My security had let him in and called up that he was on his way. I'd been tracking him since he'd come through the main doors.

"Who's that with him?" I asked Vlado, hating the curl of jealousy that snaked through me. "Did you find anything about a boyfriend while you were vetting him?"

"Nothing." He peered at the screen. "But he looks familiar. I think I've seen him before."

"At the club?"

"No, don't think so."

I'd had Vlado research Angel, going a few steps deeper than a mere background check to make sure he was an appropriate choice and wouldn't be a security risk. The last thing I needed was any threat to my, or my team's, safety. Any *further* threat.

I hadn't read the file on Angel, but perhaps I should have. I tended to put my trust in numbers and math, *data*, and *trends*, over gut feelings. But there was something about Angel... something that had made me certain he was the right person for this assignment. That compelled me to tip him the way that I did...

Same as something had compelled *him* to approach me after he was done on the stage. Which was probably the load of cash.

“Then where?” I asked, reining in my focus. “Who is he?”

“I’m not sure.” Vlado leaned closer. “But I’ve definitely seen him somewhere.”

“We should have anticipated he’d bring a guest. With everything that’s been—”

“I know,” Vlado said.

“Find out everything about his guest while I speak to him.”

Vlado shot me some side-eye, then clicked a few keys on the keyboard to freeze-frame a clear shot of Angel’s companion as they stood in the private elevator that would bring them to the penthouse.

The man was devastatingly handsome, probably a few years younger than me, and obviously had a close relationship with Angel considering Angel was currently leaning against him, his cheek pressed into the man’s shoulder.

“Make sure his *friend* waits outside,” I said as Vlado headed toward the door to the office.

He threw me a look over his shoulder. “Want me to tell him you called dibs too?”

“You’re not nearly as humorous as you think you are.”

“And you’re entirely transparent.” He grinned and pulled the door open. “Try to rein in the claws until we know who we’re dealing with.”

I turned my attention back to the screen as Vlado left the room. Angel and his companion were in the hallway, and the security cams automatically followed them as they made their way toward us.

Tapping a key, I turned the audio feed on as Vlado met them in the small waiting room outside my office door.

“Hey, human handbag. How’s it hanging?” Angel greeted him with a big smile.

Vlado laughed. “Can’t complain.”

“Oh, don’t say that. You can always complain.” Angel looked around. “So, where’s your bossman?”

“He’s in his office.” Vlado turned to the other man. “And you are?”

“Quinn Reynolds.” He stuck out his hand.

Vlado shook it. “Can I ask why you’re here?”

“Cause I’m not about to show up at a rented office to meet some mysterious and possibly sketchy dude alone.” Angel pressed his hands to his hips. “I’ve seen this movie, the pretty one dies first.”

“I promise no one is dying,” Vlado said.

“Yeah, that’s totally something you’d say before killing someone.” Angel peered around him, his gaze landing on the closed door that separated us.

“Your friend is going to have to wait here.” Vlado ticked his chin at Quinn.

Angel sidled next to Quinn and gripped his wrist.

“I understand your boss wants privacy,” Quinn said, “but you can’t expect us to just take your word for it that he’ll be safe.”

Picking my cell phone off the desk, I called Vlado.

“*Yeah?*”

“Let him watch the feed with no audio.”

“*You got it.*”

Vlado hung up. “Boss said you can watch the video feed in his office, but no audio.”

Angel and Quinn exchanged a look. Angel nodded, and Quinn spoke. “Deal.”

Vlado motioned to the desk near the door. “The monitor’s there.”

Quinn and Vlado strode toward it and Vlado turned it on, connected to the feed in my office, and locked it so Quinn wouldn't be able to snoop around the system.

“Don't push any buttons or the system will lock you out and you won't be able to see anything.”

“And what if I see something concerning? Am I going to get shot if I bust in there?”

Vlado lifted the side of his dress shirt to show his gun holster. “I don't use this unless I have to. No one is getting shot as long as you don't try something stupid.”

“Good to know.” Quinn waved to Angel, who scurried over to him. “You still okay to do this? We can turn around and leave right now.”

“I'm fine.” Angel looked between Vlado and the door to the office. “I'm not about to die, am I?”

“No.” Vlado's voice was soft, his demeanor relaxed. “All the security is for him, not because of you. I promise I don't want to hurt anyone, especially not you or your friend.”

I held my breath for a beat. Would Angel correct him and say Quinn was his boyfriend?

“Okay.” Angel nodded. “I don't know why I believe you, but I do. Don't make me regret this.” He stood akimbo again and glared at Vlado. “I swear I'll come back as a ghost and haunt your ass until the end of time if you kill me. I'll make sure you never get laid again.”

Quinn chuckled as Vlado covered a laugh with a cough. “Noted.”

“Can I go in, or do I need to know a secret knock or something?” Angel asked.

“You can go in.”

I shut the audio down but kept the video feed of the waiting room on my screen.

A moment later, Angel pushed the door open and entered.

“Holy shitballs.” He slapped his hand over his mouth, his eyes wide. “I mean, hello. How are you?”

I stood from my chair and welcomed him in. “I’m well, thank you. How are you?”

“Currently impersonating a duck.” He crept toward the desk.

“A duck?”

“You know, all calm and chill over the water but their feet are going like crazy underneath. That’s me. Only the feet are my brain.

“That’s an interesting analogy.”

“This is an interesting office.” He looked around. “Nothing creepy about a giant room with nothing in it but a huge desk and guy in a seven-thousand-dollar suit.”

“How did you know how much my suit cost?”

“It’s Brunello Cucinelli, isn’t it?”

“You have a good eye for designers.”

“It’s my superpower. Too bad I have champagne taste and a mocktail budget.”

Smiling despite myself, I waved to the chair across from me. “Have a seat.”

“Sorry, I don’t have business discussions with people who don’t introduce themselves first.”

“My apologies.” I extended my hand. “Evan Williams.”

He took another step closer and shook it. His skin was warm and soft, but damp, betraying his nerves.

“And you are?” I asked.

“Like you don’t know.” He snort-laughed and flopped down on the chair with a theatrical flounce.

“Actually, no. I don’t know.” I sat as well.

“You expect me to believe you’re going to offer me oodles of money for a job, yet you didn’t look me up? That seems

like a dumb move for someone who has armed security and a guy outside the door who's packing."

"You think I'm dumb?"

"Not sure yet. Maybe."

"Would your opinion of me change if I told you I did have Vlado look you up, but he didn't share the information with me?"

"Vlado is the hottie with the tats and the smile?"

"Yes. He's also the head of my security and my private bodyguard."

"Huh." He drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair. "Jury's still out on whether you're dumb, but the odds are in your favor."

"Good to know." I gave him a pointed look. "And your name?"

"Nick Sorensen." He chewed his lip. "So what's this job?"

My phone rang.

"Excuse me." I answered Vlado's call. "Yes?"

"The other guy came back clean, but I figured out where I know him from."

"Where?"

"Let's just say he's been in some videos I've watched late at night when I'm relieving tension." I could hear my friend's smirk.

"Are you saying what I think you are?"

"If you think I'm saying he's a pornstar, then yes."

"Thank you for the information." I hung up.

"What was that about?"

"Your friend..." I started. "He's made an interesting career choice."

Nick's eyes narrowed. "Really? You're going to talk shit about Quinn being in porn when you literally picked up a

stripper at a private event at a strip club? Hypocrite much?"

"No judgment." I raised my hands in surrender. "It's just not every day I have a pornstar in my office."

"Why am I here?" he asked. "Do you have any idea how confused I've been? You show up at my club and toss cash at me like I'm a debt collector. Then you offer me a job with zero info and have me meet you at a deserted building in an office that has nothing in it. This is sketchy as fuck."

"I realize my methods may have been a bit underhanded. I apologize if I caused you any distress."

"Distress? I've been going crazy for days! Why did you tip me so much?"

"Because you're incredibly talented."

"Yeah, I am. But so are the rest of the guys I work with. You weren't handing them C-notes."

"I suppose I was trying to get your attention."

"And what if I hadn't come up to you afterward? The only reason I did was because I thought you fucked up and you'd come after me to get your money back when you realized how much you gave me."

"People do that?" I asked incredulously.

"You'd be surprised how entitled people can be when it comes to sex workers. I've literally had people make change from the bills in my briefs while they tip me, and one lady cornered me when I was doing my rounds and demanded I give her back what she'd tipped me the week before." Crossing his arms, he gave me a shrewd look. "You didn't get a private dance or anything. Didn't even stick the bills in my undies. You just handed me the cash. Why?"

"Why didn't I get a lap dance or grope you?"

"Yeah."

"Because this isn't about sex. Getting a dance or touching you in a sexual way would create a power imbalance. I wanted to start things on neutral terms."

He blinked, confusion clouding his features.

“I asked you here because I have a job offer for you,” I told him, plainly.

“Yeah, you said that.” He sat up straighter. “But what is it?”

“I need someone to pose as my partner.”

“Partner? Like romantic partner?”

“Yes. My boyfriend to be exact.”

“Why would someone like you need to pay someone to pretend to be your boyfriend?”

“Someone like me?” I asked, not bothering to hide my grin at his exasperated expression.

He rolled his eyes and heaved a huge sigh. “Really? You’re fishing for compliments? Fine. You’re hot and rich. If you can’t find someone then there’s no hope for the rest of us.”

“I can find a man. In fact, I find plenty of them.”

Nick smirked. “I bet you do. So why do you need to hire someone?”

“Because this *relationship* is for a specific purpose, and I need full discretion.”

His glare was back. “Cut the dramatics and fancy words and just tell me what the heck you want.”

“I need someone I can bring to events and introduce as my boyfriend. My father is retiring soon, and he’s put a caveat on my inheritance of his company.”

“What kind of caveat?”

“He’s old-school and believes the only way someone can be successful in life is if they’re successful at home. To him, that means a family.”

Nick’s eyes bugged out. “A family?” he yelped.

“Yes. But that’s not what I need from you. I’ve been pretending to have a boyfriend for the past several months to appease him, but in order for the ruse to work, I need to

produce this boyfriend and fool my colleagues and family into believing we're madly in love. Toward the end of the contract, I'll announce our engagement, and that should satisfy my father's micromanaging until I get my inheritance."

"And once you get it?"

"We'll have a very public breakup. Once the papers are signed, we'll have a very public breakup. I'll get to keep my inheritance, and no one will bother me about settling down while I'm nursing a broken heart."

"That's..." He blinked rapidly. "Rich people have weird problems. How long is this job for?"

"Three months."

He gave a slow nod. "So how does this work?"

"You just play the part of my boyfriend. I'll provide you with everything you need, including a driver and an appropriate wardrobe."

"Wardrobe?" He perked up. "Okay, what else? It can't be that simple."

"Most of the events will take place in Seattle, and a few will be out of town. You'll need to travel with me and spend a portion of the time living in my house."

"In your *house*?" he squeaked.

"It would be for optics and convenience. You'll have your own space and be on your own schedule."

"I can't just pick up and put my life on hold for three months. I have a job. Hopefully two jobs. And what about my roommate? I have bills and—"

"All that will be taken care of. As part of our deal, I'll prepay six months of your expenses now, and another six months when the job is complete."

"*All* my bills?"

"Yes. All of them, including your full rent for both you and your roommate."

“But what about my jobs?”

“I’ll be paying you more than enough. You won’t need to work for a long time,” I assured him.

He rolled his eyes. “Typical rich-guy answer. Money aside, I can’t leave my bosses hanging. I’ve been at the café for five years. I like it there. What’s my manager gonna do if I take three months off? She can’t just hire a temp. And what about the club? I like working there. It’s my happy place. You might have money coming out of your asshole, but I don’t. I need to think long term because whatever you’re going to pay me won’t last forever.”

“You won’t have to quit,” I said, impressed with his work ethic and strategic way of thinking. “I’ll work around your schedule the best that I can, but you’ll have to make an effort to work with mine.”

He resumed gnawing at the corner of his mouth, thinking. “Okay. What else?”

“What do you mean, what else?”

“I mean, what else do you expect of me? To look pretty and bat my eyelashes at you in public?”

“Essentially.”

“And in private?”

“I have no expectations for when we’re not in public.”

“Really?” He pulled a face. “How much is the pay?”

“One thousand dollars a day, another five hundred per event you attend, and a fifty-thousand-dollar bonus if we’re successful.”

He gaped at me. “You’re insane.”

“I’m sorry?”

“You’re gonna pay me over a hundred and fifty grand to be your boyfriend?”

“Yes.”

“How many events are we talking?”

“A minimum of two per week, but no more than four.”

“That’s...” He looked at the ceiling, calculating. “That’s an extra ten grand, minimum.”

I refrained from correcting his math. “What do you say?”

“I say I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t believe me,” I echoed.

“Why would you pay me that much money to be arm candy? There has to be more to it.”

“There does?”

“Obviously.”

“I already told you sex isn’t part of this.”

“You say that, but we both know that’s just to cover your ass.”

“When I make a promise, I mean it. I’m hiring you as a service provider to play a part. I have never, and will never, pay for sex.” I met his gaze and held it.

He swallowed hard, his blue eyes rounding out. “This... Is. A lot.”

“I understand. I don’t expect an answer now. I have a contract for you to look over that has all the details laid out so you can make an informed decision.” I pulled a packet of papers out of my desk drawer and handed it to him.

He scanned the first page. “I don’t speak legalese. Can I show it to Quinn? He understands this kind of stuff.”

“You can have him look over it, but you’ll both need to sign NDAs first.”

“Why?”

“Because of how sensitive this information is. Again, I need full discretion.”

“You’ll have to talk to Quinn. I can’t make that decision for him. But I’ll sign if he does.”

Picking up my phone, I called Vlado.

“Yeah?”

“Can you send our other guest in?”

“*You got it.*”

A moment later the door opened and Quinn came in.

“Everything okay?” he asked Nick.

“Yeah. I think?” He waved the contract as Quinn approached. “I need help with this, but we both have to sign NDAs.”

Quinn put his hand on Nick’s shoulder and squeezed. My stomach soured at the casual, easy show of affection.

“What exactly is going on?” Quinn asked me.

“I offered Nick a job posing as my boyfriend.” I was taking a risk by revealing so much, but it was a calculated one. Quinn was the gatekeeper here, I needed to earn his trust. “That’s the contract. It details what I expect, and what he can expect.”

“And the NDA?”

“To protect everyone involved.”

“And you want me to sign one before I read the contract?”

I nodded.

He peered down at Nick. “What do you want to do?”

“I think I want to sign it.”

“Then I’ll sign too. But”—he pinned me with a hard look—“signing the NDA and reading the contract is not an acceptance. He’s allowed to say no if there’s anything in there he doesn’t agree with.”

“Of course.”

“You sure about this?” he asked Nick.

“Yes.”

“Okay. Let’s do this. Where do we sign?”

NICK

“YOU GOT A DELIVERY.”

“Eek!” I jumped and nearly tripped at Aiden’s voice. “Dude!” I whirled toward the living room where he sat on the couch, a big grin on his face. “You’re never going to get tired of jump-scaring me, are you?”

“Never.” He waved to a large black box, and a smaller shoebox-sized one, on the kitchen table. “Those came for you.”

“I thought you were working tonight?”

“Me too, but Gretchen asked to switch shifts.” He kicked his feet up on the coffee table. “I’m working tomorrow instead.”

“Oh. Okay.” I crept toward the boxes.

“What did you buy this time?” he asked.

“More crap I can’t afford,” I said evasively. I hadn’t ordered anything, but *was* expecting something from Evan.

“Want to hang out for a bit?” he asked. “Paige is coming over later, but I’m bored. Entertain me.”

“That’s my line,” I said distractedly. “I’m the attention whore in this relationship. You’re supposed to keep *me* entertained.”

“I could always have a go at using that thing.” He juttied his chin at the pole we’d installed in the corner of the cramped living room.

“Last time you did that you almost broke your face and put an Aiden-sized hole in our wall.”

“But you were entertained, were you not?”

“That I was.” I carefully stacked the boxes in my arms.

“You’re being weirder than usual.” Aiden tossed a glance my way and pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I’m ordering Thai food. Want anything?”

“Can’t. I’m going out in a bit.”

“I thought the club was closed this weekend?”

“It is. But I’ve got plans.”

“Tinder hookup?”

“Not tonight. Just going to a party.”

“You’re being cagey. Why?” He turned his full attention on me. “Your default setting is oversharing. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I lied. “Just had a long week.”

He made a sympathetic face. “You definitely did.”

“I’ve got to go get ready. Do you need the bathroom?”

“Nope.” He looked back down at his phone.

Feeling like a giant bag of dicks, I carried the boxes into my room and put them on my bed. I hated lying to Aiden, but I couldn’t tell him anything without breaking the terms of the NDA.

Quinn had spent hours going over the contract with me, explaining every single clause and term in a way I could understand. Evan had been telling the truth. Nothing in the contract mentioned any sort of sexual contact outside of reasonable PDA while in public.

An hour after I signed the contract agreeing to Evan’s terms, he sent me a list of events for the month and asked me to confirm which ones I could attend.

The annoying thing about his schedule was that he didn’t give any details beyond the date, time, and dress code. That was it. I had no clue what the fuck I was walking into tonight,

just that it was black tie and I had forty minutes until I was getting picked up. Bastard didn't even bother to let me know if I should eat ahead of time or not.

He also wanted my measurements and shoe size, and a list of any medical conditions I might have, including allergies and dietary restrictions. And he requested copies of my bills so he could prepay them. I still hadn't figured out how to tell Aiden that we weren't going to have to pay rent for six months. Luckily I had a few weeks until it was due to come up with some kind of believable explanation.

Even though I was ravenously curious about what Evan had sent me to wear tonight, I left the boxes on my bed and went into the tiny bathroom to take a shower and get ready.

The last week had been a whirlwind, and not the good kind. On Monday morning everyone who worked at the club got a text saying we were all fired and they were closing Crimson down for good. I spent most of the day texting with the twins and Kai trying to figure out what the hell was happening. I also texted Gray, even though I wasn't supposed to upset him because he had a concussion and getting him upset was bad for his brain.

Two days later we all got a text from Biggs calling a staff meeting. Yesterday we found out that Biggs and his wife bought Crimson and were overhauling the entire club and business model to try to undo all the illegal shit Corey and Ray had done.

The bad thing for the other guys was that the club would be closed for three weeks, which meant no money. But it worked out well for me because that gave me three free weekends where I didn't have to juggle events and work.

Shaking off my reverie, I climbed into the shower and focused on getting ready. The hot water in our building didn't last long, so dillydallying wasn't an option unless I wanted to get blasted with cold water before I was done rinsing.

Once I was out of the shower, I did my skin and haircare routines, then wrapped a towel around my waist and padded into my room.

The boxes sat on my bed like that beating heart from that poem I'd had to read in high school. The boxes themselves were fancier than anything in our apartment with their silky finish, gold edging, and black satin ribbons tied in elaborate bows. Anyone who knew anything about high-end fashion would recognize that these came from a place where they didn't bother putting price tags on the items. If you had to ask, you couldn't afford it.

Carefully, I slipped the ribbon off the bigger box without messing up the bow and pulled off the top, revealing matte black tissue paper held together by a gold sticker with Stefano Ricci stamped on it.

Holy shitake mushrooms.

I'd assumed Evan would send me a suit, but from Stefano Ricci? One suit from their new collection was worth more than my entire wardrobe.

Not wanting to destroy the tissue paper, I gingerly peeled the sticker off and moved the flaps aside.

Inside sat a single-breasted, slim-fit black suit, a white dress shirt, an ice-blue tie with tiny flecks of silver that sparkled in the light, a package of black socks, and another of black boxer briefs. He'd also included a pair of shiny black dress shoes and an elegant gold watch that cost more than I'd made in a year of dancing at Crimson.

He really had thought of everything.

Once I was dressed, I checked myself out in the full-length mirror on the back of my door.

"Damn," I breathed. I loved the clothes, but the clothes *really* loved me. The suit was perfectly tailored to my frame, and the silky shirt didn't have a single wrinkle or fold in it considering it had been in that box for at least a few hours. The shoes were butter soft and felt like little clouds on my feet. Even the underwear were more luxurious than anything I had in my closet or drawers.

Checking the time on my phone, I quickly slipped my wallet and keys into the pockets and cracked my door open.

“Aiden?” I called.

No answer.

Good. He’d probably left to pick up his food. No way in hell could I walk past him in this and not have to answer a million questions about where I was going.

After locking up the apartment, I hurried down to the main entrance.

A shiny black town car was double parked in front of the building. The window lowered, revealing a familiar face.

“Ready?” Vlado asked.

“Yeah.” I hurried over to the car but came to a skidding stop a few feet from it.

“Testing out the new shoes?” He smiled.

Vlado was a handsome guy when he was all broody and tough, but he was *gorge* when he smiled. He reminded me of Kai with his dark hair, dark eyes, tattoos, and bulging muscles, but his smile was wide and lit up his entire face.

“Yeah. I mean no. The shoes are fine. I just don’t know how to do this.”

“Opening the door is a good first step.”

“I know that.” I shot him an unimpressed look. “I just mean I don’t know where to sit. Up front like a normal person? In the back like you’re the help?”

The rear driver’s side window slid down. “Get in the car, Nicholas.”

“Nick,” I corrected. “I don’t like being called Nicholas. Too many flashbacks to getting scolded by every authority figure ever about how I need to learn to sit still and pay attention.”

“My apologies.” Evan pushed the door open and slid across the seat so I could get in.

“It’s fine, just don’t do it again.” I pulled the door closed. “Holy shit.” I looked around the car. “Is this thing like Mary

Poppins's purse? How does it look normal from the outside but gigantic inside? Talk about leg room."

The interior of the car had a single bench seat that was made of the softest leather I'd ever felt and close to four feet of empty space in front of it. The front of the car was separated from the back area like in a taxi, only the window part was open.

Evan gave me a critical sweep. The heat in his eyes was a welcome little ego boost. I knew I looked good, but it was always nice to see appreciation.

"Do I pass muster?" I asked.

"You do," he said as Vlado pulled away from the curb.

I brushed my gaze down Evan's frame, lingering on the way his suit pulled tight around his wide shoulders and thick thighs. He really was fine. "So do you."

He grinned. "Thank you."

"So, what's the deal tonight?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what's the deal? Where are we going? Who will be there? What kind of boyfriend do you want me to be? I literally have zero details and I don't like being unprepared."

"We're attending a cocktail party. Most of the attendees will be people I know through my business dealings."

"Okay." I drummed my fingers on my thigh. "Sounds boring."

He smirked. "It will be."

"What kind of boyfriend am I supposed to be?"

"The kind who's madly in love with me."

"I got that much. But what does that look like to you? Am I supposed to stand beside you and look pretty? Make moon eyes at you all night?"

"Yes."

"What about PDA?"

“What about it?”

“The contract says we’re supposed to be affectionate in person. That could mean anything depending on what your boundaries are. Are we talking holding hands, dancing, kissing? I need parameters because I’m super touchy-feely and not everyone is comfortable with that.”

“Whatever you’re comfortable with is fine.”

“You’re sooooo not helping,” I grumbled. “I’m trying to get into character and you’re not giving me anything to work with.”

“Just be yourself,” he said. “It’ll be more believable if you’re not trying to play a part.”

“What have you told people about me?”

“That you’re younger, attractive, and completely smitten with me.” He shrugged. “I left the details vague on purpose.”

“I can work with that. But what if people ask about me? Am I supposed to answer honestly? What if they ask what I do for work? Or how we met? We need a backstory.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “I suppose we do. We could tell people we met at your work. Your café job,” he added. “I went in for coffee, we got to talking, and the rest is history.”

“That’s a solid beginning, but we need to spice it up a bit. Why did we start talking? There needs to be a meet-cute beyond you ordered coffee.”

“There does?”

“Yes. People like details and cute stories. Did you hit on me? Or was I the aggressor? Was it an instant thing, or did one of us have to work for it?” I studied him for a beat. “You were totally the one who hit on me. I resisted, of course. But you wouldn’t be deterred. On your third visit, you gave me your card. I texted, and we started talking. I made you wait to take me out because I’m classy like that, but after a few weeks, we went on a date. Your turn.”

“My turn?”

“Yeah. Now you fill in the blanks. Where did you take me?”

“I took you to dinner—”

“Boring.”

“What’s wrong with dinner?”

“Nothing, if you’re boring. You were trying to woo me. You gotta do better than dinner.”

He paused. “What if it was a rooftop picnic?”

“Now we’re talking. Then what?”

“Then we spent the weekend in my room getting to know each other in the biblical sense.” He grinned.

“Not loving that I’m apparently easy enough to spend a whole weekend in bed with you after one rooftop picnic, but I’ll allow it.”

He chuckled.

“Okay, so we’ve got our meet-cute. What about me? Am I using my real name? What do I tell people if they ask about my job? I don’t exactly fit into your world.”

“You can go by whatever name you want, but you don’t have to hide who you are.”

“You’d be okay with people knowing I’m a stripper and not just a barista?” I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

“Why not? In fact, I think it would be highly entertaining to see people’s reactions to the news.”

“Devious. I love it.” Leaning back against the seat, I grinned. “We’ve got the meet-cute, our basic backstory, and I’ve got my character arc. What’s your favorite color?”

“Green.”

“Mine’s yellow. What about sports? Do you follow them at all?”

“No.”

“Me neither. How about hobbies? What do you do for fun?”

“Fun?” Vlado laughed from the front of the car. “Do you even remember what that is, Ev?”

“You do seem like a workaholic,” I agreed. “I like to shop and hang out with my friends. What about food? What do you like to eat? What’s your favorite restaurant?”

“Why do I feel like I’m being interrogated?”

“Because I need to know details if we’re going to fool people.” I rubbed my face. “Have you ever been in a relationship? You don’t seem to know a lot about them.”

“One.” His eyes clouded and his features hardened. “Let’s just say he wasn’t all that interested in the details of my life, only in my bank account.”

“Oof, that sucks. My ex-girlfriend—”

“Girlfriend?” he cut in sharply. “You’re not gay?”

“No.” I looked at him sidelong.

“I suppose sexuality really is fluid, especially when cash is involved,” he said bitterly.

“Wooow.” I faced him then, my throat closing around a bubble of hot anger. “You’re really going to pull that bullshit after *you* approached *me* and offered me cash to play a part? Maybe you should have asked what my sexuality is if my being gay is so important to you.”

“I didn’t think I had to with the way you were undressing me with your eyes at the club,” he said. “How many other men have you duped with your gay-for-pay act?”

“Ev—” Vlado chimed from the front seat.

“Gay for pay? Do you have any idea how offensive that is?”

“Offensive? You kids think everything is offensive.”

“Do *not* pull that boomer shit on me, asswipe.”

“I’m a millennial.”

“Boomer is a state of mind. And for the record, I was undressing you with my eyes at the club because I’m bi.”

He snapped his mouth closed.

“Yeah. Bi, as in *bisexual*. The B in LGBTQIA. I like guys *and* girls. I’ve been with both, and if that’s a problem, then let me out of the car now and find yourself another fake boytoy to get your daddy’s money.”

“I’m sorry.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I shouldn’t have said what I did.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.”

“Can we forget it?”

I appreciated that he was quick to apologize *but...* “No. We can move past it, but I’m not going to forget just because it’s convenient for you.” Crossing my arms, I stared out the window. The scenery flashed by in a blur of lights and shadowy shapes, all out of focus, the same as I felt.

“Fair enough.” He sighed. “I am sorry.”

“You said that. But the thing about apologies is that it’s not up to you if I accept it or not. It’s up to me.”

“Do you accept it?”

“Jury’s still out,” I said through clenched teeth.

Silence descended on us. I refused to look at Evan.

“My ex told me he was bi,” he eventually said softly.

“And?” I could tell this wasn’t easy for him to say based on his tone, but I was still smarting from his outburst. I’d listen, but that didn’t mean I had to put my feelings aside to accommodate his.

“And he wasn’t. He was very straight.” He paused, like he was waiting for me to say something. I didn’t. “He pretended to enjoy being with me to get access to my wealth. We were together for almost two years. I was planning on proposing.”

Now he had my interest. I glanced at him.

“I came home from a business trip early and found him in our bed with a woman. That’s when I learned he wasn’t attracted to men and was only pretending to enjoy sleeping with me. It was all an act and he’d been cheating on me with women our entire relationship.”

“That’s really shitty.”

“It is. But my trauma isn’t yours. I’m sorry I projected that on you. I have no issues with you being bisexual.”

I sighed. “I get why you did it. But you have no idea how much biphobia I’ve had to deal with, from both sides, since I came out. I’m not gay enough for the gays, or straight enough for women. It sucks to be shoved into a box because people can’t accept that not everyone fits into stereotypes.”

“I’m sorry, Nick.”

“I accept your apology. This time. Pull that shit on me again and I’m going full crazy bitch on you.”

“Noted.” The corner of his mouth tilted up in a grin.

“How much longer until we get to wherever we’re going?” I asked as my stomach rumbled.

“About half an hour,” Vlado answered.

“Will there be food at this thing?” I asked Evan.

“Some food, but nothing substantial.”

“Oh.” My stomach grumbled again.

“Hungry?” he asked.

“Yeah. I forgot to eat lunch and I didn’t have time to have dinner after work.”

“What have you eaten today?”

“Um.” I thought back. “Coffee. Iced coffee. And a muffin.”

“That’s it?”

“And water.”

“Vlado,” he said.

“On it.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We’re stopping to get you something to eat.”

I flushed hot at the concern on his face. “Thanks. Sorry. I hope this doesn’t make us late.”

“Doesn’t matter if we are. Your health is more important than a party.”

“What do you like?” Vlado looked at me in the rearview mirror. “We can hit a drive-thru or stop somewhere.”

“A drive-thru is good. I’ll eat literally anything.” I paused. “Unless it’s not food, or it’s still alive. Or marzipan. Those are my hard no’s.”

Vlado chuckled. “I can work with that.”

I peered at Evan to make sure he wasn’t angry. He smiled and patted my knee reassuringly.

That simple touch sent flickers of heat through me that started in my stomach and went straight to my balls.

He’s being nice, don’t read into things, I warned myself.

Evan’s phone rang.

“I have to get this,” he said at the screen.

I turned my attention to the window once again, as Vlado drove down a residential street.

Outside of his outburst, Evan seemed like a decent guy. Pretending to be his boyfriend shouldn’t be too hard.

EVAN

“OH MY GOD that was the longest four hours of my life.” Nick slumped in his seat as Vlado drove us away from the hotel the party had been held at. “Please tell me that was a fluke and these things aren’t that boring?”

“I wish I could. But most of the events I attend are as dry and tedious as that was.”

“Ugh.” He sighed theatrically. “Why are businesspeople always so boring? All they talked about was money. How much they have, how much they want to make. What they’ve bought and how much they spent. I swear to Christ I almost stomped on that old dude’s foot when he was going on about how he bought his new place because it has parallel hallways in it for the staff because seeing his staff moving about the house makes him uncomfortable. Or that other old guy who kept talking about how many subsidies he gets, but then turns around and says he deserves more. He’s making millions a year. Why is he getting financial help when regular people are having to choose between rent and food?”

“Because he can.”

“Who was that chick in the red dress? The blonde who was hanging off that dude who looks like the Cryptkeeper?”

“That’s Cecelia. She’s Bryant’s wife.”

“Ew.”

“It’s quite the scandalous story. She was his ex-wife’s assistant up until a year ago.”

“Really?” He brightened up. “Finally some juicy gossip. Tell me *everything*.”

I chuckled at his sudden enthusiasm. “She worked for Maryse, his fifth wife. He seems to have an age limit, and when his current wife is close to thirty, he divorces her, pays her off, and marries her replacement. Cecelia is a few years older than you. They were married only days after his divorce to Maryse was finalized.”

“Bet his other wives were counting on him kicking the bucket so they could get their bag,” he said thoughtfully.

“That’s the consensus.”

“Do you think they have to fuck him?” He scrunched up his nose adorably. “Can you imagine what eighty-year-old balls look like? Bet they’re like prunes stuffed into stretched-out stockings.”

Vlado made a strangled sound from the driver’s seat. “Did you really have to put *that* image in my head?”

“Sorry not sorry. If I have to picture it, you do too.” Nick grinned sweetly at Vlado in the rearview mirror.

“I’m never going to be able to look at Bryant the same way,” I drawled.

“Also not sorry.” Nick brushed his hair back from where it had fallen over his eye. “How did we do? Think people were fooled?” he asked me.

I bit back a smile.

I hadn’t told anyone I was bringing a plus-one, and the expressions on their faces when I introduced Nick as my boyfriend were priceless. No doubt word about us was spreading, and unsurprisingly, I’d been flooded with invitations for the next few weeks that were specifically extended to me *and him*.

Nick played his part beautifully. He’d charmed everyone he was introduced to and had spent the evening gazing at me adoringly while constantly touching me in a way that was both casual and possessive.

He'd told our fake meet-cute over and over again, gushing about how magical the experience was and how happy we were. He'd been so convincing I would have believed him if I hadn't been part of the ruse.

"You're quite the actor."

He grinned. "Theater nerd for the win! And who says the arts can't help you later in life? My drama classes are about to make me more than algebra or the Pythagorean theorem ever did."

"Isn't the Pythagorean theorem geometry?" Vlado asked.

"No clue," Nick answered.

"Yes," I said at the same time.

"Of course *you'd* know that." He eyed me. "I bet you were a math nerd."

"Guilty."

"He used to do my math homework for me in school," Vlado said.

"Is that how you two became besties?" Nick asked excitedly. "You were his bully, but then you realized he's just a stuffy old man trapped in a hot guy's body, so you decided to befriend him and help him see the power of friendship?"

"What?" I choked out a laugh. "Old man trapped in a hot guy's body?"

"You totally are." Nick patted my thigh.

"He's not wrong." Vlado chuckled.

"Oh my god, I was right?" Clapping his hands, Nick bounced in his seat. "You two are a real-life E2L story?"

"E2L?" I asked.

"Enemies-to-lovers." Nick waved his hand in a 'hush now' motion. "Did you two have a torrid love affair and now you're BFFs?"

"What? No!"

“Methinks the dude is protesting too much.” Nick threw me a smirk. “Are you secretly harboring feelings for each other? Am I about to play matchmaker?” His blue eyes widened. “Dibs on being the best man at your wedding.”

“Slow down there, matchmaker,” Vlado said, his voice heavy with amusement. “Not everything is a ‘how I met your father’ scenario.”

“It should be. We need more epic romance in the world. Everything is all hookup apps and situationships. Where’s the magic? What happened to the fairytale experience the movies of my youth promised me?” He glanced between me and the back of Vlado’s head. “You two would look hot together. Can I watch?”

“What?” Vlado and I spluttered.

“What?” He blinked innocently.

“Before this gets any weirder”—Vlado’s shoulders shook with the effort to not laugh—“let me explain.”

“Am I going to be disappointed?” Nick asked.

“Yes.”

He exhaled grievously. “Fine. Go ahead and burst my bubble.”

“Evan and I met when we were babies. My mom was his and Emily’s nanny.”

“Oh. That’s way cuter than my bully scenario.”

“Maybe, but that’s where the cuteness ends,” Vlado said. “The three of us grew up together, and Ev’s been my best friend for as long as I can remember. But there’s never been anything between us. I’m straight, and I think of him like a brother. Same as he thinks of me.”

“Boo.” Nick undid his suit jacket and tugged on his tie.

“What are you doing?” I asked, my head still spinning from the strange turn the conversation had taken.

“Getting comfy.” He pulled off his tie and stuffed it in his pocket. “This suit slaps, but I’m not used to wearing so many

clothes when I'm working.”

Vlado snickered.

“So, why did Evan do your math homework if you're BFFs?”

The car went silent as I, and presumably, Vlado, circled back to what we'd been talking about before Nick's tangent.

“Oh, right.” Vlado cleared his throat. “Ev was such a math nerd he wanted to do it. Said it was fun for him.”

“Math is fun?” Nick gave me a look like I suddenly couldn't be trusted. “You're like Kai. Super hot and broody, but secretly a nerd who nerds.”

“Kai?” I asked. A flare of something moved through my stomach. Was that jealousy?

“My friend. He works at the club with me. Remember the hottie with the tats? The one who did that insane chair routine?”

“Mmhm.”

“That's Kai. He's going to grad school in a few months. He's gonna be a doctor.”

“Really?” I asked, unable to hide my surprise. “What kind of doctor?”

“A psychologist.”

“You mean he's getting his PhD?” I asked before I could stop myself.

He shot me a glare. “A PhD is a doctorate, which would make him a doctor. What? You don't think strippers can be smart? Knox's girlfriend is a stripper and she's almost done med school. Is that enough of a *doctor* for you?”

“I wasn't implying anything,” I said quickly.

“You might want to look down and check to see if your pants are on fire.”

I screwed up my face.

“Because you're a liar liar.” He smiled sweetly.

Vlado covered his laugh with a cough.

Nick undid the top button of his shirt.

“I’m very confused,” I admitted. “This conversation has taken so many twists and turns I have no idea what we were talking about.”

“My bad.” Nick shrugged. “I had to keep all that inside while we were talking to those beige people. That’s like, four hours of behaving like an adult. I asked if we fooled everyone.”

“Right. Yes. I believe we did.”

“Phew.” He rubbed his cheeks. “I kept zoning out and daydreaming while you guys blathered on about money shit. Like, interest rates. Whoever named those was dead wrong. There’s nothing *interesting* about them. I was worried people noticed I was in la-la land.”

“Is that when you kept grabbing his ass?” Vlado said, his voice light with amusement. “You seemed a little dreamy while groping him.”

Nick had indeed spent a good deal of time with his hand on my backside. The touch had been far more intimate than I normally would have shown in public, but the scandalous reactions of the other attendees had been worth it.

“Not my fault you’ve got a muffin butt. It’s squeezable, so I squeezed it.” He shrugged.

I smirked. “Did I complain?”

“Nope. Which is why I kept doing it. Your butt was basically my fidget spinner tonight.” He bit the side of his lip with a grin. “Do any of these events have dancing or food that isn’t bite-sized? Something, anything, other than just walking around and talking to boring people about boring shit?”

“Rarely. But my sister’s wedding should at least be more entertaining.”

“Hold up. Your sister’s wedding?”

“Yes. Emily’s getting married at the end of August. That’s why she had her bachelorette party last week.”

“I wanted to ask about that. Why our club?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why our tiny little club in the middle of buttfuck nowhere? You’re both based out of Seattle, right?”

I nodded. “I also have offices in New York and LA but spend most of my time at my home base.”

“So why Crimson? There’s gotta be a bunch of high-end clubs in Seattle. Why would she pick our club, especially because it looks like my grandma’s basement.”

“Your grandma’s basement has a stage and poles in it?”

He rolled his eyes. I noticed he did that often, but rather than annoy me, I found it oddly cute. “Don’t be a dumbass. I meant the décor. It’s straight out of the nineteen hundreds.”

“Those reasons are exactly why she chose your club.”

“I don’t get it.”

“She wanted the anonymity of being somewhere away from home so she and her friends wouldn’t have to worry about being recognized. And she thought it would be fun to pick somewhere that wasn’t the usual type of place she goes to.”

“So she and her rich friends wanted to slum it with the poor strippers?” He quirked an eyebrow. “Was that supposed to make me feel better about the situation?”

“No. It was to answer your question.”

He gnawed harder into his lip.

“I can see the questions in your eyes,” I observed.

His nostrils flared as he breathed out, and he gave his lip a reprieve from his biting. “Why did you offer me this job?”

“Because I need a—”

“I know why you needed to hire someone. But why *me*? Why not an escort or something? Why some random stripper

from a club in a town you don't even live in?" A sudden epiphany rounded his eyes. "It's *because* I'm a random stripper from out of town. No chance anyone would recognize me."

I recoiled a bit. He was smart—smart in a way I wasn't used to. "That was only a small part of why I did."

His expression went hopeful.

Jesus, he looked young right then. Between his big blue eyes, luminous smile that always rounded out his cheeks, and that mop of light blond hair, he really did fit his stage name.

"My plan was to hire an escort, but I saw you at the club and...you intrigued me. You're my type, and I liked watching you."

Disappointment flashed in his eyes. He dropped his gaze to the seat between us.

Something about the defeated stoop of his shoulders tugged at my heart. Nick might have behaved like the perfect, mature partner tonight, but he was still young, and right then, vulnerable. Smart, but equally, naïve.

Staying emotionally detached from him was going to be a problem. He was so magnetic, so full of life, and his mind was fascinating. I never knew what was he was going to say next, and tonight, I'd found myself laughing more than I had in months.

He'd fulfilled his end of our deal. The least I could do was be honest with him.

I played with the knot of my tie and swallowed thickly. "I enjoyed your fire."

"My fire?" Blue eyes lifted. They were still shuttered but he was listening.

"When you danced. You're not only incredibly talented, but you enjoy your work. The joy and passion you radiated on stage were what drew me to you more than anything else."

"Oh." A small smile tilted his mouth.

“I entertained the idea of offering you the job after that first dance.” I looked away. The hope and vulnerability on his face was more than I could handle at the moment. “But that was more of a fantasy than a plan. I decided to offer you the position because you confronted me.”

“Really?”

With a single nod, I looked at him. His expression was thoughtful but held an undercurrent of something I couldn't read.

“I've spent my entire life surrounded by *yes men* and people who'll quite literally fall over themselves to do whatever I say. No one ever talks back or calls me out on my behavior. No one except my sister, Vlado, and you. *That's* the reason I offered you the position. Not because you're a good dancer or because I'm attracted to you. Because I knew you'd challenge me and not let me get away with any bullshit.”

he grinned slyly, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “You're attracted to me?”

This time *I* rolled my eyes. “Are you fishing for compliments?”

“Duh.” He put his folded hands under his chin and batted his eyelashes. “I'm a needy bitch. Now validate me.”

“I'm attracted to you,” I deadpanned.

“Nope. Do better.” He dropped his hands. “Make me believe it.”

“I'm attracted to you.”

“Is that supposed to convince me?” He flicked his head to the side, moving a lock of hair from where it had fallen over his eye. The hair fell right back into place. He lifted his hand, presumably to push it back.

I was quicker.

Nick's breath caught as I gently brushed the hair out of his eye and tucked it behind his ear.

“I find you very attractive,” I murmured, pinning him with a heated stare.

He gulped, not breaking our eye contact. “Hey, Vlado?”

“Yeah?”

“Does this car have a divider or anything?”

The partition behind his seat lifted, cutting off his view of us.

“Why did you do that?” I asked.

“Because I don’t think Vlado would be into watching us since he’s straight.”

“Watching us do what?”

“You’re attracted to me; I’m attracted to you. We should do something about that, yeah?”

“Sex wasn’t part of the contract.”

“Who said anything about sex?” Nick’s eyebrow went up and he grinned impishly.

“You did?”

“Did I? All I said is that we should do something about our mutual attraction.” He shifted closer, put his knee on the seat, and turned his body to fully face me. “You’re the one who automatically thought about sex.”

“I…”

The tip of his tongue peeked out. He dragged it over his bottom lip.

Heat pooled low in my body as my cock thickened and filled.

I’d been fighting my reactions to Nick since we’d picked him up. It seemed I’d reached the limit of my self-control.

“You want to fuck me?” He tilted his head to the side, a serene smile on his full lips. “Or maybe you want me to fuck you.”

I opened my mouth but no sound came out. My cock throbbed with arousal.

“I bet you’re a top.” He moved closer. His shin pressed against the outside of my thigh. “I bet you love bending guys over and fucking them like they owe you money. You’re probably quiet too. Don’t let go or allow your partner to hear you enjoy it. Always in control. The one who makes your partner scream.”

“Is there something wrong with that?” I rasped through my suddenly arid throat.

“Nope.” He popped the ‘p’ sound. “Who fucks you so hard *you’re* the one who’s screaming?” He tilted his head, as if studying me. “Have you ever been fucked?”

I nodded.

“Did you like it?”

“Not especially.”

“Too bad. There’s no better feeling than a big, thick cock in your ass, hitting your prostate just right.” He let out a shuddering breath and inched closer. “Have you ever come handsfree?” A teasing smile drew my eyes to his mouth. “Ever had someone hold you down and fuck you until you can’t take it anymore and you come all over yourself?”

I fisted my hands and sucked in a gasping breath. My balls were full and heavy, my cock so hard I ached.

“I have.” He ran one finger down the length of my tie, stopping where my jacket was held closed by the buttons. “I bet you’d like to see that, wouldn’t you?” He tugged my tie free of my jacket and gently pinched it between two fingers. “See me come apart on your cock...” He looked at me through his impossibly thick lashes. “...Watch me come for you.”

“What are you doing?” I croaked. “You just said you weren’t talking about sex.”

“I’m not talking about having sex right now.” Quick as lightning, he planted his knee on the seat and threw his body over mine and straddled my lap, his weight pressing me into

the seat. I resisted the urge to roll my hips up and drag my cock against him. “Just asking what kind of lover you are for when we do have sex. I like having something to look forward to.”

“You’ve already decided it’s happening?”

His slow grin was angelic, and devious. “You can always say no.” Leaning in he put his lips next to my ear. His hot breath ghosted over my skin. “Are you going to say no if I pull your dick out and suck you off right here in the back of your fancy car?”

My entire body clenched at his words.

He sat back. “I bet you have a really nice dick. Big, but not too big. Thick enough to stretch me but not enough to hurt. Are you leaking right now?” He dropped his gaze to the bulge in my slacks. “I bet you taste good.”

Letting out a strangled cry, I gripped his thighs and held tight. “Stop.”

“You don’t want me?” He peered at me through his lashes.

“Why are you doing this?”

“Why not?” He lifted one shoulder in a tiny shrug. “I’ll stop if I’m making you uncomfortable or if you’re celibate or whatever. But respectfully, I think you’re hot as hell and I don’t see why we can’t fuck around if we want to.”

“Because the contract states no sex.”

“The contract states no sex as part of our arrangement. It doesn’t say anything about fucking because we want to.”

“It’ll create a power—”

“Imbalance. Blah blah blah.” He pressed his finger against my lips to shush me. His touch was featherlight, but it was the little zings of electricity that danced between our connected skin that I couldn’t ignore. “I have three questions. Will you answer them?”

I nodded.

Every fiber of my being was screaming at me to flip Nick under me and fuck him until the only words he could say were my name and to beg for more. But I held back. I'd set the no-sex rule for a reason, and I hadn't made it this far by breaking my rules.

"Do you want me?" he whispered. He dropped his hand. My lips immediately felt cold at the loss.

"Yes."

"Are you holding back because you're under some delusion that I'm a naïve kid and you need to protect me from myself?"

It had occurred to me.

"Thought so. Final question." His face dipped toward mine. "Can I please suck your dick?"

"Only if you kiss me first."

His eyes sobered. "Really?"

"You don't usually kiss guys before you put their dicks in your mouth?"

"Well, yeah. But I figured this would be like a *Pretty Woman* thing and you wouldn't want to kiss me unless people were watching."

"You have that backwards. It was Julia Roberts who had the no-kissing rule, not Richard Gere."

"I never saw it." He fixed his stare to my mouth. "I think you should kiss me."

"You think so?" I tipped his chin up with my fingers.

"Yeah," he said breathily.

"Are you sure you want this?"

"I'm on your lap and dirty-talking about how much I want you to fuck me. If this isn't a clear invitation, then you're way denser than I thought."

"I meant, have you thought this through?"

"What's there to think through?"

“I’m not in a place where I’m looking—”

“For anything serious. Yeah, me neither.” He snatched his chin out of my grip. “Are you worried I’m gonna fall for you because you put your dick in me?” He huffed out a laugh. “I may look young, but I’m not some stupid kid. I’m not asking for anything other than orgasms and a good time. Not even your disco stick is magic enough to make me forget that.”

“If we do this then we need rules.”

He draped his arms over my shoulders. “Okay.”

“First is that this ends when the contract is up.”

“Duh.”

“Second, we don’t share a bed. Ever.”

“Okay.” He toyed with the hair at the nape of my neck. “Anything else?”

“We use protection. No exceptions.”

“That’s one of my rules too.”

“Do you have any others?”

“Two. The first is no judgment.” He scraped his nails over my neck. “I’m not going to dim my sparkle or try to fit into whatever it is you expect of me in bed. This is over the second I see any sort of judgment from you. I’ll finish the contract, but you’ll never get a second chance at my ass if you make me feel bad for being myself.”

“I promise,” I said, making sure to inject as much sincerity in my voice as possible. “What’s the other?”

“Exclusivity. We don’t mess around with anyone else while we’re doing this. I don’t share, and I’m not risking my health if this is going to be a long-term thing.”

I nodded slowly. “That’s also one of mine. I don’t share either.”

“Got any more?”

I shook my head. “Do you?”

“No.” He wiggled a bit closer.

“May I kiss you now?”

Nodding, he threaded his fingers through my hair.

I gently cupped the back of his neck and tugged him closer. He let me.

Rather than give him a full kiss, I touched my lips to the corner of his mouth. He let out a little gasp and clutched my shoulders. I moved to the other side of his mouth and kissed there. Then traced over his bottom lip with my tongue.

“Evan,” he said on a stuttering breath.

My chest tightened at the use of my name. Desire and need pooled in my body, crashing through me like waves, so strong I could barely breathe.

Not willing to rush things, I brushed my lips over his, the contact too quick and fleeting to be considered a kiss.

Nick’s hands coasted over my torso, slipping under my suit jacket so he could rub my pecs, my shoulders, and chest. He flexed his thighs down on me, pressing his erection against mine. The heat from his skin and his scent surrounded me, so soft and sweet and dark and heady.

I slicked my tongue over his lower lip, then sucked that full, plump lip between my teeth and gently nibbled it.

He panted against my mouth and rocked in my lap, dragging his cock over mine with every thrust of his hips.

Needing more, I released his lip and finally fit my mouth over his, kissing him hard and deep.

He moaned and eagerly met me kiss for kiss.

His zeal was as much of a turn-on as kissing him. The little mewling sounds he made, the way he grabbed at me and kept trying to tug me closer. How he ground down on my lap and thrust against my cock. The friction was incredible, but not nearly enough.

With a low, throaty moan, he undid my jacket buttons with nimble fingers. When it was open, he ran his hands over my chest, tracing the buttons on my shirt.

“Is this shirt as expensive as I think it is?” he murmured.

“Yes.”

“Too bad.” He nipped at my lip, then pressed his cheek to mine and scraped his smooth skin against my stubble. “I’ll refrain from ripping it open.” He trailed his hand down my chest and stomach, pausing at the waistband of my slacks. “May I suck your dick now?” he purred.

“Yes.”

He pulled back, grinning, and slid off of my lap. Settling on the floor in front of me, he elbowed my knees apart and situated between them.

I watched in rapt fascination as he rubbed his hand over my cock.

“So big.” He squeezed me through my pants. “This is gonna feel so good in my mouth.”

I bit back a groan and pushed his hair from where it had fallen over his eyes.

Smiling impishly, Nick bent his head and nuzzled my bulge with his cheek. He turned his head and mouthed my shaft. The wet heat of his mouth teased my skin, making me shiver.

“Take your dick out.”

I undid my pants and fished my cock out of my briefs.

“Stroke it.”

“Isn’t that your job?” I asked huskily, running my hand up my length.

“Soon.” He licked his lips, his eyes on my cock. “You’re so hard.”

I huffed out a laugh. “That’s what happens when a gorgeous man sits on my lap and dirty-talks about all the things he wants me to do to him.”

“Vlado is a good driver, right?”

“Huh?”

“This is pretty much the unsafest place for me to be if we crash. Plus, I’ll probably bite your dick off if we do. I’m a cockslut, but I don’t want to die with a dick hanging out of my mouth while they pry me out of the wreckage.”

“That’s...grisly.” I grimaced as my dick went half hard.

“Sorry.” He met my eyes, his expression oddly shy. “I get weird thoughts sometimes and my filter tends to go away when I’m horny.”

“It’s fine. I’d never risk your safety for an orgasm. Vlado is a good driver. He’s never been involved in an accident.”

“Good.” He lowered his gaze to my half-hard cock. “Let me fix that.”

Leaning down, he drew my length into his mouth. Soft and tight and vibrating from his moans, it felt incredible.

Dragging my fingers through his hair, I gently held the strands as he languidly sucked me, teasing me back to full hardness. My cockhead bumped the back of his throat, but he just angled his head and swallowed me deeper.

“Jesus,” I muttered, my hips twitching as he held me there, suckling around my head as he rubbed his tongue along the underside of my shaft.

Slowly, he pulled off me enough to take a breath, then he gripped my thighs and moved down again. His lips pressed against my pubic mound, and he somehow managed to tongue the seam of my sac at the same time.

“Ungh,” I grunted and locked my thighs so I didn’t thrust up into him.

Nick held there for longer than I would have thought possible. I was about to pull him up when he popped off me and gulped in a breath.

“Are you okay?” I rasped.

“Mmhm.” He smiled. “I like it when it hurts a bit.”

Before I could answer, he was back on me, sucking and moving over my dick as he worked me over. Every draw of his

mouth and swipe of his tongue sent ripples of pleasure through me. Heat and pressure gathered low in my body, and my thighs quaked with the effort to keep still.

Watching him was almost as erotic as having his mouth on me. He wasn't just playing a part and pretending to enjoy this. His enthusiasm was so pure, so real, that I found myself hurtling toward my release far too soon.

"I'm close," I warned, my voice rough and broken.

He pulled off me and sat back on his heels. "Come on my face."

"What?" I gripped my aching cock as precum slid down my shaft.

"Come on my face. I like it." He yanked his pants open.

"No."

He froze.

"That's my job. I come, then I make you come."

His pupils blew wide, and his blue eyes darkened. "Okay," he whispered. "Make yourself come for me."

Groaning softly, I traced my gaze over his face and stroked myself.

His big eyes were so full of emotions I couldn't pinpoint them all. His flushed cheeks and red, shiny lips transformed him from beautiful to breathtaking.

"Kiss me," I rasped, needing that extra connection.

He shot up and grabbed me around the neck, hauling me down for a blistering kiss.

My orgasm hit hard and fast, tearing through me in a rush of sensation and need. Nick didn't stop kissing me as I came, shaking beneath him from the force of my release.

"So hot," he murmured against my mouth, slowing our kisses so they were long and leisurely. "I was right." He caught my lower lip between his teeth and gently tugged it.

"Huh?" I asked through the haze of my afterglow.

He released my lip. “You taste good.”

“Get your dick out,” I growled, then kissed him hard. I might be sated, but Nick wasn’t.

Still kissing, he pulled his cock free.

Wrapping my arms around him, I tugged him up on my lap. He came willingly, settling over me and running his hands through my hair. I gripped his cock and gave him a long, slow stroke. He felt good in my hand. I already knew he was bigger than average thanks to his performances at the club, and the heat of his skin, already wet with precum, sent another rush of desire through me.

I wanted his orgasm. Wanted to see him lose control and hear him come apart for me.

He moaned against my lips and wiggled closer.

I sped up my strokes, squeezing as hard as I dared. I added a little twist to my hand when I reached his head.

He shuddered and rocked his hips.

“You want to come?” I asked between kisses.

“Yes.” He fisted my hair and wrenched hard enough to snap my head back. “Do it. Make me come.”

The unexpected aggression sent another pulse of need through me.

“Harder,” he urged. “Faster.” His chest heaved as hot breaths sawed out of him. “Yes, that’s it. More pressure at the head.”

I did exactly as he asked, unable to rip my gaze from his face.

“Fuck, Ev. I’m gonna come so hard.” He bit his lip, his expression twisting into one of pleasure. “Little more. Don’t stop. Don’t fucking stop.”

“Come for me, Nick,” I rasped. “Come all over me.”

“Oh shit.” He yanked on my hair so hard I grunted at the sting of pain. “So close. Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

“You’re so beautiful.”

His eyes widened and his mouth fell open in a silent cry.

“That’s it,” I purred. “Come, Nick. Come now.”

He let out a strangled cry and shuddered in my arms. Wetness dripped onto my hand as he came, shooting between us as he frantically fucked my fist.

He collapsed against me, still twitching from the aftershocks. “Holy goddamn shitballs, Batman.”

Chuckling, I gently pried his hand out of my hair.

“Next time you’re coming on my face.” He sighed happily. “Oh, another rule. Post-orgasm cuddles are nonnegotiable. If I’m gonna rock your world, you’re gonna cuddle me after.”

“I suppose that’s fair. Sit so you’re on my lap with your legs to the side.”

He wiggled and shifted until he was able to snuggle up to me, his head on my shoulder. I hugged him closer and breathed him in, still savoring the afterglow.

The partition lowered an inch. “We’re about five minutes out,” Vlado said, then raised it again.

“Perfect timing.” Nick sat up, his face blank and his eyes eerily neutral, as he slid off my lap and back onto the seat. “You wouldn’t happen to know a good dry cleaner, would you?” He tucked himself away and did up his pants. “Hopefully one that does rush jobs. There’s no way in hell I can wear this again tomorrow night.” He motioned to his shirt, which was streaked with cum.

I finished doing up my pants. “Don’t worry about that. Tomorrow’s event isn’t black tie. My stylist will send you another outfit.”

“Your stylist?” He buttoned his jacket, effectively hiding most of the mess. “Are you Kim K? Why do you have a stylist?”

“Because my sister was in fashion and she insists on it.”

“Rich people are so weird.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “I bet you have a personal chef and a full staff to do all the chores us normies have to do ourselves.”

“I do.”

“If you tell me you have parallel hallways, I’m gonna stomp on your fancy-ass shoes.”

“I only have one set of halls.”

“Good.” He glanced out the window as the car slowed and pulled over. “What’s the thing we’re going to tomorrow?”

“Another cocktail party.”

His face scrunched up. “Same boring people?”

“Different ones.”

“Awesome sauce.” He gripped the handle. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow.”

He pushed the door open.

“Nick.”

Pausing, he glanced back at me.

“Is everything okay?” I asked.

“Fine. It’s just been a long day.”

“Do you work tomorrow?”

“Nope. I usually work at the club on Fridays and Saturdays, so I get weekends off at the café.”

“That’s a lot of hours.”

“Says the workaholic. Bye, Vlado!” he shouted at the partition, and it lowered.

“Bye, Nick.”

“One question. Is that divider thingy completely dark, or only tinted?”

“Completely dark.” Vlado grinned.

“Good to know.” Nick flashed me a smile. “Have a good night.”

“You too.”

My stare stayed on his full ass as he stepped out of the car. He waved, then closed the door and headed up the walkway of his building.

“This could get messy,” Vlado said, his eyes on Nick’s retreating form.

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

He started the car. “Just be careful.”

I pulled out my phone. “I’m always careful.”

With a sigh, Vlado drove away from the curb.

I focused on the dozens of emails and messages that had come in during the drive to Nick’s building.

Vlado wasn’t wrong. This entire situation had messy and complicated written all over it. It was stupid and reckless to mix sex into a professional arrangement, but I was finding it hard to care.

What was done, was done. We couldn’t take it back, and I didn’t want to. Nick was an adult. We’d be spending a lot of time together in the coming months. Why not have some fun?

Because it always ends in disaster, the ever-present voice in my head whispered. *You have rules for a reason.*

Clutching my phone tighter, I shoved all thoughts of Nick and how beautiful he’d looked as he came out of my head and concentrated on the email I’d opened.

NICK

“WHY ARE YOU LYING TO ME?”

“Eek!” I bobbed my phone as Aiden flopped down on the couch next to me. “Dude!”

He plucked my phone out of my hands and tossed it on the coffee table. “What?” He blinked innocently.

“You scared the bejeesus out of me!”

“Not my fault you didn’t hear me come in.” His expression went serious. “You’ve been lying to me.”

“I haven’t.”

“You just did it again.” He sighed and held out his arm. “Come here.”

I nearly dove on top of him in my haste to get some bestie cuddles. I tucked my head under his chin and melted against his strong body. Aiden was only about an inch taller than my own five-foot-eleven frame, but with his broad shoulders and barrel chest, he seemed much bigger when we stood next to each other. His body type also made him as comfy as a giant teddy bear.

“I’m worried about you,” he said softly, holding me close.

“There’s nothing to be worried about,” I mumbled. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not. I can always tell when you’re lying.” He rested his cheek on the top of my head. “I’m scared you’re involved with something really bad.”

“What do you mean?”

“Paige’s work sent out this thing on how to spot people who are being forced into human trafficking, and you’re ticking off a lot of the boxes.”

“What?” I tried to pull away but he held me in place.

“*Something* is going on. I know it is. You’re never around when you’re home. You’re getting multiple deliveries of insanely expensive clothes a week, and you’re going to all these parties with people you’ve never mentioned before. That’s not normal. And you’re constantly lying to me. We’ve been best friends since we were six. I know you. This isn’t you, and I’m scared you’re caught up or involved in something that’s going to get you hurt or killed. I can’t live without my Nicky. I refuse to. Please talk to me.”

Tears prickled my eyes as he squeezed me almost desperately.

The last three weeks had been hell. I’d attended seven events with Evan so far, and each time, I’d had to lie to Aiden about where I was going, and where the clothes I’d worn had come from.

A sharp pain tightened my chest, and it wasn’t Aiden’s tight squeeze that did it. I hated lying to him. It tore me up inside. He wasn’t just my bestie, he was my brother from another mother. But I’d felt so guilty about everything that I spent my time hiding in my room when he was home. I was hurting him, and I hated, *hated* it.

“I have a sugar daddy,” I blurted out.

“What?” He let me go so I could sit up and look at him. “You do?”

I nodded. It wasn’t the truth, but it wasn’t exactly a lie.

“Why couldn’t you just tell me that?” Hurt shadowed his eyes.

“I wanted to. So bad. But he’s kind of a big deal in certain circles so he asked me to keep quiet.”

“What do you mean, he’s kind of a big deal in certain circles?”

“He’s a business guy, and he’s not just rich, he’s *rich*.”

“Are we talking millions, or billions?” His eyes doubled in size.

“Millions. But lots and lots of millions.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah.”

“Well damn. That makes sense now.” He leaned back against the couch. “I thought you were being pimped out or you’d gotten involved with the mob or something.”

“No, just a rich guy who likes to spoil me with clothes and wants me on his arm at these parties.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Are you fucking him?”

“No. Well, not technically.” I toyed with the hem of my shirt. “I haven’t had sex with him, but we’ve done...stuff.”

“Stuff? Do I want to know?” He tapped my knee. “Eyes on me.”

I lifted my gaze. “Nothing crazy. Mostly just blowing him in the car.”

“Is he forcing you to do this stuff?”

“No. It’s not like that. He originally said no physical stuff. It was never part of the deal.”

“So why are you blowing him if you don’t have to?”

“Because I want to.”

“It’s not...gross?”

I shook my head and dropped my gaze again. “No. I like it.”

“You know he just said no sexy stuff because he didn’t want to get in trouble. It’s kind of telling that he’s asking for blowies after saying he wouldn’t.”

“He didn’t ask for them,” I mumbled.

“What?” Aiden tapped my knee again. “Look at me.”

Sighing, I did. “He didn’t ask for anything. I offered.”

“Why?”

I shrugged.

“I know you like your men older, but I never took you for the granddaddy type.”

“What? No. He’s not old.”

“He’s not?”

“No. He’s thirty.”

“Why would a young rich guy have a sugar baby?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Nicky.”

“I really can’t. I want to, but I signed an NDA. I can’t tell you anything more without breaking the terms.”

“Are you sure that’s all it is?”

I nodded. “I’m sorry I lied.”

“I know. I’m just glad you’re not in trouble. I’ve been so scared that you’re going to leave for one of these parties and never come home.”

“I should have talked to you sooner. But the NDA...”
Now. I should so totally tell him about the rent now.

“What?” he prompted.

“Um...”

“Nicky.”

“He’s paying our rent.”

Aiden’s jaw went slack.

“For six months. It’s all set up so we don’t have to do anything.”

“Are you freaking kidding me?”

I shook my head.

“Jesus, you must have a magic mouth.”

I grinned despite the guilt still rolling through me. “I mean, I do, but the rent thing was arranged before the BJs. I just didn’t know how to tell you without freaking you out.”

“Yeah, I probably would have tied you to a chair and organized an intervention if you’d just randomly dropped that someone was paying our rent and not given any details. That was a good call.” He held out his arm again. “Come on and get your cuddles. You’ve been avoiding these, too.”

I gratefully accepted.

Aiden was used to my need for platonic snuggles. He might be straight, but he’d always been super supportive of me being bi, and never shied away from giving me hugs and cuddles. He even helped me choreograph my pole routines. I was lucky as hell to have a best friend like him, and I’d almost thrown it all away by lying to him. *A lot* of lying to him.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured again, fighting a fresh wave of tears.

“I know.” He rubbed my arm comfortingly. “Just promise me you’ll tell me if you’re ever in trouble or if you do get caught up in something.”

“I promise.”

“Want to hang out tonight? Maybe order pizza and binge *The Golden Girls* again?”

“I thought you were working?”

“Nope, I’m off tonight.”

“Is Paige coming over?”

I liked Paige and always had fun hanging out with her, but it would be nice to have some bestie time with just the two of us.

“Not tonight. But I will have to figure out something to tell her. I’ve kind of been talking her ear off about everything and she’s worried about you too.”

“You can tell her what I told you, but maybe not too many details, like his age.”

“So you have a sugar daddy, and it’s not weird or gross or anything to worry about?”

“Yeah. Is that enough? I don’t want you to lie to her, but this situation is...complicated.”

“I’m sure she’ll understand. Yay or nay to hanging out?”

“Yay.” I snuggled into his chest a bit more. “I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too. Don’t scare me like that again, okay?”

“I won’t.”

“So, is this sugar daddy paying you in more than just clothes and rent?” he asked, his voice taking on a teasing quality.

“You’re going to make me pay for the pizza, aren’t you?”

“Fuck the pizza. You’re paying for everything from now on.” He scrubbed his knuckles against my hair.

I slapped his hand away. “Ugh. I guess that’s fair.”

“Damn straight it is.”

“Oh trust me, there’s nothing *straight* about what I’m doing with him.”

Aiden laughed and patted my back playfully. “I walked right into that one. But you said you haven’t slept with him yet. Are you holding out for a car?”

I chuckled. “Nope, but a car is the reason he’s only getting his dick sucked instead of wet.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Well, you see, when two men have intercourse, we say the top is getting his—”

He swatted my ass hard enough to sting. “I know what getting your dick wet means. Us heteros say it too.”

“Right.” I patted his firm stomach. “So far the only time we spend together is in his car driving to and from these events. If I’m going to take the time to get all prepped for him, then he can damn well put the effort into making it good for me. And a car quickie isn’t it.”

“Good for you.” He smacked a kiss against my hair. “It’s his loss if he can’t be bothered to do the bare minimum and be a decent person.”

My stomach rumbled, breaking the momentary silence.

“Did you eat today?” he asked.

“No comment.”

“Nick.”

“Gray already lectured me! I’ve been scolded. I don’t need a double whammy.”

“That’s what she said,” Aiden quipped.

I snickered.

“Sit up for a second.”

I shifted so he could swipe my phone off the coffee table. “Want to get it delivered, or should we pick up?” He pressed his thumb to my fingerprint ID. I’d added his biometrics to my phone when I set it up because of how often he used it.

“Delivered. I’m wearing my inside pants and don’t feel like changing.”

“The usual? Or do you want to try something different?”

“I’m still scarred after Paige ordered that pizza that came with broccoli and kale on it.” Blasphemy. I shivered at the memory. “I now have pizza trust issues when it comes to the unknown.”

Chuckling, he tapped my phone screen. “Yeah, I’m still not over that either. Paige has agreed she’s never allowed to pick the toppings again. Wanna get extra dipping sauce?”

“Yeah. And some cinnamon sticks too. I won’t consider tonight a success until we’re both in a carb coma.”

I waited as he finished ordering.

“Done.” He handed me my phone. “They’re saying twenty minutes.”

I tossed it back on the coffee table. “I’ll believe that when I see it. How many times do you think that porn scene has happened?”

“Huh?”

“You know, the pizza-guy one. Do you think that’s ever actually happened IRL? Like someone is all ‘I don’t have the cash to pay for this pizza’”—I pitched my voice to imitate an over-the-top porn actor—“and the guy is all ‘I know a way you can pay for it’”—this time I lowered my voice and tried to add a little growl to it—“and they fuck?”

“I...I never thought of it. I mean, maybe?” He snickered. “I’d probably fuck someone for a pizza before I did it for a Klondike bar.”

“That’s because you’re a weirdo and you don’t like chocolate.”

“It tastes like dirt.”

“You taste like dirt,” I shot back out of reflex.

“Paige would say otherwise.”

“Or maybe she’d agree with me but keeps her mouth shut because she doesn’t want to hurt your feelings.” I batted my eyelashes at him.

“Ask her next time she’s over.”

“I plan to. I wonder if the pizza guy has to pay for it,” I mused.

“Pay for it?”

“The pizza. The store still needs to get paid. So let’s say a delivery guy shows up and some MILF in lingerie is all ‘oh no, I’m soooo hungry but don’t have any money’ and the pizza guy is all ‘there’s another way you can pay’ and the MILF is all ‘yes, daddy.’” I pantomimed tearing a shirt open. “And he

gets some nookie instead of cash. Would he have to pay for the pizza since she didn't?"

He thought about it. "It would make sense if he did. But considering you have to prepay for everything nowadays, I doubt that's a thing anymore."

"Ugh, technology ruins everything," I grumbled and kicked my feet up so my legs were draped over his lap. "Where's the romance?"

"Pretty sure there wasn't a lot of romance going on in these types of scenarios."

"I almost did it once."

"Fucked someone for a pizza?"

"Not a pizza." I motioned to my legs and gave him my best puppy eyes. "I twisted my knee at work. Can you fix it?"

"Which one?"

"Left."

He smoothed his big hands over my knee and gently massaged the muscles right above and below the joint.

"Well?" he prompted when I didn't say anything.

"Well what?" I settled back against the arm of the couch and let out a contented sigh.

"Finish your story! You can't cliffhanger me after saying you almost fucked someone for pizza."

"It wasn't for pizza. Remember that sparkly harness I was obsessed with and finally got?"

"Yeah. Wait. You said Mackenzie gave that to you."

"She did. But she made a joke about how she'd only give it to me if I fucked her and got her off when I was saying how much I wanted one just like it."

"You never told me this."

I shrugged. "Because it didn't happen. I would have because you know how much of a slut I am when I drink, but she changed her mind." I watched his hands as they gently

massaged my knee. “She said any guy who’d want a sparkly harness wouldn’t know how to get a girl off so she just gave it to me.”

Aiden frowned. “I’m sorry, Nicky.”

I shrugged again. “Not the first time I’ve heard that shit. But I got the harness *and* ended up dirty-dancing with Braedan for the rest of the night so I’m calling it a win.”

“Her loss.”

“Yup. If someone can’t appreciate all of me, then they don’t deserve any of me.”

“Fuck yeah they don’t.”

Ding dong.

“Damn. They are quick tonight.” Aiden patted my shin. “Either let me up or get your ass to the door to get our food.”

“That sounds like a you job.” I tucked my knees up under my chin so he could stand.

I waited as Aiden went to the door to get the pizza.

“I was kinda hoping you’d try to seduce them,” I said as he brought our food into the living room.

“I thought about it, but that guy looked like he’d had a long day.” He put the boxes on the coffee table. “And I know how much it sucks to have someone mess with you while you’re working.”

“Yeah.” I flipped the pizza box open and pulled out a steaming slice. “That’s true. It’s only funny to do that kind of thing when you know the person.” I took a big bite of my pizza. “Did I tell you some kids did one of those jump-scare pranks on Zane the other day?”

“What?” He froze, his hand hovering over the pizza box. “Do they have a death wish?”

I popped a slice of pepperoni in my mouth. “He was leaving his jobsite after shutting everything down and a group of kids jumped out of the bushes when he passed them.”

“Jesus. Why?”

“He said they were recording him, so I’m thinking some sort of social media content.”

“They picked the wrong guy to mess with. Did they get their shot before he went full psycho on them?”

“Nope. I don’t even think he can get scared. He calls it situational awareness. I call it being a scary motherfucker.”

“What happened after they jumped out at him? Did River have to bail him out of jail?”

I shook my head and swallowed a cheesy bite. “He saw they were little kids before he pulled his knife out. If they’d been older, he would have fucked them up and had fun doing it. They scattered when he turned around.”

“Probably caught the full blast of his death stare.” Aiden paused. “Who do you think would be worse in that situation? Like if it was adults. River, or Zane?”

“Hmmm.” I chewed pensively. “Honestly, I’m not sure. Zane’s death stare is scary as all get out, but River’s smiles are terrifying in a different way. You should have seen them when Gray got beat up. I thought they were gonna kill those guys. The only reason they held back was because of Biggs and Kai. I’ve seen them get mad, but I’ve never seen them rage out like that. Oh, did I show you the prezzie Zane gave me?”

He shook his head and chewed a big bite of pizza.

“BRB.” Shoving the rest of my slice into my mouth, I scurried into my room to get it. “Pretty, isn’t it?” I dropped down on the sofa and handed it to him.

“Is this a fidget spinner?” He examined the intricately carved metal shell. “Why is it so heavy?”

“Because it’s not just a fidget spinner.” Taking it back, I flicked open the trigger cover and released the hidden blade with a press of my thumb.

“Holy shit.” Aiden gawked at it. “Is that legal?”

“Nope. He wanted to give me this really cute set of brass knuckles that come all folded up and have little pop-up blades you can release when you spread the circles out and wear them, like knife claws, but the spinner is a bit more user-friendly so he gave those to Kai instead and I got the pretty one.”

“That’s really sweet, and totally psycho.”

I snapped the blade closed. The knife itself was gorgeous and crafted in silver with an intricate pattern of swirls in galaxy colors overlaid on the casing. The blade was in oil-slick hues and fit perfectly in my hand.

“Some people bring their friends coffee as a way to say they care. Zane hands out weapons.” I tossed the knife on the table and grabbed another pizza slice. “He wants us to be able to protect ourselves in case anything like what happened to Gray happens again.”

“Do you think it will?”

“Not sure. But I know things will be different if it does. Biggs wouldn’t let anyone get away with that kind of shit, and he’d never blame us like Corey and Ray did to Gray. He’s also putting cameras around the building and adding lots of security inside. He cares about us, and not just about how much money we make him.” I pointed to the TV. “Want to start the show?”

“Yeah.” He grabbed the remote off the table. “Can you get me a soda?”

“Sure.” I put my slice on a napkin and stood. “Don’t start without me. I don’t want to miss anything!”

“This is our fourth rewatch *this year*. You’ve seen everything there is to see.”

“So?” I called over my shoulder as I hurried into the tiny galley kitchen. “Do you skip dessert just because you’ve had cake before?”

“That makes no sense,” he shouted back.

“Yes it does! You just don’t get it.” I opened the fridge and pulled out two drinks. “I’m having one too,” I informed him as I came back into the living room. “You know how much I love cream soda. I can’t resist when I see it.”

“Why do you think I buy it?” He poked me in the side as I sat next to him.

“You’re the bestest bestie ever.” I threw him a smile, then shoved the entire pizza crust in my mouth.

“Classy.” He popped the top on one of the cans. “Is that the guy equivalent of a girl tying a cherry stem in a knot with her tongue?”

I put my hand in front of my mouth so I could talk around the food I was still chewing. “I have no idea what kind of BJs you’ve been getting, but I tend to go top down, not from the side.” I swallowed and dropped my hand. “And most guys don’t really want you to fold their dicks in half to fit them in your mouth. Or chew on them.”

He chuckled and handed me the open soda. “Remember when Tessa was bragging about that cherry-stem trick at Rylan’s party and she challenged all the girls to do it?”

I choked on the sip of soda I’d just taken. “Oh shit.” I pounded my chest to try to clear my lungs. “I forgot about that.”

Aiden thumped me on the back a few times. “I felt so bad for them. They were making these weird faces and trying to look sexy, but they reminded me of cows.”

“And Tessa didn’t even tie hers.”

“You tied yours.” He held out his can to clink with mine. “And you didn’t look like a cow doing it. I don’t think she ever forgave you for showing her up.”

“She should’ve believed me when I said I could do it,” I sassed. “Not my fault she wrote a check she couldn’t cash when she dared me to do better than her.”

“I saw this thing on TikTok where people were sticking bananas down their throats and pulling them out. I mean, I get

that the sentiment of ‘hey, I can deepthroat’ is hot, but it looks weird to be giving blowies to bananas on social media.”

“So weird. And dangerous. Dash said he tried it, but the banana broke off right above the peel and it almost got stuck in his throat. There’s a reason sex toys have bases on them.”

“Imagine being the person who croaked because they were deepthroating a banana? And there being video evidence of it?”

“I’d die, then come back to life just to die again.” The cinnamon sticks had been calling my name since before I even started on pizza, and I finally snagged one and bit into it. Deliciousness warmed my mouth. “Do you think ghosts can be embarrassed?” I asked.

Aiden pointed the remote at the TV and started the first episode.

“Maybe that’s why ghosts stick around,” I continued, tucking my feet under me as I faced the TV. “Maybe it’s not unfinished business or being vengeful that traps them here. Maybe it’s people who died in embarrassing ways and their spirits get stuck while they ruminate about that moment for all of eternity. Just reliving it over and over again until the end of time...”

“That’s dark, my guy.” Aiden side-eyed me. “New fear unlocked.”

“Sorry not sorry.” I sipped my soda and turned my attention to the screen, ready to be immersed in the world of my favorite ladies and hanging out with my BFF.

EVAN

“Ev.”

I looked up and finished buttoning my pants. “Yes?”

Vlado stood in the doorway to my dressing room, his expression grim. “We got another one.”

“What did it say?”

“Same as the others. But the language was more personal.”

“How so?” I worked my way down the buttons on my shirt, undoing them with more force than was necessary.

“The other letters made it seem like it was a group targeting you. *We’re* watching you. *We* demand. That sort of thing. This one was singular. *I’m* not going to ask again. Don’t ignore *me*.”

Stripping off my shirt, I tossed it aside. “Do you think they slipped up, or are we dealing with two different threats?”

He handed me a clean shirt from my closet. “It’s definitely the same threat. Everything about the letter and delivery was identical except for that.”

“Why would they change it?” I slipped the shirt on. “A group is more threatening than an individual person. Do you think they did it so it makes them sound like they’re splintering and one of them is going rogue?”

“Maybe. Or maybe it really is just one person and they’re getting sloppy.”

“That could be. But it’s been months of these letters and no action. How dangerous do you think they are?”

“Just because they haven’t acted doesn’t mean they won’t. It’s a common tactic to scare a victim with threats before attacking them. The psychological effects of knowing you’re being stalked or threatened is an effective way to get in someone’s head and mess with them. Stalkers love the mental trauma their actions cause their victims as much as the endgame of actually hurting them.”

I hummed and finished buttoning my shirt.

One of the reasons Vlado was so good at his job were his instincts. He had a sixth sense about incoming danger and always seemed to be a step ahead of every threat that came my way.

He’d saved my life more than once in the past, and he’d also handled multiple stalkers, wannabe blackmailers, and thwarted a few kidnapping attempts.

Three months ago a letter arrived at my Seattle apartment, and like clockwork, another had shown up every week since.

Whoever was sending them had done everything possible to conceal their identity. They were printed on a common brand of copy paper using a printer that had been modified to not leave any identifying information or tracking codes. The envelopes were standard sized and a generic brand that was available everywhere, and there were never any prints or DNA on the letter, stamp, or inside of the envelope.

The deliveries were sent through regular mail and were processed through different post offices around the city.

Despite all that, I couldn’t shake the feeling that whoever was sending them wasn’t a real threat.

“Which tie do you want?” He indicated the two I’d laid out earlier.

“Blue.”

He handed it to me. “You know, this color reminds me of a certain someone’s eyes.”

I looped the tie around my neck and popped the collar of my shirt. “Does it now.”

“You’ve been wearing a lot of blue lately.”

“Have I?”

“You’re annoying when you’re trying to be coy.”

“I am?”

He gave me an unimpressed look.

“What are we going to do about this latest letter?” I asked.

“Not much we can do without more information. I’ll add extra guys to the schedule and send it off to be analyzed. But I’m guessing it’ll come back as clean as the others.”

“Probably. I still don’t think this is anything to worry about. It’s most likely some whackjob with too much time on his hands, or someone I pissed off who’s trying to mess with me.”

“Maybe, but maybe not,” Vlado cautioned. “They’re being sent through local channels, so that right there ups the threat level.”

“But you said yourself they could be using a local connection to send the letters while they observe from afar.”

“I don’t have enough facts to know either way. Until I have solid, tangible proof that this isn’t something to worry about, it’s my job to worry about it. Ready to go pick him up?”

“Ready.” I fell into step beside Vlado as we headed out of the dressing room.

Nick was leaning against the outside wall of his building as we pulled up. Grinning, he bounded over to the car and wrenched the door open.

“How’s it hanging?” He tossed a duffel bag in the car and slid into the seat.

“To the left, same as always,” Vlado quipped.

“Are you a grower, or a shower, Vlado?” Nick turned his attention to the front of the car, an impish grin on his plush lips.

“A little of both.”

“Is that your way of saying you have a big dick?” Nick asked.

“I don’t like to brag, but...”

Nick snickered. “Don’t lie. You love to brag.”

“Guilty.” Vlado pulled away from the curb.

“Evan loves to brag too, isn’t that right?” He swept his gaze to me. “Like when that greasy guy was going on about that thing the other night and you were all ‘is that so, peasant?’ I thought you were gonna whip your disco stick out and have a dick measuring contest right then and there.”

“Is it weird that I know exactly what moment you’re talking about?” Vlado asked.

“Nope. Means I’m rubbing off on you.” Nick grinned. “You’re both gonna be fluent in Nickalese in no time.”

“Are you talking about when Malcolm was pestering me about the new security measures he wants to put in place and I was trying to explain how our last system update already included all of his suggestions?”

“Not sure. Is Malcolm the dude with the super shiny hair and the lemon face?”

“Lemon face?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Yeah. Like he sucks on lemons for fun and walks around looking like a sourpuss.”

“That does sound like Malcolm.” I chuckled. “I have no idea what my sister sees in him.”

“Your sister? Isn’t she getting married?” He gasped theatrically. “Shut the front door. No freaking way. Your sister is marrying lemon face?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Does he have a bigger dick than Vlado?”

I grimaced. “If you could not talk about my future brother-in-law’s dick size, especially in relation to my best friend’s dick, that would be great.”

“Sorry.” He grinned, not looking the least bit apologetic.

“How was work? Was the big reopening everything you’d hoped it would be?”

“It was.” He nodded gleefully. “Biggs and Hazel did an amazing job fixing the place up.”

“It doesn’t look like your grandma’s basement anymore?” I teased.

“Nope. It’s classy as fuck now. The whole vibe is so much better.”

“Are you all set for tomorrow?” I asked.

Nick was going to be staying with me at my house in Seattle for the next two weeks to make it easier for us to coordinate him attending a series of weeknight and daytime events. He’d taken a leave of absence from his café job and had worked things out with his boss at the club so that he would only be working one night for the next two weekends.

The plan was to get him settled at the house tonight after our outing.

“Yup. It’s still weird that I’m going to be living somewhere else for two weeks and I’m only bringing a bag of essentials. I’m that person who packs enough for twenty-seven days when I go away for a weekend.” He nibbled his lip and looked away. We’d spent enough time together I recognized that as a telltale sign he was actively stopping himself from speaking.

“What?” I asked.

“I kinda told my roommate about you. Not the truth,” he added hastily. “Just enough of a half-lie that it’s kinda true but not.”

“You did?”

He nodded, his blue eyes wide and filled with sincerity. “I had to explain why I was being so weird and secretive at home. Aiden’s been my bestie since we were little. He can always tell when I’m lying or hiding something, and I was avoiding him and freaking him out and he got all serious and said he was worried about me and scared because I wasn’t acting like myself and I couldn’t keep it up.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That I have a sugar daddy. I didn’t tell him anything specific about you other than you’re not old and you’re in business. I’m sorry. Did I mess everything up? I tried really hard not to break the NDA, but I couldn’t keep lying to his face like that. Especially since I’m not going to be home for two weeks. I literally dropped that on him last night because I’ve been so stressed with what I can and can’t tell people. I’m not good at lying, and I hate doing it.”

“I understand.” I squeezed his firm thigh reassuringly. “I should have realized you’d need some sort of cover story to explain things to the people in your life.”

“You’re not mad?”

“I’m not mad.”

His smile was so brilliant it lit up his face. Heat moved through my chest and down to my groin as Nick leaned back and kicked his feet.

“I’m still not used to all this legroom.”

“You’re not?” I quirked my eyebrow at him. “I would have thought you’d be intimately acquainted with that space after spending so much time kneeling in it.”

He made a face. “I know that was probably supposed to sound sexy, but it just came out pretentious.”

Vlado laughed heartily. “He’s got your number, Ev.”

“So, Vlado. How’re you? Anything new or fun in your life?” Nick asked. A warm smile stretched his lips as he turned his focus to the front of the car.

“Can’t complain. Or I could, but bossman is here so I’d better not.” Vlado winked at him in the rearview mirror.

“Is he being his usual self?”

“He is.”

“Bummer for you.”

“I’m sitting right here,” I drawled.

Nick flicked his gaze to mine. “Do you mind, I’m trying to have a conversation with Vlado.”

“You’re extra feisty today,” I said, not bothering to hide my smirk. Usually an attitude like Nick’s would piss me off, but on him, it was endearing.

“I’m in a mood. And I have no idea where we’re going or what we’re doing. I figure I’d better lean into it now so I don’t scandalize your beige friends with my sassiness.”

“You don’t have to worry about that today.”

“Huh? You *want* me to scandalize people today?”

“I mean you don’t have to worry about boring people.”

“I’m not following,” Nick said.

“We’re not going to an event.”

“We’re not? Is that why you told me to wear my own clothes?” He smoothed the front of his shirt. “You have no idea how hard it was to find something you’d approve of in my closet that you didn’t buy me.”

I traced my gaze down his lean frame. He’d put on a pair of skinny jeans, a thick leather belt with an ornate brass buckle, and an oversized striped t-shirt that hung off one shoulder and had an asymmetrical cut so one side snaked down his thigh and the other ended just above his belt.

He looked incredible, and the eclectic outfit highlighted his tight and toned physique while also giving a playful and fun vibe.

“You do approve, right?”

I lifted my gaze to his anxious face. “I approve. You look gorgeous, as usual.”

His cheeks pinked as he smiled shyly. “Thanks. So do you. But you need to learn what casual means.”

“I know what it means.”

“Do you?” He gripped the grab handle above the window next to him. “Only a rich person would have padded holy-shit bars in their car.”

“Holy-shit bars?” Vlado and I asked together.

“Yeah.” He wiggled the grab handle. “This thing. You don’t call them holy-shit bars? That’s what my brain yells when I have to grab it.”

I chuckled. “I’ve never heard anyone call them that before.”

“Probably because Vlado’s a good driver. I love my friends, but I spend a lot of time hanging on for dear life when I get rides from them. But anyway, slacks, a shirt, and tie is business wear.”

“He’s wearing loafers,” Vlado said. “So at least his feet are casual.”

“Those aren’t loafers, they’re boat shoes. And you’re wearing them with socks.” Nick wrinkled his nose and shook his head ruefully. “You’re too young and too hot to have those on your feet. I mean, you might as well just put on some Crocs.”

“Oh god, can you imagine Ev in Crocs?” Vlado howled.

Nick cackled. “My life will not be complete until I see that.”

“I will never wear Crocs.”

He put his folded hands under his chin and fluttered his eyelashes cherubically, even as his expression stayed devious. “Pretty please.”

“No.”

“Boo. You’re no fun.” He heaved a dramatic sigh and looked at Vlado. “Does he ever take that fuddy-duddy stick out of his ass?”

“Pretty sure it would need to be surgically removed at this point.”

“Probably,” Nick agreed. “You’re a saint for putting up with him for so long.”

“He’s not so bad when he relaxes.”

“He knows how to do that?”

“Are you two done ganging up on me?”

“We’re not ganging up on you.” Nick smiled serenely. “We’re simply having a discussion about you while you eavesdrop. So really, who’s being the rude one here?”

“We’re about five minutes away,” Vlado said.

“From where?” Nick peered out the window. “You still haven’t told me what’s going on.”

“I thought we’d go shopping.”

“Shopping?” He whirled toward me, his expression hopeful and guarded in equal measure. “Like what kind of shopping?”

“Like the kind where you buy stuff.”

“Har har har.” He fake-laughed and rolled his eyes. “You’re soooo funny.”

“Your eyes are going to get stuck like that.”

“Google told me they won’t, so Imma keep doing it.” He rolled his eyes again, this time in a slow, deliberate arch. “Ow.” He squeezed his lids shut. “Remind me to not do it that way again. Can you sprain your eyeball?”

“No,” Vlado and I said together.

“Good to know.” He blinked rapidly, like he was clearing his vision. “So, shopping.” He made a *tell me more* motion with his hand. “Elaborate.”

“I’m taking you shopping so you can pick out what you’d like to have available while you’re staying at my house.”

“You really need to stop talking like you memorized a thesaurus.” He flicked my thigh. “Everyone in here knows you’re smart. You don’t have to keep trying to prove it with your big words and fancy sentences.”

Vlado’s lips pressed together to stifle a laugh.

“I’m taking you shopping so you can pick out your own wardrobe,” I said dryly, the corners of my lips twitching as I held back my smile.

“Really?”

“Really. You’ve dropped enough hints that you think my stylist has no taste and you’d prefer to choose your own clothes.”

“It’s not that she has no taste, it’s just that her taste is boring. It’s fine for you because you’re *supposed* to be boring. But my sparkle needs the freedom to shine, and it can’t do that if I’m dressed like an assassin.”

“An assassin?”

“Or secret agent.” He shrugged. “It was cool the first few times because I look damn good when I’m dressed to kill. Heh, get it, dressed to kill, assassin?”

“Very clever,” I said flatly as Vlado laughed and said, “good one.”

“Vlado thinks I’m funny.”

“Vlado also thinks whoopee cushions are funny,” I pointed out.

“You don’t?” Nick clucked his tongue disapprovingly. “Such a fuddy-duddy. But anyway, like I was saying. The assassin look was fun for a while, but it’s boring to always be in slightly different versions of the same suit. Fashion is supposed to be fun. Boring black is not fun.”

The car slowed to a stop. “We’re here,” Vlado said.

“Where?” Nick twisted around and pressed his face to the window. “I can’t see shit. Am I gonna get yelled at again if I open the door and get out like a normal person?”

“You’re fine.”

Nick scrambled out of the car. I slid across the seat and climbed out after him.

“I have no idea where we are.” He looked around. “You said we were going shopping?”

“We are.”

The door to the unmarked building in front of us swung open.

“Evan,” Bridgette greeted as she and her assistant approached us.

“Bridgette.” I bent down so she could air-kiss my cheeks.

“It’s so wonderful to see you again.” Her pasted-on smile was as fake as always. “Shall we go inside?”

Wordlessly, we followed her into the front of the store, which was set up like a small lobby and separated the main entrance from the showroom.

Nick leaned close and whispered in my ear. “This place looks like a fancy doctor’s office.” His hot breath fanned over my neck. Goosebumps erupted on my skin and I suppressed a shiver. My neck had always been an erogenous zone, which was another reason I wore shirts with collars. “You’re not trying to trick me into getting my kidney harvested, right? I know you only need one to live, but I’d like to keep both of mine, thank you very much.”

I covered my laugh with a quick cough and turned my head to whisper back. “I promise there’s no organ trafficking going on here. Just shopping.”

“Okay.” He looked at Bridgette. “Sorry, just had to ask a quick question.”

She scanned Nick from the top down, her expression dimming as she eyed his clothes. “It’s a good thing I cleared

my schedule.” She made a disapproving sound. “I can see we have our work cut out for us with this one.”

Nick’s smile fell and his shoulders stooped.

A rush of possessive anger moved through me. No one spoke to Nick like that in my presence.

I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and pulled him against me. “Bridgette, this is Nick. My *boyfriend*.”

Her eyes doubled in size. “Your boyfriend? I thought you were bringing a...companion.”

“You were mistaken.” The outside door banged shut as Vlado joined us in the lobby. “Is there someone available to assist Nick while he shops?”

“I’d be more than happy to—”

“Not you.” Nick snuggled up to me and wrapped both arms around my middle. “Someone who isn’t a judgey mcjudgerson.”

“Of course.” She waved to her assistant, finally acknowledging her. “Elizabeth can assist you with whatever you need.”

Nick moved to stand in front of me, still hugging me tight. “What’s my budget?”

“No budget.”

He blanched. “Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“Are you *sure* you’re sure? I know you’re loaded, but you have no idea how much I love to shop. I need to know if you mean it, or if you’re just saying that and I’m supposed to magically know what the limit is.”

I pressed a soft kiss to his lips. “I mean it. No limits. Today is about you getting spoiled.”

“Okay, but what about parameters? Am I only shopping for event stuff, or can I get other stuff too? You need to give me something to work with or my brain is gonna go rogue and

I can't be held responsible for how much of your money I spend."

"Get whatever you need to build a complete wardrobe. I mean it. No limits."

"Thank you." Nick squeezed me tight enough he forced the air from my lungs, then pecked a kiss against my lips. "I hope you're wearing comfy shoes today," he said as he spun toward Elizabeth, "because I'm ready to do some serious damage to both your store, and Evan's credit card."

"Comfy shoes are locked and loaded," Elizabeth said with a genuine smile. "Right this way." She motioned for him to follow her into the showroom beyond the lobby.

Some of the tension left my body. Nick would be in good hands with her.

"Christ on a bike!" Nick exclaimed as he peered into the back area. "Now *this* is how we shop! RIP to your credit card!" He rushed through the door and disappeared into the showroom.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Bridgette asked me, crisply.

"Yes."

She perked up.

"Nick will need some refreshments while he shops."

Vlado made a sound in his throat.

"Us too," I added.

"Of course." She nodded, her expression returning to its default tightness. "Anything else?"

"No." Looking at Vlado, I waited until the click-clack of heels on the polished floor indicated Bridgette had left.

"You pissed her off." He smirked.

"She pissed me off," I growled.

"Come on. Let's park our asses in those comfy chairs and relax while Nick has his fun."

“I realize Evan said no limits, but I can’t allow this.”

I looked up from my phone at Bridgette’s voice.

She yanked a few garments off the rack Nick had loaded up with things he wanted to try on. Meanwhile he stood a few feet away, his head down, looking like he wanted the floor to swallow him up.

“You might not have rules where you come from, but in my store—”

“What’s the problem?” I asked loudly, watching Nick.

“Nothing,” he mumbled.

I strode over to him.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle, Evan.” Bridgette turned on her phony smile. “Your companion—”

“Boyfriend,” I corrected. “Put them back.”

“But—”

“Put. Them. Back.”

She stilled for a beat, then nodded tightly and hung the hangers back on the rack.

“Leave us,” I clipped.

“Come along.” She motioned for Elizabeth to follow her. “We’ll give them a moment.”

“Nick?” I tipped his face up by the chin, forcing him to look at me. “What happened?”

“Nothing.” His lip trembled. “I just got excited and forgot where I was.”

“What do you mean?”

“I picked some stuff I shouldn’t have.” He tried to look away, but I held his chin in place.

“What do you mean?”

His eyes brightened with unshed tears.

“Nicky?” I said.

He gave me a wobbly smile. “You...called me Nicky.”

“Is that okay?” I asked softly.

“Yeah.” He half smiled, the liquid gathering on his lashes.
“I like it.”

“Will you tell me what happened?”

“I just did. I picked some stuff I shouldn’t have.”

“Show me what you picked.”

“I... I don’t think I should.”

“Please.”

“Okay,” he whispered.

On the rack of clothes Nick had chosen, a pleated black skirt caught my attention, as did a white bodysuit with artistic cutouts, and a sheer black slip dress.

“Do you enjoy wearing clothes that are traditionally for women?” I asked when he didn’t make a move toward the rack.

“Sometimes.” He wrung his hands in front of him. “I mean, I know what’s appropriate and when to *not* wear certain things, but my parents are hippies. They don’t believe in gendered clothes or toys and taught us that stereotypes are stupid and gender is a social construct. I forget that just because I think skirts are comfy or bodysuits make me look like a snack, that doesn’t mean other people will be okay with it.”

“Nicky, look at me.”

He peered up at me through his lashes.

“Did you pick these clothes because you liked them?”

He nodded.

“Will you feel good about yourself when you wear them?”

He nodded again.

“Then that’s all you need to think about.” I leaned in to take a soft sip from his lips. When I pulled back, the surprise had soaked in, and his smile became so luminous it warmed me from the inside. “Are you ready to try them on?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He looked between the entrance to the dressing room and the chair I’d been sitting in as Vlado and I waited. “Do you want to see any of them?” Nick asked me. “The outfits?”

“I’d love to see whatever you want to show me.”

“Want me to scram, or can I stay for the show too?” Vlado asked from where he was sprawled in his chair, a cup of coffee in his hand, and a platter of finger sandwiches on his lap.

“You can stay.” Nick scurried over and plucked a sandwich off the platter. “You’re not going to be weird if you see me rocking a skirt, right?”

“Fuck no. I’m all about freeballing. A skirt or dress would be awesome for that.”

“Why do they call these finger sandwiches?” Nick wiggled the little square of food in his hand. “When I was little, I thought they had real fingers in them and I thought people who ate them were cannibals. Same with ladyfingers, you know, the cookies? I still can’t eat them because all I can think about when I see them is crunching down on a chocolate-covered finger. At least these little sammies don’t look like fingers.”

“I think they call them that because you eat them with your hands?” Vlado cut me a bewildered, sidelong glance.

“But you eat all sandwiches with your hands. That’s the whole point of a sandwich. I should text Gray so he can ask Eli. He’d know.”

“Who? And also, what?” I tried to follow the shift in conversation.

“My other bestie, Gray. His little brother is a genius. Not like ‘oh, he’s a genius’ but like ‘he’s a *genius*.’” He shoved the sandwich in his mouth and grabbed another. “I bet he also does math for fun.”

“Are you calling me a genius, or a nerd?” I asked slowly, still not completely caught up with the conversation.

“Depends. Are you a genius?”

“No?”

“Then I guess it’s door number two.” He popped the sandwich piece in his mouth. “Why does rich-people food always taste like sadness and air?” he asked as he chewed. “Is that how they stay rich? By not buying seasoning? Or is flavor the new rich-person gluten and everyone is fashionably avoiding it?”

Vlado shoved several of the sandwich squares in his mouth and chewed around a grin. “You get used to the blandness. At least the coffee is good.”

Nick swiped the cup out of Vlado’s hand and took a sip. “Yeah, I’ll stick with the bubbly.” He handed it back. “Just because something is expensive, doesn’t mean it’s good. The dark brew at my work has a better flavor profile, and it’s less acidic. This is boring coffee for boring people with too much money. Proves you can put lipstick on a pig but that doesn’t make it a beauty queen.”

Vlado coughed around the sandwich he’d been swallowing, and I let out a bark of laughter.

Listening to Nick talk was a wild ride, but his inability to keep to a topic and all his rambling tangents only made him more fun. Usually I hated when people wasted my time with drivel and useless chatter, but Nick was different. Refreshing and so full of life.

“Are we ready to start trying on?”

We spun toward Elizabeth, who had a tape measure around her neck and a box of pins in her hand.

Nick nodded vigorously.

I settled in my chair as Nick and Elizabeth dragged the humongous rack of clothes into the dressing room.

“Remember the bill when you let Emily loose in that shop in Milan for her sweet sixteen?”

“I remember.” I smiled at the memory of my sister rushing around the store, excitedly choosing things to try on, much like Nick. “I have a feeling he’s going to blow her total out of the water.”

“He’s good for you. I haven’t seen this side of you in years.” Vlado slurped down the rest of his coffee, his head tilted back as he just drained the cup as if my heart weren’t slamming a hole against my chest from what he’d said.

“Ready to be amazed?” Nick called from the dressing room, saving me from having to answer.

“Bring it!” Vlado shouted back.

Still reeling a bit from Vlado’s declaration, I jerked my attention over to where Nick was stepping out in a textured navy-blue suit and a vibrantly patterned shirt.

“I figured we’d save the best for last.” Nick strutted over to the raised platform and trifold mirror, working the floor like a supermodel on a runway. “Get the event clothes out of the way so you can approve them. Thoughts on this one?”

“I like it.” That felt woefully inadequate, but Nick didn’t seem to mind.

Elizabeth moved around him, pinning various parts of the garments, as Nick babbled about all the things he loved about it.

I barely heard a word he said, I was too focused on how happy he was and the joy that radiated off him as he checked himself out in the mirror.

The next hour was filled with Nick modeling outfits he’d chosen for events. He had an incredible eye for detail and managed to create classic looks with little surprise elements that made each ensemble as unique as him.

Fashion had never been one of my interests. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d gone shopping for myself, but sharing this experience with Nick and seeing him enjoy one of his passions was the most fun I’d had in weeks.

He’s good for you.

“That’s all the...traditional stuff,” Nick said as I tucked away my grin. His cheeks were ruddy as he stood in front of the open dressing-room door in a silk robe.

I looked up at Elizabeth. “Can you take what we have so far and add it to my bill?”

She nodded. “I’ll get you a delivery estimate too. It shouldn’t take more than a few days to get everything altered, but I’ll have to check with our team before I can give you a firm date.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you sure you want to see the rest?” Nick asked when Elizabeth was out of earshot. “I’ve already spent a shit ton of your money. We can stop now.”

I crooked my finger at him.

He scurried over, the silk robe fluttering around his defined thighs.

“I told you to get whatever you want and to not think about the cost.”

“Yeah, but even without price tags, I can ballpark how much all that will cost, and I’m pretty sure it’s about the same as the GDP of a small country—”

I tugged him down on my lap. He wrapped his arms around my neck. “You haven’t spent nearly as much as you seem to think you have. I can afford it, and more than that, I *want* to buy these things for you.”

“Why?” he asked. “I get the suits and stuff I can wear to events, but why do you want to buy me things I don’t need for our arrangement?”

“Because I enjoy spoiling people I like. Seeing you happy makes me happy. And the selfish bastard in me likes knowing you’ll be wearing clothes I gave you.”

He smiled, the last of his unease fading, it seemed.

“Now, will you show me the rest of your choices?”

With a quick nod, he slid off my lap.

Vlado peered at me knowingly as Nick hurried into the dressing room. I ignored it.

“Are you sure about this?” Nick shouted a moment later.

“Get your butt out here and show us,” Vlado yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth for emphasis.

“Okay.” The door swung open and Nick took a tentative step out.

“Holy shit.”

I would have echoed Vlado’s sentiment, but I was so taken aback I couldn’t form words.

He stood in a pair of loose, flowing silk slacks and a skintight, one-shouldered bodysuit with several cutouts along the sides and a deep neckline. A belt consisting of a string of rainbow gems sat low on his hips, a few inches below the waistband of the slacks, and a matching rainbow choker necklace encircled his slender throat. The finishing touch was a pair of ankle boots with a chunky heel.

“Do you like it?” he asked tentatively.

I gulped a swallow. “You look beautiful.”

“Yeah?” He beamed, his entire demeanor going from shy to radiant. “Want to see more?”

I nodded, not trusting that my voice wouldn’t crack like I was back in middle school.

He sprang into the dressing room.

“Wow,” Vlado muttered.

“Yeah.” I loosened my tie as a flush of heat crept up my neck.

“Okay, this one is a bit out there,” Nick called.

“This isn’t an airport, you don’t need to announce your arrival,” Vlado teased. “Just come out and show us.”

The door swung open and Nick stepped out in a short, pleated black skirt with a deep slit up the side of his right thigh, fishnet stockings, gothic-style combat boots, and a fitted

tuxedo shirt with a strappy black harness-style belt that went over his shoulders, crisscrossed over his abdomen, and had two garter sections that fit around his thighs.

“Whoa.” I shifted in my seat as my cock hardened. “You look...*wow*.”

He smiled, but it was reserved. “Are you against makeup on guys?”

“Not at all.”

His grin widened, his features relaxing. “Oh phew. ’Cause if I was wearing this out I’d add some dark eyeliner, maybe a smudgy-smokey cat eye, and a neutral lip stain. And this super cute fake nose ring I got because I hate needles and almost passed out while watching my friend get her hoo-ha pierced.”

“Her what?” Vlado looked a bit stunned.

“Her hoo-ha. Snickerdoodle? Her va-jay-jay—”

“Got it.” Vlado made a gurgling sound as he swallowed his laugh. “And she wanted you there while she did it?”

“As her safe person.” He shrugged and fingered the buckle of the belt. “Most of my girl friends think of me as their safe gay bestie, even though I’m not gay. I’m just...nonthreatening. And that’s good because I *want* to be a safe person. But yeah. That look, plus this outfit, is how I’d wear it.”

I had to blink a few times to circle back to talking about his clothes and not his statements about how the people in his life perceive him.

“I really like these kinds of belts.” He smoothed his hand over the thick strap that circled his waist. “The ones I have are fake leather or plastic and have sharp edges that kinda hurt and dig into me. This one is so soft it’s like I’m not even wearing it.”

“How many colors does it come in?” I asked.

“Four...”

“Get all of them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Happily, he twirled around and hurried back into the dressing room.

“You okay?” I asked Vlado. He’d spent the last few minutes staring at a spot on the floor in front of him with a blank look on his face.

He shook his head, then glanced up. “Yeah. Fine. I’m just...”

“Having a bit of a sexual crisis?” I chuckled at his gobsmacked expression.

He scrubbed a hand through his dark hair. “Little bit. I never realized the stuff I like on women could look that good on a man. Or at least on a man who looks like him.”

Vlado’s type was goth girls and metalheads and had been since we were teenagers. The aesthetic had never really appealed to me in the past, but I was a fan of Nick’s version.

Nick had the uncanny ability to walk the line between masculine and feminine without shifting into androgynous. It amazed me how he could look pretty and delicate in a traditional suit, but still not seem feminine. And now, he’d proven he could be masculine and handsome in a skirt and stockings.

He was a true chameleon when it came to his look, and his personality. How much of that was because of his background in theater and dance, and how much of it was because he felt the need to hide who he was from people? How much of it was because he *could* hide who he was from people?

“Wait, hold that thought!” Nick shouted excitedly. The door to his dressing room flew open and he rushed toward us. “Am I about to inspire a bi-awakening?”

“Maybe?” Vlado shifted the empty sandwich platter on his lap so it covered his crotch.

“Eeek!” Nick clapped his hands. “I have soooo many hot friends I can introduce you to if you wanna give dick a chance.”

“Slow down there, speedy.” Vlado smiled affectionately. “I’m still straight, just...realizing things aren’t as binary as I thought they were.”

“Is that code for your dick is confused but you aren’t?”

“Pretty much.”

“Too bad. You’d do well if you dipped your dick into the dude pool. The bad-boy hottie look you’ve got going on is super in right now.”

A rush of jealousy moved through me as Nick complimented Vlado, but faded as he turned his gaze to me.

“Do you like it?” he asked.

Slowly, I traced my gaze down his frame and took in the full effect of the outfit. He’d layered a sheer bodysuit with an opaque flame pattern on it under a red-and-black-striped silk suit. The jacket and matching pants were slim fit and hugged every curve of his amazing body while the flames on the bodycon drew the eye to his fit pecs as they mimicked a bra pattern. He’d finished off the look with a pair of black high-top dress shoes.

“You look incredible.” I didn’t bother hiding the bulge in my pants as my throbbing cock twitched toward him.

Grinning, he hurried back into the dressing room.

The next half dozen outfits were just as sultry and flattering as the others, and I was dizzy with desire when he peeked his head out of the room and called my name.

“Yes?” I walked over to him.

“I want to show you this next one, but I don’t think it’s appropriate for Vlado to see.”

“Do you want me to come in?”

“Mhm.” He stepped back.

I closed the door behind me.

He toyed with the belt of the silk robe he had on. “I really like this one, but it might be too much.”

“I’m sure it isn’t.” I leaned against the door. “Will you show me?”

He tugged the belt loose and pushed the robe off his shoulders. It fluttered to the floor and puddled at his feet.

“Nicky...” I hissed as blood pounded in my...*everywhere*.

The shimmery black panties and matching bralette looked incredible against his tanned skin, but it was the complicated pattern of glittering straps circling his torso and connecting the pieces I couldn’t look away from.

The set had been designed for women, but it looked amazing on him.

“I like wearing stuff like this under boring clothes.” He smoothed the cups of the bralette against his pecs. “Like my work uniform.” He licked his lips, tucking the bottom one briefly in between his teeth. “Or a suit.”

“I have a better place I’ll take you to.” My voice cracked on the last word.

“Better place?”

“One that has an entire selection of clothing exactly like that, only made for men.”

“Really?” His eyes gleamed. “They have those kinds of stores? I’ve only ever been able to find stuff for guys online, and the sizing is always a nightmare on those sites.”

“I know someone who has a boutique that carries lingerie and fetish wear for men. I’ll take you when I have a break in my schedule.”

“Are you sure? This is already too much.”

“Does it make you happy?” I asked, stepping into his space.

“Yes.” He peered up at me shyly.

Nick was only a few inches shorter than me, but he seemed small and delicate when he looked at me like that.

“Then that’s all you need to care about.” I drew him close and gave him a sweet kiss.

He moaned and pressed his hardening cock against my erection.

I tried to pull away, but he held on and swept his tongue into my mouth, deepening the kiss.

“Is there anything I can do to thank you?” he whispered against my lips. “Maybe you could put this this”—he cupped my cock—“somewhere new and fun.”

Alarm bells went off in my head as he kissed me again, cutting through the haze of my arousal. I broke away. “Are you asking me to fuck you?”

“Maybe.” He squeezed my dick.

“What happened to wanting it to be special?”

“Well, buying me a full wardrobe is pretty special. I think you deserve a reward.”

“I’ll take another kiss, but nothing more.”

“What?” He scrunched his face up in confusion, and hurt. “You don’t want me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you don’t want to fuck me?”

“I didn’t say that either.” I pulled him tighter and put my lips to his ear. “I want you, Nick. Make no mistake about that. But I didn’t bring you here because I expected anything from you. I did it because I wanted to.”

“But...” He shuddered as I kissed his neck, just under his ear. “You’re spending all this money—”

I cut him off with another quick peck. “I am, but it’s my choice to do so. I never want you to think you need to repay me for anything, especially not with sex. If I do something, it’s because I want to. A thank-you, a smile, and a kiss is reward enough.”

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “You’re more than your body, Nicky.”

He blinked rapidly, his eyes veiling with something I couldn’t make out. “Thanks, Ev. No one has ever said anything like that to me before. It’s usually... It doesn’t matter. But thank you. For today, and for not being a creep.”

I dropped a quick kiss on the tip of his nose. “Is that the last of it?”

“Yeah. Is it okay that I got some cozy clothes too? I can show them to you so you can approve them—”

“Of course it’s okay. I told you to get a full wardrobe. That includes cozy clothes. Are you ready to go?”

He untangled himself from my arms. “Yeah. I’m actually shopped out. I think this is only the second time that’s happened.”

“When was the first?”

“When my friend got married last year and I went dress shopping with her and her bridesmaids. Thirteen of them, all with different body types and comfort levels. And a bride who tried on over seventy dresses in two days and insisted on going to five stores to see all her options before going with the third dress she tried on. That was a long-ass weekend.”

“Thankfully Emily’s friend designed her wedding dresses so I’ve only had to go along to fittings. Now, how about you get dressed, I’ll handle everything up front, and we go to dinner?”

“Okay.” He looked down at the lingerie he still had on. “What should I do with this? I can’t really give it back now that I got excited in it.”

“Wear it under your clothes so I can picture it on you during dinner.”

“Yeah?” He grinned. “You’d like that?”

“Very much,” I said, my voice a low rumble.

“I’ll be out in a few.” He pecked a kiss against my jaw, then shooed me out of the room.

Still a bit dazed and reeling from what just happened with Nick, I made my way to Bridgette's office to settle my bill and arrange for delivery.

NICK

NICK: DUDE

Gray: what?

Nick: DUDE!

Gray: stop yelling dude at me and use your words

Nick: DUDE!!!

Nick: jk

Nick: but im still mad at you!

Gray: what did I do?

Nick: it's what you didn't do!

Gray: what didn't I do?

Nick: you didn't tell me you're boinking ur stepbro!

Gray: technically he's boinking me

Nick: I cant even give that an lol

Nick: I feel so betrayed

Nick: its like I don't even kno you anymore

Nick: I had to find out from the twins!

Gray: i wasn't leaving you out. I haven't told anyone about what's going on

Gray: I have no clue how the twins figured it out but it wasn't from me

Nick: River said he saw you dragging some guy off to the booths to boink each other's brains out and Zane figured out it was ur stepbro!

Gray: I can't read the word boink with a straight face fyi

Gray: we didn't fuck in there I just gave him a dance

Nick: but ur fucking him?

Gray: yeah

Gray: but its complicated

Nick: i need story time

Gray: not much to tell. He was my nurse when I went to the ER

Nick: and?

Gray: and he took care of me while I was on concussions watch

Nick: and???

Gray: and... I don't know. We fucked a few times

Nick: but don't you hate him?

Gray: and he hates me. First time we hooked up started with him slamming me into the wall

Nick: that sounds hot

Gray: it was hot

Nick: so now what?

Gray: nothing. It happened and it's over

Nick: are u sure?

Nick: if you liked him enough to have sex with him maybe there's something worth exploring between you

Gray: it was a lapse. He's my type and he activated my fighting kink. That's it. Trust me when I say like had nothing to do with it

Nick: if ur sure

Gray: im sure

Nick: I don't get the fighting kink thing

Nick: no judgment cause I don't kink shame but fighting doesn't make me feel sexy

Nick: it makes me stabby and ragey and if someone whipped their dick out while I was pissed they'd def need to have it surgically reattached

Gray: the scary thing is I know ur not joking

Gray: I gotta go to bed. I have work in the morning

Nick: have a good sleep. Love you

Gray: Love you too

Sighing, I climbed off the king-sized bed and stretched my arms above my head.

I'd been at Evan's for three days now and I'd barely seen him.

The house was huge and had every luxury someone could want, including two pools, a gym, a movie theater, and a sauna.

The weird thing about it was how it didn't seem lived in. The rooms were sparsely decorated and were mostly devoid of personal touches. It was way too much space for one person, and even though he'd told me to make myself comfortable and feel free to use the amenities, I hadn't done more than wander around.

The cavernous rooms and gleaming surfaces weren't the least bit welcoming, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched or that someone would jump out and yell at me if I disturbed the silence of the house.

Evan had told me he was dealing with some issues at work, and he'd canceled the event we were supposed to attend last night. He'd said it was a baby sprinkle, and after looking up what the hell a baby sprinkle was, I hadn't been too broken up over missing it.

The next event we were supposed to attend was tomorrow night, and it was a benefit his mother was throwing. It was also the first time I'd be meeting his family.

Well, officially meeting them. I'd sort of met Emily at her bachelorette party but didn't think that counted since our only interactions had been her stuffing cash in my undies after I ripped off my clothes to music.

Dropping my arms, I headed toward the door. I needed to get out of this room before I went stir-crazy.

The late hour meant the staff had all gone home for the night, and I had no idea if Evan was even home. He'd mentioned that Vlado lived in the pool house out back, but I hadn't thought to check if the lights were on or if there were any signs of life in the sprawling structure.

Gingerly, I made my way down to the kitchen, trying not to freak myself out by picturing all sorts of scary things lurking in the shadowy corners, ready and waiting to jump out at me.

By the time I made it to the kitchen, I was half in a tizzy from self-induced fear and my imagination.

I was so out of it I didn't think to question why the lights were on. Not until I rounded the corner and saw a dark figure pulling something out of the fridge.

"Shit!"

"Jesus!"

The figure spun around, a huge knife in its hand.

"Don't kill me!" I scrambled back but tripped over my own foot and landed on my ass on the cold tile floor.

"Nick?"

"Evan?" I blinked as the figure came into focus. "You scared me!"

"I can see that." He put the knife and whatever he had in his other hand down on the counter and hurried over. "Are you hurt?"

“I don’t think so.” I let him pull me to my feet. “But my butt isn’t all that happy with your floor right now.” I rubbed a sore spot just below my tailbone. “Why were you lurking in the dark?”

He glanced around.

“I mean the metaphorical dark.” I snapped my mouth closed, only then realizing he was naked from the waist up, and only had a pair of capri sweatpants on. “Oh that’s not fair.”

“Metaphorical dark? And what’s not fair?” He folded his lips and pressed them into a tight line, like he was trying to stop himself from grinning.

“You know, the metaphorical dark. It’s late and your house is super creepy, so even the lights don’t make it not dark and scary.”

His shoulders shook with the effort to not laugh.

“And you were waving a knife! Who does that?”

“Someone who’s making themselves a sandwich.”

“Say what?”

He motioned to the counter where a cutting board, a loaf of bread, and a few jars and containers were laid out.

I eyed his washboard stomach. “You eat?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“I mean, I know you eat. But you can cook?”

“Making a sandwich isn’t exactly cooking. But yes, I do know how to cook.”

“Why? Don’t you have people for that?” I followed him to the cutting board and hopped up on the counter next to it.

“I do, but cooking is a life skill.”

“Not one I’m good at. Thank fuck my bestie works at a restaurant and brings me food on the regular. Otherwise I’d either burn the place down or starve. Maybe both.”

He went back to the fridge and pulled the door open. My gaze was drawn to his back and ass as he bent to get something.

“What wasn’t fair?”

“Huh?”

“You said something wasn’t fair.”

“Oh right.” I waved to his pants when he faced me. “Those aren’t fair.”

He glanced at them.

“Sweatpants capris are one of my weaknesses. It’s not fair you look like that in them.”

“Like what?” He grinned and gave his attention to the cutting board.

“Like sex on legs.”

He chuckled. “Consider it preemptive payback for what you’re wearing.”

I glanced down at the baggy sweats and floaty crop top I had on. “Really? You like this look? These are my cozy clothes.”

He met my gaze, his dark eyes molten and shining with desire. “Let’s just say crop tops are one of mine.”

“Good to know.” I cleared my throat. “So, what are you making me?”

“Roasted chicken with apples, cranberries, and brie.”

“That sounds...weird.”

“Will you at least try it before you make up your mind that you don’t like it?”

“Sure. And weird isn’t bad. Gray gives me weird stuff to eat all the time and it’s usually yummy.”

“Gray?”

“Gray. Or Graham. Or Seth—that’s his stage name.”

“You work with him?”

“Yup. He’s my bestie.”

“I thought your roommate was your best friend?”

“He is. But so’s Gray. If you want to get technical, Aiden is my BFF and Gray is my bestie.”

“What about Quinn?”

“Quinn? He’s my friend. A good friend but not bestie zone yet.”

“You seemed close when you came to my office.”

“We are. Well, we’re getting to be. It’s complicated, but I work with him too.”

“Complicated like you and he had a thing?” He focused on whatever he was chopping as if he were going to be quizzed on it later. His jaw clenched and worked as he ground his teeth together.

“I wish, but alas, Quinn is very straight.”

Evan visibly relaxed.

“Are you jelly?” I teased.

“Of course not.”

I grinned at his clipped tone. “I’m not into any of my coworkers.”

“But you said you had a thing for Quinn?”

“He’s not really a coworker, and I don’t actually have a thing for him. He’s a headliner, so he only dances at the club once, maybe twice a month. And yeah, he’s hot, but I don’t think of him that way. He’s just a friend.”

“It’s none of my concern. You don’t have to explain anything to me.”

“Maybe not, but I’m just saying that I’m not into anyone at my work. They’re my friends, some of them are my best friends, but that’s it.”

Evan plated a tall sandwich and handed it to me, then made himself one. “I didn’t mean to make it seem like I was prying into your private life.”

“You weren’t. We agreed on exclusivity. Remember? You have a right to know if I’m breaking that. I’m not and I wouldn’t, but you’re allowed to ask.”

He looked at me, as if knowing I would want to ask questions, too.

“Have you ever hooked up with a coworker?” I started.

He shook his head and leaned his hip against the counter. “I have strict rules about mixing business and sex.”

“Rules as in you don’t do it?”

“Never.”

A little flutter of happiness tickled my chest. I wanted to roll my eyes at myself. Why did I care that he didn’t fuck people he worked with?

Trying to distract myself, I took a bite of the sandwich. A myriad of flavors exploded on my tongue as they blended into something absolutely delicious. “Holy shamrocks this is good.”

He chuckled and finished chewing his own bite.

We ate in silence, mostly because it was so good I didn’t want to pause long enough to talk. When my plate was empty, I put it on the counter and patted my stomach. “That hit the spot.”

“Glad you enjoyed it.” Evan busied himself with cleaning up.

“Need help?” I asked, planting my hands on the counter so I could jump off.

“I’ve got it.”

“Are you sure? I kinda feel like a tool just sitting here while you do the work.”

“It’s fine.” He smiled sheepishly. “I’m a bit particular when it comes to cooking and how my kitchen is kept.”

“You mean you’re anal and a clean freak?”

“Maybe a little bit.” He chuckled.

“I haven’t seen much of you the past few days. It’s weird to be in your house when you’re not here.”

“I’ve been putting in more hours than usual at the office.” He gathered up the jars and containers to put back in the fridge. “How’re you finding the house? Is there anything you need?”

“A map would be useful. Do you have any idea how weird it is to be in a house big enough to get lost in?”

“I’ve gotten turned around a few times, if that makes you feel better.”

“You get lost in your own house? And you don’t think that’s a sign that maybe you don’t need all this space?”

“This isn’t my house.”

“What?” I yelped. “We’re trespassing?!”

“It’s a rental.”

“The fuck is going on with the housing market if *you* can’t afford to buy a house in this economy?”

“I can afford to buy a house. In fact, I have three houses.” He closed the door to the fridge.

“I know you didn’t mean that to sound like a *nana nana boo boo*, I’m rich you’re poor type thing, but it totally did. Anyway, if you have so many houses, why did you rent this monstrosity?”

“For security reasons.”

“That’s not a normal-people answer.”

“Unfortunately it’s all I can say right now.”

“What about that issue you were dealing with, is it better?”

“Mostly.”

“What’s going on? You don’t have to tell me, but sometimes it’s nice to vent to someone who’s completely removed from the situation.”

“I’m having some issues with Malcolm.”

“Your future bro-in-law?”

He nodded and put the cutting board and knife in the sink. “Malcolm has been with the company for a long time, and his engagement to my sister has given him a sense of entitlement that’s made him difficult to work with.”

“How long is a long time? He doesn’t look that old.”

“Ten years. He started working for my dad when he was twenty-five.”

“And how long have he and Emily been together?”

“Two years. They’ve been engaged for almost eighteen months now.”

“That feels quick.”

“It was, but Emily is happy and our parents are thrilled.” He finished washing the cutting board and laid it in the drying rack. “The issue I’m having is that Malcolm is the COO of my father’s company and he’s not happy that I’ll be inheriting the majority share when Dad retires. He’s been increasingly vocal about his doubts that I can run two companies.”

“That’s a lot for anyone. You already work too much. You can’t add another full-time job on top of that.”

“I don’t plan to.” He finished wiping down the counter and draped the cloth over a small hook on the side of the trough sink. “I’m appointing a new CEO who’ll take over when my father retires. I’ll oversee things, but my focus will be on my position within my company.”

“And I’m guessing you’re not promoting lemon face?”

He smirked. “I almost called him that today.”

“Really?” I grinned. “One day you should do it on purpose and record it. I will need to see that footage, please and thank you.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He chuckled. “But no, I’m not promoting him. My father has built an incredibly successful company, but his practices and policies are outdated and unsustainable. Massive changes need to be made so it can stay

relevant in the changing market, but that costs money and takes time. Malcolm is convinced I'm going to fail and destroy everything my father built. He's trying to get the board of directors on his side so they'll refuse to work with the new CEO I've already hired, and fight any of my proposed changes."

"Maybe the new boss will be able to put him in his place?"

"I'm sure she will, but—"

"She's a she, and your boomer dad and sucky mclemmon face are too misogynistic to wrap their brains around a woman being able to do the job? And I'm guessing the board of directors is made up of a bunch of dinosaurs who also suffer from fragile masculinity?"

The corners of his mouth tilted up in a smile. "Exactly."

"That's annoying."

"It is. I've managed to keep the board on my side, but every time Malcolm hears something he doesn't agree with, he goes running to my father to tell him. Then I have to deal with my father's micromanaging and waste my time explaining everything to him, while also juggling the egos on the board and trying to keep everyone appeased."

"He's tattling on you? Is he five?"

"Apparently."

"And I'm guessing you can't say anything to him or talk to Emily about this?"

He shook his head. "Malcolm is good at what he does, but he's not the future I want for the company. He's in a unique position because of his engagement to my sister and his close relationship with my father. He has no respect for my authority and there's nothing I can do about it until the paperwork has been signed and the company is officially mine. But she's stressed about the wedding, and she hates business, so putting any of this on her isn't an option."

"What about your mom?"

“She’s on Dad’s side. No matter what, she’ll always pick his side.”

“That sounded a bit bitter.”

He crossed his arms. “My mother is a product of her environment. She was raised to put her husband first and her children second. Her entire focus has always been on him and his career. She’s not a bad person, but there were plenty of times when Emily and I have needed our mom to protect us, and she didn’t.”

“I’m sorry. That sucks. My parents were the opposite. They always told us that their first job is being parents, and their second job is being a partner. I was lucky I grew up knowing they’d always have my back. It sounds like you didn’t have that.”

He shook his head. “It’s always been me and Emily against them. And they’ve already proven their support is conditional.”

“What do you mean?”

“One of the reasons my parents are thrilled Emily is marrying lemon face is because he’s an appropriate choice.” He grinned, his bad mood breaking.

I grinned back, trying like hell to ignore the warmth that snaked through my chest at the soft look in his eyes. “You mean he’s rich and boring and will do whatever your dad says?”

“Precisely. He also comes from a respectable family with good connections, so that makes him an even more attractive choice.

“Emily was always the wild child of the family. Our parents forbade her from pursuing modeling; she did it anyway. They threatened to cut her off if she didn’t quit working in fashion and focus on finding a suitable husband, so she went no-contact and supported herself until they gave in. Now that she’s made a proper match and is taking on a more traditional role, our parents are frothing at the mouth for them to get married.”

“Which makes it extra hard to deal with lemon face’s attitude because no one wants to upset him before the big day,” I guessed out loud.

Evan nodded at the same moment his phone rang. He pulled it out of his sweatpants and looked at the screen warily.

“Dude, it’s almost eleven at night. Don’t answer it.”

He made a face. “I have to.”

“Do you?” I gave him a pointed look. “Or do you just think you do because you’ve been trained to always be available to people?”

He shrugged and swiped to answer it. “Yes?”

“Doesn’t even say hello like a normal person,” I muttered.

“I understand your concerns,” he said in a robotic voice. “But there’s nothing we can do right now. Put everything in an email and I’ll handle it in the morning.” He pulled the phone away from his ear and ended the call.

“Look at you setting a boundary. And you didn’t die!”

He went to tuck his phone away. It rang again.

“Oh hell no.” I held out my hand. “Lemme answer it.”

He checked the screen.

“I’m serious. Give me the phone and I’ll deal with it.”

The corner of his lips twitched. “This is either the best, or the worst idea I’ve ever had.” He handed me the phone.

“Is it the same person?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Hello, Evan’s phone.”

“*Evan?*” A booming male voice came blasting over the speaker.

“I’m sorry, Evan is busy right now. Can I take a message?”

“*Who’s this? Why do you have Evan’s phone?*”

“This is his boyfriend. I have his phone because Evan is busy.”

“Put him on the phone. I don’t have time for this.”

“One moment please.” I held the phone a few inches from my face. “Honey, someone needs to speak to you. Should I get the keys and uncuff you, or do you want me to just hold it while you talk?”

Evan made a grab for the phone. I jumped off the counter and darted away. “Oh, silly me. Better take the gag out so you can answer!”

“Nick!” Evan made another grab for me, but I danced out of his way and pressed the phone to my ear. The line was dead.

“Told you I’d handle it.” I wiggled the phone at him. “They hung up.”

“I’m never going to be able to look Arnold in the face again.” He sighed.

“Why not? You’re a young, healthy man. If he’s all icked out by you getting your bondage on, that’s a him problem for bugging you at hookup o’clock.”

“At least he’s retiring soon. Maybe next time you could just tell whoever calls that I’m occupied and leave it at that?”

“That won’t work because they’ll just keep calling until they annoy you into becoming unoccupied. This way he knows you’re tied up.” I snickered. “Get it? Tied up?”

“I got it.” He smiled affectionately.

“Are you mad? I’m sorry. I didn’t think things through and just—”

“I’m not mad. I knew the risk when I let you answer it. And it was effective, I’ll give you that.”

I handed him back the phone and pulled mine out. “You know what we need, some music.”

“Music?”

“Yeah, you know, that stuff that sounds nice and makes people happy?”

“I’ve never heard anyone describe music that way.”

“My brain is weird.” I scrolled through my current playlist. “We should dance.”

“You’re going to dance for me?”

“Use your listening ears. I said *we* should dance.” I handed my phone to him. “You pick something. I’m having a brain fart and can’t remember the name of a single song other than Baby Shark.”

“We’re definitely not playing that.” He tapped on the screen a few times. “How about this?”

The opening bars of “Back to December” by Taylor Swift came out of my phone speaker.

“Are you a Swiftie?” I looked between him and the phone.

“Of course. Taylor’s music got me through high school.”

“Another point for the perfect guy column.” I plucked the phone out of his hand and put it on the counter. “Now, show me your moves.”

“I haven’t danced with anyone since prom.”

“So you’re saying you don’t have any moves.”

“Not dance ones.”

“Well, you’re in luck because I’m a fabulous dancer. I’ll teach you to waltz.”

“Waltz? Isn’t that a bit advanced for a first lesson?”

“Nope. It’s not as hard as people think. It’s basically step, slide, step, slide. If you can remember the pattern, then you can waltz. Easy peasy.”

“That doesn’t sound very easy or peasy.” He tapped on my phone screen and stopped the music.

“I promise it’s way easier than it looks. You’ll get it in no time. Unless you’re like Aiden. Are you like Aiden?”

“How is Aiden?”

“He’s got two left feet and no balance. He’s dangerous when he tries to dance.”

“I’m not Aiden. I’m not good at it, but I’ve never caused anyone bodily harm.”

“Then you’ll be fine. Here. I’ll do your part so you can see it.” I moved beside him. “Watch my feet.”

Evan dropped his gaze.

“Now, it’s just step, slide. Step, slide,” I said as I demonstrated the steps. “Watch it again. Step, slide. Step, slide. Got it?”

He nodded, still staring intensely at my feet.

“Now step with me. We’ll go slow, and don’t worry if you mess up. You’re learning a new skill. You’re *supposed* to mess up.”

“How did you know I needed to hear that?”

“Because you’re a perfectionist workaholic who probably quits everything he’s not immediately good at,” I observed.

“You really do have my number.”

“You’re not as complicated as you seem to think you are. Now, focus on your feet and don’t count in your head. People always make the weirdest faces when they’re counting and it doesn’t help in the long run. Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

I led him through a few minutes of repeating the box step, guiding him through the turns, until he had it.

“Awesome. Now, do that, but no looking down.”

“Okay.”

“And make your dance frame.”

“My what?” He threw me a confused look.

“Your dance frame.” I held up my arms, pantomiming how I’d hold a female partner. “That’s what I like to call it. Engage

the muscles and keep your frame strong, but don't tense up or go stiff. Dancing is all about working hard but making it look effortless."

He lifted his arms and mimicked me.

"Perfect. Now, keep your frame strong and your head up. Back straight. Good. And smile." I bit down on a laugh. "I said smile, not bare your teeth like a lunatic."

"I think smiling might be a bit beyond my skillset at this point."

"Fine. Glare away but keep your head up and no counting. Ready?"

"No."

"Too bad. And I'm not counting this time. Find the beat and follow along with it."

"Beat? From what music?"

"From the music I'm gonna make with my face hole."

Evan burst out laughing, losing his dancer's pose as he turned to face me. "Your what?"

"My face hole." Grinning, I pointed to my mouth. "Now, get ready."

Still laughing, he resumed his pose.

It took a few minutes, but soon Evan was sweeping across the kitchen like he'd been born to dance.

"Do I have it?" he asked with a big smile when I stopped my music.

"You've got it. Now for the real test." I waved him over. "Doing it with a partner."

He rested his big, hot hand on my waist, and gripped the other.

"Wait. We need music for this. Hold that pose." I let go of his hand and grabbed my phone off the counter. "Okay. Now find the beat and start when you're ready. Just squeeze my waist so I know to start with you."

He nodded, his eyes boring into mine.

Swallowing hard, I restarted the song and tried to focus on the steps and not on the way Evan was looking at me.

I loved dancing, and I'd done plenty of partnered dancing over the years. None of them had ever looked at me the way Evan was. The heat in his eyes, the intense desire on his face. I usually only saw that look when I was swinging around a pole or gyrating half naked to music.

By the time the song was fading out, my heart was racing, and not from the exertion of dancing.

"You're a quick study," I managed, unable to pull away from him, even though we'd stopped moving.

"You're a good teacher," he murmured, his eyes on my mouth.

"We should learn a routine or something for your sister's wedding," I blurted, needing to say something to stop the spiral of self-doubt I'd fallen into.

Evan had put the brakes on things after that first night in his car. We still messed around, usually on the way home from an event, but not every time. He also hadn't made any indication that he wanted more.

The few times I'd tried to start something beyond playing with each other's dicks, he'd rejected me.

I didn't understand why. He'd told me he wanted me. He never had trouble getting hard around me, and he happily sat back while I did my thing and rocked his world.

Why didn't he want more?

Was I bad at giving head? No one I'd been with had complained, but none of them were like Evan. They weren't older and sophisticated and rich. Evan told me he never had issues finding men to hook up with, but did he even consider me a man?

He obviously recognized that I was a cis male, but he called me a kid when he didn't think I could hear him. Was

that how he thought of me? Just a silly kid trying to play with the big boys?

“Something that will knock everyone’s socks off when they see it,” I continued in a rush when he kept on staring at me like I was the only bottom at an orgy.

He tightened his grip on my waist. “We should,” he said in that rumbly voice I liked way too much.

“I’ll teach you one. I mean, obviously I’ll teach you one. It’s not like we need a dance instructor when *I’m* a dance instructor. Well, not an *actual* instructor. But I—”

He leaned close and brushed his lips over mine, effectively cutting off my rambling. His strong arms slid around my waist, pulling me against his firm body.

I melted against him and gave myself over to those deep, drugging kisses he was so damn good at.

I loved kissing Evan, but I couldn’t quite pinpoint why. Kissing him was different than it had been with other partners. Maybe it was because he seemed to enjoy it too? Most of the people I’d kissed had been eager to move on to the next thing. I liked the other parts of sex and foreplay as much as the next person, but I was a slut for deep kissing.

Evan gripped me tight and lifted me right off the ground.

I let out a little squeak of surprise, which he swallowed with another incredible kiss and walked me backward. He deposited me on the counter and cupped my cheek with one hand, and gripped my ass with the other.

Eagerly, I wrapped my legs around his waist, wanting as much contact as humanly possible.

Evan seemed to be of the same mind as his hands moved over my back and stomach, then he slipped them under the hem of my crop top to stroke my chest and upper back.

His hard cock pressed against mine. I rocked my hips, needing more, needing it all.

The shrill ring of Evan’s phone pierced the haze of my desire.

“That better not be Arnold,” I grumbled against his mouth as he froze. “I swear to Lucifer, I will answer that phone screaming like you’re taking me on a one-way trip to Poundtown if he cockblocks me right now.”

“You have my permission to do whatever you want if it’s him.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket and checked. “It’s Vlado.”

I let go of him and leaned back.

“Yes?” he answered, his expression and tone grim. His gaze focused on me, and something I couldn’t read flashed in his eyes. Anger? Frustration, maybe? “Understood.”

“What’s going on? Is everything okay?” I asked when he ended the call.

The change in him was so stark a shiver of fear that moved through me.

“It’s fine.” He pressed a soft kiss against my lips. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded and stroked the backs of his fingers over my cheek.

“Can you tell Vlado his timing sucks?”

He smiled, but only halfway. “He knows.”

“He does?”

“Yup.”

“Eeek!” I nearly fell off the counter at Vlado’s voice. “DUDE!” I whirled toward the door, almost falling again.

Evan grabbed my waist and helped me slide off the counter.

Vlado grinned from where he was leaning against the doorway into the kitchen. “Sorry, Nicky. But this is important.”

I glanced between them.

Evan's posture was stiff, and his resting bitch face was on in full force. Vlado looked relaxed, but the tightness around his eyes and the set of his shoulders gave away that he wasn't.

"You're sure you're okay?" I asked Evan.

He nodded, his eyes a bit softer than they'd been a moment ago.

"Okay. Have a good night."

He brushed another kiss against my lips. "Goodnight, Nicky."

Cold washed over me as Evan stepped back and left the kitchen. Something was going on, but it wasn't like they were going to tell me. I was just the stripper Evan had hired to trick his dad so he could get his inheritance.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I hurried out of the kitchen and toward the hallway that would hopefully lead me to my room.

Whatever. Evan didn't owe me explanations or even his time. He was going to get sick of me if I didn't stop being greedy and demanding too much.

EVAN

I LEANED back in my chair, my mind reeling as I processed everything Vlado had just told me.

“Let me read it again.”

Vlado handed me a copy of the letter.

One of Vlado’s men had found it while doing a routine patrol of the gate. Another patrol had gone by the gate two hours earlier, so the letter had to have been dropped off between rotations.

The gate was under surveillance, but whoever had delivered the letter had either been casing the place, or they had a working knowledge of my security system. All we’d been able to see on the CCTV was a figure dressed in black. They’d kept to the shadows, and obscured their face with a mask.

Vlado had his team working on identifying the delivery person, but it would take time to get answers.

I read the letter for the fourth time, focusing on every word to commit it to memory.

Whoever was sending them had shifted their threats from me, to Nick, and had gone into graphic detail about what they’d do to him to get to me.

They’d wanted my attention before, now they had it.

“I don’t care what it costs, or what you have to do. Find whoever is sending these and give me five minutes alone with

him.”

Vlado took the paper back. “You can have your turn with them when I’m done.”

I nodded. “I want you on him.”

“Ev—”

“That’s not a request. You will be his shadow every time he steps foot outside this house.”

“I want to protect him too, but you’re—”

“I brought him into this. I put him on their radar.” I dug the heel of my shoe into the floor as anger flowed through me like a rushing current. “If anyone touches even one hair on his head, it will be the last thing they ever do. Any of them. They will pay.”

Vlado folded the letter and shoved it in his pocket. “Understood. But I’m putting three guys on you until this is over, and I’m bringing in our reserve team. I’m not taking any chances. Not with either of you.”

“Do whatever you need to. We’ll worry about the consequences later.”

Vlado nodded grimly. “Are you going to tell him?”

I drew in a deep breath. “Not yet.”

He leveled me with a flat look.

“Telling him will just scare him, and it’s not safe for him to leave, not until we neutralize the threat,” I reasoned.

“He has a right to know.”

“I know. And I’ll tell him when the time is right.”

“This is going to backfire when he finds out you lied to him.”

“That’s a risk I’ll take if it keeps him safe.”

“Get some sleep, Ev. We’ll get this handled.”

I nodded and stood. “Tell whoever needs to know that I’ll be ready to leave at eight.”

“Will do.”

Energy crackled under my skin as I headed out of my office. My mind raced as images of all the worst-case scenarios bombarded me. The overwhelming urge to check on Nick hit with the speed and strength of a freight train. I needed to see for myself that he was safe and unharmed.

Not letting myself think too hard about what I was doing, I strode to his room.

A sliver of light shone from beneath his door as I approached. “Nick?” I called softly and rapped on the door.

A moment later it swung open. “Evan?”

He’d changed into a pair of tiny green silk shorts that had deep slits on the sides, and an oversized green crop top, and I instantly lost my train of thought.

The dim light highlighted the long, lean muscles of his stomach. The rounded protrusions of his hips were on full display, as were his incredible legs and muscular thighs.

Heat and blood rushed to my groin as I remembered exactly how those legs had felt wrapped around my waist.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, breaking me free from my daze.

“I wanted to check on you,” I said after a pause. I’d been so focused on just getting to him, I hadn’t thought of an excuse to be knocking on his door at this hour.

“You’re freaking me out. What’s going on?”

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

His expression fell. “Oh. Okay.”

The utter defeat in his voice cut deep, splintering my already-precarious resolve to keep him in the dark.

Vlado was right. Nick deserved to know the truth about everything so he could make an informed decision about what he wanted to do.

“There is something.” I tipped his chin up. “Can I come in and I’ll explain it to you?”

With a nod, he stepped back, his big eyes liquid and so trusting.

Closing the door behind me, I followed him to his bed. He perched on the edge of what I presumed was his side. I sat a few feet in front of him, my body angled toward him as he crossed his legs.

I didn’t get nervous, or anxious. Not easily. And a difficult or pointed conversation was rarely anything for me at all; I had those daily. But for this, I took a fortifying breath. “A few months ago I started receiving threatening letters.”

His eyes rounded in shock but he kept quiet.

“It’s not the first time this has happened, and it won’t be the last. The letters have followed a pattern—when they’re delivered, how, even the language in them.”

“And you got one tonight?” he asked, sounding uncharacteristically cautious and quiet.

“Yes. It broke their usual patterns, which is what makes tonight’s letter extra concerning. It’s not the right day, place, or the usual delivery method. They also changed the language within the letter.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means they’re not just threatening me anymore.”

His lips parted in a little O. He blinked slowly. “They threatened me?”

“Yes.” I laid my hand over his, where it rested on his knee. “I’m so sorry, Nicky. I never would have started this arrangement if I thought you’d get brought into this. To be honest, until tonight, I wasn’t taking them seriously. I should have, but I was reckless.”

“What did they say they’d do to me?”

“They threatened to use you as a way to get to me.”

“How afraid should I be?” He threaded his fingers with mine and gripped my hand tight. “You said you weren’t taking them seriously until now. What changed?”

“They threatened *you*.”

He nodded slowly, his face drawn up in a look of thoughtful concentration. “Would you be this worried if they hadn’t threatened me and broken their pattern?”

“No.”

“Do you think I’m in danger?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “But we’re doing everything possible to find whoever is sending them and end this.”

“Am I safe here?” he whispered.

“Yes.” I shifted closer and took his free hand in my other one. “I’ve dealt with this kind of thing before. I have security measures in place, and my team is the best of the best. I promise I’ll do everything I can to make sure you’re safe.”

“Okay.” He smiled, but it wasn’t his usual cheerful grin. This smile was shy and sweet and filled with trust. “I believe you.”

“Are you okay? I didn’t want to scare you, but you have a right to know what’s happening.”

“I’m fine.” He tilted his head to the side and studied me. “Vlado made you tell me, didn’t he?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“He might have suggested it,” I conceded.

“Can I ask one question?”

“Sure.”

“Has anyone ever tried to hurt you before? Like how the letters are saying?”

“Yes.”

“Can I ask a follow-up question?”

“You can ask whatever you want.”

“Has anyone ever gotten close enough to hurt you?”

“No.”

“Were they sloppy, or did Vlado save you?”

“He saved me.” The tightness in my chest finally began to recede as Nick’s posture relaxed. “He’s saved me more than once.”

Nick’s mouth tilted up in a small smile. “Thanks for telling me. A lot of people think I’m dumb or flighty or that I can’t handle serious things. It means a lot that you didn’t try to hide this from me for my own good, or because you were trying to protect me.” He dropped his gaze to our joined hands, his eyes oddly blank and unseeing. “I’m not used to people treating me like an equal.”

Guilt rippled through me. I’d almost been one of those people.

“I’m sorry that’s been your experience,” I said softly.

“It is what it is.” He rolled one shoulder in a sort-of shrug. “I know I’m weird, and it’s hard to talk to me about normal stuff because my brain bounces around and I don’t always make sense. But I’m not stupid.” He peered up at me. “Not a lot of people take the time to find that out about me. They just assume I am and treat me like I can’t think for myself.”

“You’re not weird, Nicky. You’re fascinating.”

“That’s another way to say weird.”

“No, it’s not. If anything, I’m the weird one between us.”

He wrinkled up his forehead. “Huh?”

“I’m the one who needs things to be a particular way. Who craves order and predictability. The workaholic who has two friends and spends his free time making spreadsheets because numbers are relaxing. You’re...you’re a breath of fresh air after a storm. You brighten the room just by being in it, and you’re one of the most interesting people I’ve ever met. I

never know what you're going to say next, and I can honestly say that the time I've spent with you has been the most fun I've had in years."

"Really?" he murmured.

"Yes. I'm sorry I brought you into this mess, but I'm not sorry I met you."

"You can't keep saying things like that to me."

"Why not?"

"Because my brain can't tell the difference between flirty and friendly. I know you're being nice because of what you just told me, but you're saying all these perfect things and I—"

I cut him off with a kiss. The anguish in his voice was heartbreaking.

"Ev?" he asked as I pulled away.

"I wasn't just being nice. Yes, I meant what I said, but I was also flirting."

"You were?"

I nodded.

"I hate that I'm like this." He stole his hands free from mine and covered his face. "Do you have any idea how many times my stupid brain has gotten me in trouble?" He parted his fingers and peeked at me.

"I'm guessing a few times?"

"Sooooo many times." He dropped his hands with a frustrated grunt. "People think I'm flirting when I'm being nice, or they think I'm being nice when I flirt. And I can never tell when people are hitting on me unless they're super obvious or actually tell me they are. And you have no idea how many times people have lost their shit and accused me of leading them on when I thought we were just having a friendly conversation."

"Well, I'm definitely hitting on you." I stroked the backs of my fingers over his thigh.

His mouth quirked up in a tiny half-smile. “And what are you gonna do now that I know you are?”

I moved closer to him. “What do you want me to do?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want?”

“Mmhmm.”

I circled one arm around his waist. “This okay?”

“Yeah.” He slicked his tongue over his bottom lip.

“What about this?” I dragged him onto my lap so he straddled my waist.

“It’s good,” he breathed.

“And this?” I cupped his soft cheek and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth.

“Really good,” he whispered.

“Tell me now if you don’t want this.”

His pupils blew wide, his eyes darkening from sky-blue, to denim, to *midnight*. “I want this.”

The last of my self-control snapped, and I pulled him all the way to me with a low groan.

He met my kiss and eagerly wrapped himself around my body, clinging to me like a baby koala.

Every swipe of his tongue sent a rush of need through me. Little zings of pleasure denotated deep inside me, and my skin crackled with awareness everywhere we touched.

Not wanting to rush things, I slowed our kisses until they were deep and languid. He sighed, a sound that was needy and contented, both roped together. He ran his hands over every part of me he could reach.

I shuddered as he raked his nails down my back, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

“Ev,” he panted against my mouth. “I need...”

I shifted our body weight and gently laid him on the bed. “I’ve got you.”

His chest fluttered as he drew in a shaky breath. Using my strength, I moved him on the mattress, settling his head on the pillow and arranging the blankets so they weren’t tangled under him.

He blinked up at me as I knelt over him. “You’re so beautiful, Nicky.” I traced my gaze over his face, lingering on his big blue eyes, then his full cheeks, to those lips that could bring any man to his knees. “So beautiful.”

His hands shackled the back of my neck and pulled me down for another kiss. His mouth was hungry and desperate as he cinched his legs around my waist and tilted his hips. His cock, so hot and hard, pressed against mine.

Needing more, I tore my lips from his and kissed a line down the column of his throat.

“Oh, shit, Ev.” He grabbed my ass and yanked me closer. “That’s so...ungh.” He angled his head to the side to give me better access.

“How do you feel about hickeys?” I asked huskily, then licked a stripe up his neck.

“It’s kinda funny to hear a grown-ass adult who adults say the word hickey, but I’m a big fan if they’re your jam.”

Chuckling, I fit my mouth over a spot on his neck, right where it connected to his shoulder, and sucked hard.

He shoved his fingers through my hair and yanked me closer. “Yeah, Ev. Mark me. Wanna see it. Want everyone to see it.”

Dark desire flowed through me at his words. I wanted that too. Wanted to claim him so everyone could see who he was with.

Who he belonged to.

“Roll over.” Nick bumped his hips up. “Get on your back.”

I did as he said, rolling him with me so he lay on my chest.

He gave me a sultry little smile and sat up. I held his hips as he wrenched his shirt off and tossed it aside.

“I’m gonna make you feel so good,” he purred. “Just lay back and let me rock your world.” He trailed his fingers down the center of my chest.

I caught his hand and brought it to my lips. He stared at me with wide eyes as I gently kissed the soft skin inside his wrist. “You don’t need to do that. Not with me.”

“Do what?”

“Perform.”

His face fell and he tried to pull away. I held tight.

“Perform isn’t the right word. I just mean you don’t have to worry about trying to seduce me or play a part. Just be in the moment with me, Nicky. You said you wanted me to put the effort into making you feel appreciated and special. Let me do that.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” I tugged him down so he lay on me. “Do you know why I waited to initiate more with you?”

He shook his head.

“Because you were right. You deserve to feel special and for your partner to put the effort into making it good for you. I love that you have boundaries and that you won’t accept less than you deserve.”

“It’s been almost a month,” he whispered, tickling his finger over my jaw. The rasp of my stubble against his skin sent another shiver of awareness through me. “I thought you didn’t think it was worth it.”

“I should have communicated better.” I ran my hands down his sides, where he was hard and smooth and sinuous. “But that wasn’t why I waited. I want you, Nicky. I’ve wanted you since that first night but I didn’t want to rush things.”

He held still for a beat. “I’m not used to this.”

“Used to what?”

“This.”

I wanted to ask him to elaborate, but his tone and the faraway look in his eyes stopped me.

“Do you want me?” I asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Kiss me, Nicky.”

Smiling, he leaned down and brushed his lips against mine. The kiss was sweet and soft and absolutely perfect.

Nick sighed against my lips as I ran my hands over the silky material of his shorts. The fabric shifted and slid over his skin. He wasn't wearing anything under them.

Moaning, he wiggled closer to me. The little mewling sounds he made were as sexy as any of his usual dirty talk.

Slipping my hands under the waistband of his shorts, I squeezed his firm and full ass. Nick had a dancer's body, and his ass was a work of art.

Nick tore his mouth from mine and pressed our foreheads together. “Goddamn you're good at that.”

“So are you.” I pushed a lock of golden hair back from his face. “I could get lost kissing you.”

“There you go saying all that perfect stuff again.” He rocked his hips, a playful grin on his kiss-swollen lips.

A low groan tore from my throat as he fit his mouth against my neck and sucked hard.

He pulled away, his eyes bright with mischief. “There, now you have my mark too.”

“Will that be an issue at work? Me marking you?”

“Nope. I found this amazing foundation that completely covers hickeys and any other love marks. I can just use that to hide them.”

“And what prompted you to find this makeup?” I asked before I could stop myself.

Nick beamed. “You have no idea how hot it is when you go all caveman possessive on me.”

“I’m not—”

“Shhhh.” He touched his finger to my lips. “Now, before you worry your pretty little head off, I got it for Kai, one of my coworkers. He and his boyfriend are into some kinky-ass shit and he regularly comes to work covered in scratches and bite marks.”

“You make it sound like he’s being mauled by an angry cat.”

Nick snickered. “I’m so calling Alex an angry cat next time I see him. But when I said kinky, I meant *kinky*. They’re into primal play, so they literally maul each other as they’re fucking.”

“That’s...interesting.”

“Are you into that?”

“Definitely not. Marking, yes, but only when done in the throes of passion.”

“Throes of passion? You sound like one of those novels Aiden reads.”

“Your roommate reads romance novels?”

He pinned me with a look. “And what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing.”

“Damn right, nothing. But anyways, you were listing your kinks? Tell me more, for science.”

I laughed, which made Nick laugh as my chest shook under him.

“I’m an ass man.” I gripped his firm cheeks and squeezed them tight.

“That’s not a kink.” He tucked his face against my throat.

“Isn’t it?” I slipped my hand under the loose material of his shorts and dragged my fingertip through his crease.

“Ungh.” He spread his legs and popped his ass up.

“You have a gorgeous ass.” I kissed his temple and circled his hole with my fingertip. “So firm and full.” I dipped the tip of my finger inside him. “And so tight.”

“Ev, please,” he mumbled against my neck.

Using my other hand, I held him tight and rolled us over so I was on top, my hips between his spread thighs. I kissed him hard and deep, rocking over him as I ran my hand along his smooth skin.

The little sighs and mewls he let out were the sexiest sounds I’d ever heard, and my cock was so hard I ached.

We kissed for what felt like forever. Nick’s enthusiasm was a huge turn-on, but it was how he finally relaxed and let go that I couldn’t get enough of. How he wiggled every time I stroked a particular spot on his hip, or how he couldn’t seem to stop playing with my hair.

“Need you.” He broke the kiss and slid his hand under my waistband to grip my cock.

Gently, I tugged his hand out of my sweats.

He blinked up at me. “Ev?”

“Let’s get these off you.” I tugged on his shorts.

He nodded and lifted his hips so I could pull them down.

He reached for me again. I caught his wrist and gently pressed it to the bed as I settled over him.

His lip trembled. “You don’t want me to touch you?”

“I want nothing more. But right now it’s my turn to touch you.”

“Are you sure?” Indecision clouded his features. “I don’t need much prep. Just stretch me and I’ll be okay.”

“This isn’t prep.” I sat back on my heels. “This is foreplay.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“No.” I caressed my hands over his creamy thighs. A bead of precum spilled down his shaft. “Prep is the bare minimum

of effort needed to not hurt you. Foreplay is what you do before the prep.”

“I don’t need lots of foreplay.”

“Maybe you don’t, but I do.”

“But— *oh!*”

His protest turned into a cry of pleasure as I swallowed his cock and held him in the back of my throat.

“Oh fuck. Ev. That’s... You don’t...”

Strong fingers wound through my hair as his taste exploded on my tongue. He continued to babble nonsensical things as I moved up and down his length, my pace slow and measured.

He tugged on my hair. I let him fall from my mouth and looked up at him.

“Now,” he panted. “Get your dick in me right now.”

“Not yet.” I kissed the tip of his cock.

He made a frustrated sound and glared at me.

I smiled at his expression. The angry effect was ruined by his flushed cheeks and bright eyes. “Do you have any supplies?”

Nodding, he shoved my head away from his dick. I sat back as he scrambled off the bed and darted into the closet.

I adjusted myself, chuckling. I was getting close to blue balls territory. Both my dick and balls were heavy with need.

“Got them!” Nick came flying out of the closet and practically dove onto the bed.

I managed to avoid a rogue foot as he lay beneath me.

“Here.” He shoved a small bottle of lube and a condom at me. “Now get your dick in me.”

“Patience,” I said, popping the top of the lube.

“I’ve *been* patient.” He planted his feet on the bed and angled his hips toward me. “Now fuck me.”

“Not yet.” I dribbled lube on my fingers and rubbed them together to warm them up.

“You’re a tease,” he huffed.

“And you’re impatient.” Leaning over him, I held myself up with one hand and caged him in.

“Your fault for having a magic mouth.”

“Wait until you experience my magic fingers.” I slid my hand between our bodies.

“I’d rather have your magic cock— *oh!*”

I rubbed his hole again. “Relax, Nicky.”

“I’m not good at relaxing.” He pushed back against my finger. “I’m part of the instant gratification generation. I’m hardwired to not be patient.”

“That might be, but some things are worth waiting for.” I pushed my finger inside him.

“Oh shit.” He clenched and grasped fistfuls of the sheets.

He was tight, tighter than I’d anticipated. I pushed into him again, moving a little deeper, but stopped when his body locked up tight.

I met his eyes. “Am I hurting you?”

“No. I’m just... It’s fine.” He drew in a shaky breath. “Push hard and I’ll open up.”

The way he said it, and the words he used, didn’t sit right with me. Did he mean he wanted me to fight his body’s instincts because he liked it, or because that’s what people always did to him?

Not sure I wanted to know the answer, I moved down his body, then sucked the head of his cock into my mouth. This time, I concentrated on slowly opening him up with my finger as I worked him over.

“Oh god. Holy crap. I’m... Ev.” Nick spread his legs wider and rocked on my finger.

I worked a second one into him and found his spot.

This time I held still as he bucked up his hips and let him fuck my mouth as he fucked himself on my fingers. Every shift of his body and cry of pleasure made my already-hard cock throb with need.

“Shit, Ev. Fuck me now or I’m gonna come like this.” He shoved my head off his dick.

Shaking with both desire and adrenaline, I pulled my fingers free of his ass and sat up.

Nick lay on the bed in a boneless, panting heap as I shucked off my sweats and tossed them aside. He stared hungrily at my cock as I tore the condom package open and rolled it on.

“Why is that so hot?” Nick asked, his voice dreamy and faraway.

“Why is what so hot?” I poured more lube into my hand.

“When a guy tears a condom open with his teeth.”

“You like that?” I slicked up my cock, then rubbed the excess lube against his waiting hole.

“Yeah.” He lifted his legs and held himself open.

I shifted closer. “Ready?”

He nodded.

Notching my tip against his hole, I slowly pushed forward.

He sucked in a hissing breath.

I pulled back.

“It’s fine,” he said quickly. “Just go hard at first. It takes a second for my body to realize I want this.”

Unease moved through me at his words.

I knew some men were into pain, especially during the initial penetration, but I wouldn’t have pegged Nick as one of them.

“I’m not made of glass. A little pain won’t kill me.” He wrenched his knees up higher. “Please, Ev. I need you.”

“You have me.” I lay over him. “But I’m not going to hurt you.”

“I told you it’s fine.”

“No, it’s not. Wrap your legs around my waist.”

He rolled his eyes but did as I said.

“Hold onto me.”

“I’m not some blushing virgin you need to coax through taking a dick,” he huffed.

“I know what you’re doing, but it’s not going to work.”

“What am I doing?”

I notched my tip against his hole again and used my other arm to hold myself up over him. “You’re trying to rush things.”

“I’m not trying to rush things, you’re just taking your sweet-ass time.”

“Look at me.”

He did. His petulant expression should have pissed me off, instead it strengthened my resolve.

“Breathe in. Now hold it.” I nudged against his rim. “Let it out nice and slow.”

This time, when I pushed in, his body gave way and I was able to slide my cockhead inside him.

The tight heat of his body felt incredible, and while my every instinct was screaming at me to fuck him hard, I held back.

“Do it again.”

He breathed in and held it.

“Now let go.”

He did, and I was able to work almost half my length inside him.

This time I rocked my hips, delving the rest of the way inside him in tiny pulses. He moaned when my thighs brushed

his ass.

“There you go, that’s all of me.”

He blinked rapidly. His pink lips parted as he drew in quick, shallow breaths.

Leaning down, I kissed him deep and slow as I rolled my hips, gently thrusting inside him.

He clung to me and kissed me back, but I could feel how tense he was. How he couldn’t fully relax.

Reaching behind me, I unhooked his ankles from where they were locked under my ass. Before he could get lost in his head again, I rolled us over so he was on top, not breaking our kiss.

He froze for a moment, then pulled away to sit up.

I waited to see what he would do.

His entire demeanor changed, and his familiar smile-smirk slid into place. He grinned down at me, his smile not matching his eyes, and rolled his hips in a sensual wave. The movement of his tight body on my cock felt incredible, but everything else about the move was wrong.

“Come here.” Gently, I tugged him down so he lay on my chest.

He let me, a wary expression taking over from his earlier confidence.

Lifting my knees, I moved my feet so I could cradle his full ass with my thighs. When he was set, I gripped his ass in both hands and used the globes to rock him over me in short thrusts.

“Oh fuck,” he whispered, his gaze locked on mine.

“Feel good?”

“Yeah.” He pushed back, rocking with me. “Does it feel good for you?”

“So good.”

A real smile lit up his eyes. “You feel really good,” he whispered, then dipped his head and kissed me.

Time ceased to exist as we moved together, kissing like the world was about to end. Everything about the moment was perfect. His strong body over mine, his hungry, drugging kisses. The way he moved with me, not fighting or trying to rush things.

He was finally in the moment with me.

I never wanted it to end.

Nick’s hips moved faster, dragging his cock over my abs. My stomach was wet with precum, and my mouth tingled as I remembered how good he’d tasted, how much I’d enjoyed feeling his length in my mouth.

“Can you come like this?” he asked between kisses.

“Yeah. Are you close?”

“I think so.” He shoved his hand between us.

With a low growl, I batted his hand away and gripped his leaking cock.

This time I lay under him and let Nick move over me, taking what he needed as he fucked himself on my cock. He panted against my mouth, still trying to kiss me but not managing to do more than keep our lips together.

My own orgasm was dangerously close. I had good control and usually had to focus to come, but not tonight.

My thighs tensed as my lower back tingled. I was past the point of no return.

Needing him to come first, I stroked his cock and thrust up into him. He cried out against my lips and clenched around me.

Wrapping my other arm around him, I held him tight, locking him in place as I fucked him hard and deep.

“Yes yes yes yes yes,” he muttered against my neck. “Oh my god. Oh fuck!”

He tensed over me, his inner walls squeezing me tight. His thighs shook, but he didn't come.

Turning my face, I caught his lips under mine. He cried out against my mouth. His knees tightened around my ribs as he ground down on my dick. Warmth shot between us, soaking my stomach and hand as he came with a strangled scream.

Another low growl tore from my throat as my pleasure crested and my orgasm ripped out of me.

Nick lay on me, panting and moaning as I fucked him through my release. When the waves of pleasure finally subsided, I blinked my eyes open and stared at the ceiling in a daze.

"Hmmm," Nick made a happy little sound and nuzzled into my neck.

I held him tight and sank into the afterglow, enjoying his closeness and the little kisses he kept pressing into my skin.

"That was...wow." He rubbed his nose against my collarbone.

"It was." I stroked his back.

My cock softened and fell out of him.

Nick tensed in my arms. I let go of him, not wanting to crowd him if he needed space.

"Definitely worth the wait." He pecked a kiss against my lips, then rolled off me.

"Nick?"

"You've definitely got a magic dick." He scrambled off the bed.

I sat up on my elbows.

"Gotta clean up. BRB." He flashed me a quick smile and darted off toward the bathroom.

What the hell?

I stared after him. This behavior didn't track with the man who would curl up on my lap and snuggle me after he'd blow

me in my car.

Shaking my head, I removed the condom and tied it off. I was just throwing it in the trash when Nick emerged from the bathroom.

“That was fun.” He smiled brightly and picked up his shorts.

“Yes, it was.” I cleared my throat and pulled on my sweats.

“I know I’m going to sleep really good tonight. Speaking of sleep. You should do that. Only one of us needs to get up and adult in the morning, and it’s not me.”

“Nick—”

“Thanks for...” He waved at the bed. “Have a good night.”

I waited a beat to see if he’d say anything more, but he turned his attention to his shirt.

“Goodnight,” I said lamely.

He flashed me a quick grin and tugged his shirt over his head.

Confused and more than a little miffed by the shift in his attitude, I left his room and headed toward mine.

Something was wrong, but I didn’t know how to fix it. Confronting him and demanding answers would only make him shut down. Was it the sex? Or maybe because of what I’d told him about the letters.

Or maybe I was reading too much into things and he wasn’t a cuddly person after sex. Our agreement was to have some consensual fun, and we had. Cuddles and long talks in bed were a relationship thing.

Shaking off my thoughts, I lengthened my strides. I’d had a long day and an even longer week. I needed to get some sleep, then I’d start thinking clearly again.

NICK

“DO I LOOK OKAY?” I asked Evan as Vlado slowed the car to a stop.

“You look perfect.”

I looked down at my clothes critically. “Are you sure?” I smoothed my hand over the emerald-green silk shirt I’d paired with my tuxedo. “Is the boat neck too casual? Maybe I should have gone with something more traditional.”

“Nicky, look at me.”

I flicked my gaze to his.

“You look perfect.”

I smiled, some of the tension leaving me at the heat and affection in his eyes.

“There’s no reason to be nervous.”

“I’m not nervous. I just don’t want to screw this up.”

“You won’t. Just be yourself and have fun. Everything else will fall into place.”

The valet opened the car door. I pasted on a smile and climbed out of the car.

“Holy mother of pearl.” I craned my neck and looked up at the hotel the benefit was being held at. “You didn’t tell me we were going to a literal castle!”

Vlado covered his laugh with a cough. “Wait until you see the inside.”

“I’m gonna get tackled by the poor police as soon as I step through the door, aren’t I?”

“No one is tackling anyone.” Evan held out his arm. “Not in public, at least.”

Looping my arm through his, I tossed him a sweet smile. “I thought you weren’t into primal play?”

“Primal play?” Vlado fell into step behind us as Evan led me up the walkway, which had an honest-to-god red carpet, and toward the ornate glass doors. “What’s that? It sounds like it’s either a great time, or a terrifying one.”

“Depends. Do you like chasing your partners down and going all caveman on them?”

“Yeah, not really my thing. I’m more of a pleasure Dom.”

“Really?” Perking up, I glanced back at him. “Bet the ladies love that.”

“I’ve never had any complaints,” he said with a smirk.

I turned my attention back to the hotel as we stepped through the main doors.

“Holy crap on a cracker. What in the Midas touch is going on here? Why is everything so...gold?”

“Because it’s luxe?” Vlado said.

My head was on a swivel as we walked across the gilded lobby. Every fixture and surface was done in gleaming gold, and the décor and furnishings wouldn’t be out of place in a palace. “It reminds me of those people who wear designer labels from head to toe. A little is classy, a lot is trashy. How much does a room go for here?”

“A lot,” Evan said.

I glanced at him as he steered me toward the back of the lobby. “Is this one of those ‘if you have to ask, you can’t afford it’ moments?”

He nodded.

“Are the rooms like this too?” I waved my hand around. “Do you think people stay here to cosplay royalty and live out their princess fantasies?”

Vlado choked out a laugh. “Princess fantasies?”

“You never pretended you were a princess when you were a kid? If I was staying in a place like this I’d totally pack a gown and tiara and just sit in my fancy-ass room that probably costs more than my rent and pretend I was a princess. Hell, I’d even splurge and order all sorts of fancy nibblies from room service and stand on my balcony so I could look down on all the peasants outside while I stuffed my face like a French Queen.”

“French Queen? Is that a Marie Antoinette reference?” Evan asked.

“Maybe. Is she that bitch who ate cake and got her head chopped off? ’Cause that’s who I was talking about.”

Vlado snickered behind me.

“Something like that.” Evan chuckled.

“Holy baby bunnies,” I exclaimed as Evan led me through a doorway at the back of the lobby. “How is the hallway even fancier than the goldsplosion of a lobby?”

The hallway in question was positively drenched in gold accents, and had the most beautiful stained-glass ceiling I’d ever seen. The lighting was soft and shone through the stained glass, giving the room a warm glow, like sunshine.

“How are they doing that? Isn’t it dark out? Why does it look like an enchanted forest in here? Isn’t there more building on top of us? What sorcery is this?”

“The lights create the illusion of it being daytime,” Evan said. “They also have a setting that looks like twinkling starlight, and another that can mimic sunset or sunrise.”

I glanced at him, half expecting him to appear exasperated at my running commentary. He was smiling, his shoulders relaxed and his head high.

Jesus, he was handsome.

“I swear I’m not usually this dumb.” I cut my gaze back to the hallway before he caught me staring. “My brain is just confused by all the shiny stuff and my mouth is going along for the ride.”

“You’re fine.” Evan patted my arm. “It’s a lot to take in the first time.”

Quiet music and the hum of voices filtered out of an open doorway about fifty feet in front of us.

“Is that where we’re going?” I asked, tightening my grip on his arm.

“It is.” Evan rubbed my hand affectionately.

A shiver of desire shot up my spine as a memory came of Evan holding my wrists and gently pinning them to the bed as he lay over me.

His strong body over mine, the heady scent of his cologne mixed with the musk of his arousal. The soft, almost reverent way he’d kissed me.

How he’d looked at me while he pushed inside me.

“... about a thing.”

“Huh?” I blinked to clear my head, only then realizing Evan had been talking. “Sorry, I zoned out there for a second.”

He grinned knowingly. “And what, pray tell, were you thinking about?”

“How many licks it takes to get to the center of a Tootsie Pop.”

Evan let out a bark of laughter as Vlado issued an almost-laugh that was more of a snort.

“Tootsie Pop?” Vlado lightly punched Evan’s shoulder. “Is that what you call yours?”

“It has lots of names.” Evan shot Vlado a look. “Tootsie Pop is just one of its many layers.”

“Layers? It’s a dick, not a cake.”

“Hearing you say Tootsie Pop in that serious voice while wearing a tux is officially the highlight of my week,” I said with a snicker.

The entrance to the room where the benefit was being held loomed ahead of us. Nerves fluttered around in my belly as Evan led me inside.

The sprawling ballroom was as opulent and gilded as the rest of the hotel. People milled around in tuxes and gowns, and waiters moved about holding trays of drinks in fancy gold flutes, and platters of tiny food. A string quartet played soft music on a stage above a dance floor where several guests were dancing.

“Oh. My. God!” a female voice shrieked.

I jumped.

“Evan!”

We turned toward the source of the voice. A woman about Evan’s age stood a few feet away in a blue gown with a sheer bodice and a mermaid-style skirt that hugged her curves in all the right ways.

“Hello, Maryse.” Evan stepped away from me as the woman rushed up and threw her arms around his neck.

A surge of jealousy hit out of nowhere at the familiar embrace.

“Relax, killer.” Vlado put his hand on my shoulder and leaned close to speak in my ear. “He’s not into her, or any women.”

“Not my business who he’s interested in,” I said, going for neutral but failing epically. “Or who he ends up in.”

“Breathe, Nicky.” He grasped my shoulder as Evan untangled himself from the hussy in blue.

“I’m fine.” I stood up straight and pasted on my brightest, fakest smile. “Are you going to introduce us?” I asked Evan cheerfully.

He shot me a look that said he knew exactly what was behind my friendliness. But instead of being angry, he seemed like he was trying not to bust a gut laughing.

“Of course, darling.” He held out his arm.

Something about him calling me *darling* sent a little thrill up my spine, and I fought the insane urge to giggle.

Shaking that weirdness off, I stepped closer.

He put his arm around my waist and cinched me against his side. “Nick, I’d like you to meet Maryse. Maryse, this is Nick.”

“So nice to meet you.” Maryse barely flicked her gaze to me. “Can I steal you away for a moment, Ev? There’s something important I need to talk to you about. Something that requires...discretion.”

My heart fell.

It was stupid to be jealous. Even if Evan weren’t gay, he was a young, wealthy, and gorgeous man who oozed confidence and was a whole-ass adult who adulated. He was free to be with whoever he wanted when our arrangement came to an end.

For the most part, Evan’s colleagues and associates were polite to me. I still got the occasional cold shoulder or overly nosy questions, but most people seemed content to treat me like the arm candy Evan had hired me to be.

Ugh. I needed to get over myself and focus on the job. Evan was counting on me, and this was *the* party. The one where I finally met his family and we sold our act to them. The hussy in blue could go kick rocks.

“Anything you want to say, you can say around Nick,” Evan said, his voice smooth, but I could hear the slight edge to it.

Maryse laughed in that pretentious way people did when they were mad but didn’t want to show it. She turned her full attention on me. “So this is the famous Nick.” She gave a

critical sweep. “I can see why you chose this one, Ev. He’s very...pretty. And a lot younger than I thought he’d be.”

“I get that a lot. Having a babyface is both a blessing and a curse.” I smiled serenely. “I have to say, that dress is banging. Total main character energy.”

“Thank you.” She ran her hand over the generous swell of her breast and fixed her attention on Evan. “What do you think, Ev? Do you like it?”

“It’s super brave of you to try to bring back the fashions of your youth,” I said before Evan could answer. “It’s serving nineties prom with a hint of eighties glam. Love that for you.”

Maryse’s face went red under the layers of makeup.

“If you’ll excuse us, we have to go say hello to my parents.” Evan hauled me away from Maryse. Vlado followed behind us, his snickers just loud enough for us to hear them.

“What?” I asked fake-innocently when Evan pulled me to a stop about twenty feet away from where Maryse was still fuming. “I thought we were going to say hello to your parents.”

“Was that really necessary?”

“Um, yeah. Isn’t that Bryant’s ex trophy wife? She was looking at you like you’re the last Birkin bag at the Hermes outlet. And you know what I say to that? I say not today, Satan.”

Vlado made a weird sound behind me. I glanced back and found him with both hands over his mouth and his face bright red from holding in his laughter.

Evan’s throaty chuckle slid into my ear and warmed my insides.

“I’m just saying,” I continued. *Please don’t let my face be as red as it feels.* “She’d better stick to wrinkly old balls and stay away from yours while I’m around.”

Evan’s eyes glittered with humor. “She was being polite.”

“She was being a twatwaffle.”

“He’s not wrong, Ev.”

“Maryse is harmless.”

“Maybe to you, but bitch better check herself while I’m around because these hands are rated E for Everyone.”

Evan’s laugh was loud and booming. Several people nearby turned to stare at us.

“I’m serious. She can take several seats if she thinks I’m going to stand by and watch her flirt with my man. Hell no. My character would never.”

Vlado clapped me on the shoulder. “Never change, Nicky. Never change,” he managed through peals of laughter.

“And mess with perfection?” I asked haughtily. “Not a chance.”

“Are we interrupting something?”

I whirled around. Evan abruptly stopped laughing.

An attractive couple stood behind me. The man was an older, slightly doughier version of Evan, and the woman reminded me of an old-school Hollywood starlet.

Evan’s parents?

Evan cleared his throat and leaned in to air-kiss the woman’s cheeks. “Mom, Dad. We were just about to come find you.”

“Well, luckily we found you.” His mom looked me up and down with a carefully neutral smile. “You must be Nick.”

“It’s so wonderful to finally meet you, Mrs. Williams.” I gave her my best smile. “Evan has told me so much about you and all the good work you’ve done.”

Her smile shifted to one that looked a little less polite and more genuine. “It’s wonderful to meet you too, Nick. Please, call me Adelaide.” She held out her hand. The ginormous diamond rings decorating her fingers gleamed under the ballroom lights.

Taking her hand in both of mine, I gave a gentle squeeze. “The room looks beautiful. So elegant and understated.”

She beamed brighter.

“And the flowers are perfection. The gloriosa is so underrated but such a bold and powerful choice.”

Adelaide’s smile only grew wider. “I was a bit concerned when my florist suggested them, but they really do make the room, don’t they?”

“They do. The pops of color, the vibrancy of the arrangements, the symbolism. All of it is chef’s kiss.” I mimicked kissing the tips of my fingers and tossing the fake kiss into the air the way cartoon chefs always did.

Now that his mother had been won over, time to tackle his dad. Metaphorically speaking.

“And it’s so wonderful to meet you too, Mr. Williams.”

“Grant.” He stuck out his hand. Now I knew where Evan got his resting bitch face.

I shook it. Unsurprisingly, Grant squeezed my hand way harder than was necessary. I just smiled placidly and let him. My grip strength came from working a pole twice a week while he spent his time sitting on his ass and bossing people around. I could have easily crushed his hand if I wanted, but I didn’t play those macho games.

“Nick Sorensen.” I resisted the urge to wipe my hand on my pant leg when he let go. His palms were weirdly damp, but not quite sweaty. Like he used way too much moisturizer.

“So you’re the one who’s made my son realize there’s more to life than playing the field.” Grant’s smile was an exact replica of the one Evan made when he was talking business to people he disliked. Polite, but not polite enough to hide his obvious disapproval.

I didn’t like being on the receiving end of that smile.

“I suppose I am.” I laughed, making sure to use my inside laugh. “But I could say the same for Evan. He’s opened my eyes to what’s important in life.”

“And what would that be?” Grant asked dryly.

“Friendship, and companionship.” I smiled at Evan adoringly. He returned it and tucked me against his side. “Before Evan, I never knew what a true connection with someone was. I didn’t understand how life is just...better, when you’re with your best friend.”

“That’s a lovely sentiment.” Adelaide looked between us. “As a mother, it’s wonderful to hear someone speak so highly of your son.”

“You did an incredible job raising him. He’s...” I cut myself off with a shy laugh. “I could gush for hours about how amazing he is.” I looked at Evan and turned up the moon eyes. “I’m so lucky to have found him.”

“I’m the lucky one, darling.” Evan pressed a soft kiss against the side of my mouth.

The greedy bitch in me wanted to grab his head and give him a real kiss so Maryse and any other wannabe gold diggers knew I didn’t come to play.

Instead, I said to Adelaide, “I love your dress. Is that Chanel? I recognize it from the new collection.”

“It is.” She beamed and smoothed her hand down the skirt of her gold and red gown. “You have quite the eye for fashion.”

“Did someone say fashion?” Emily appeared at Evan’s side.

“You’ve been summoned,” Vlado teased.

“How about we step aside and let the ladies have a chat about dresses and flowers.” Grant gave Evan a pointed look.

Evan stiffened beside me.

“I’ll be right here when you’re done,” I told him, hoping to defuse the rising tension.

Evan nodded and pecked a quick kiss against my lips. “I won’t be long.”

“Take your time.” My cheeks flamed hot with a blush that wasn’t fake. “You know how much I love fashion talk.”

If Grant had an issue with me not being manly enough for his son, then I was going to lean into it and be the most extra bitch I could get away with. I didn’t have to get Grant to like me if Adelaide and Emily were team Nick.

Evan gave me another kiss, then traded a look with Vlado.

“You don’t need to go stand in my brother’s shadow?” Emily asked Vlado when Grant and Evan had stepped out of earshot.

“You know me, I can’t resist a good conversation about fashion.”

Emily laughed as Adelaide smiled. Interesting.

Vlado had said that his mom was Emily and Evan’s nanny, and that was how they’d become friends. I’d assumed Evan’s parents would look down on Vlado for being the help, and the kid of the help, but Adelaide’s smile was filled with warmth and affection.

“Can I just say that this”—Emily waved her hand at me—“is what I call a *look*. The cut, the contrast, I’m here for all of it.”

I smiled, a very real one. “Thanks. I was a bit hesitant to wear something so nontraditional, but this shirt”—I plucked at the neckline—“was calling my name and I couldn’t resist.”

Emily gently smoothed her fingertips over the material of the shirt where it peeked out from under my lapel. “Exquisite. Imagine it with a pair of slim-fit black trousers, and maybe some utilitarian calf boots.”

“With buckles, not laces,” I said. “And a chunky heel.”

“Exactly!” She nodded enthusiastically. “But it needs something else. Something that just brings everything together.” She tapped her lips with her finger.

“I have the most gorgeous vintage steampunk vest that would do just that.” I waved my hands like I was setting a

stage. “Picture this—a nineteen-twenties waistcoat-style front with a leather corseted back.”

“What color?” she asked.

“Front is dark gray with black leather trim. Back is black.”

“Does the vest have a built-in harness with the clip straps?”

“It does. Matte black leather and brushed silver accents and buckles.”

“Is the corset held together with ribbon, or leather ties?”

“Black ribbon.”

“Perfection.” She clapped. “We’re definitely keeping you.”

The warmth in her tone and smile did weird things to my belly.

“You must come to my tasting.” Emily looked at her mother. “He can take your place.”

“That’s a wonderful idea,” Adelaide said.

“Tasting?”

“For the wedding. I still have to finalize the menu. I’ve rescheduled the tasting four times already, and I’m down to the wire.” She rolled her eyes dramatically. “Everyone was available a week ago when I picked the new date, but now Evan is the only one who can make it.”

“And me,” Vlado piped up. “If there’s food, I’m there.”

“When is it?” I asked.

“Tomorrow at two. Please say you can come.”

“I’m free then. And I’ll also never say no to food.”

“Well well well.” Lemon face came up beside Emily and put his hand on the small of her back.

The move was polite and familiar, but it irked me. It looked possessive, but not in the ‘you’re mine and I claim you’ way. It screamed ‘this is my shiny toy, look at it and admire me for having it.’

“If it isn’t Evan’s new beau.” His smile was as fake as the ID I’d used to go clubbing in high school.

“Hello, Malcolm,” I said, making sure to keep my animosity out of my voice. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Lovely to see you too.” His face twisted up in a barely concealed sneer. “Are you telling everyone what a neglectful fiancé I am?” he asked Emily.

She giggled. “Of course not. I was just inviting Nick to the tasting tomorrow now that both you and Mom can’t come.”

“I thought you were bringing Imogen?”

She made a face. “I know she’s your best friend, but we have nothing in common.”

“Please try to make more of an effort with her. She’s important to me. She should be important to you.”

“I know she is. I invited her, but she declined. If you want her there so bad then you talk to her.”

“She probably declined because you don’t make her feel welcome.”

I glanced at Adelaide to see her reaction to this conversation. She was smiling at Malcolm and nodding like she agreed with him.

Was I the only one who was getting the ick from this? I understood wanting your fiancée and your bestie to get along, but the *way* he was saying it was giving off major red-flag energy.

“Excuse me for a moment,” Adelaide cut in, her attention on something behind me. “I need to speak with Cecelia.”

Cecelia, like Maryse’s replacement? In all the events I’d attended, they’d never both been present.

Lemon face was still focused on Emily. “I love that you have something that’s keeping you busy, but not everyone cares about color schemes or dresses or chair coverings. Try to connect with Imogen over her interests instead of on trivial things.”

“I’ll try.”

Lemon face smiled, but it only made him look more like a cartoon villain with his overly shiny hair and pinched expression. “Shall I get you a drink?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He turned to me. “What about you, Nick? Do you like Shirley Temples? I’d get you a glass of champagne, but I wouldn’t want to contribute to the corruption of a minor.”

“Mal—”

I cut Emily off with my pretend laugh. “I’m fine, thank you.”

His smile faltered.

I’d learned a long time ago that bullies didn’t like it when you didn’t fight back. Malcolm was a bully, and I refused to stoop to his level.

“I’ll get you that drink.” Malcom waved a server over, picked up one of the champagne flutes on her tray, and handed it to Emily. “There you are.”

“Thank you.” Emily delicately sipped the bubbly.

It didn’t escape me that she’d thanked Malcolm when all he’d done was wave his hand. The server was the one who’d done all the work.

“Sir?” The server shifted the tray closer to me.

“You might want to check his ID first,” Malcom said. “My brother-in-law likes them young.”

The server glanced at me uncertainly.

“He’s just kidding. I’m not underage.” I smiled at her, even as I pictured kicking lemon face in the nuts.

She peered at the drinks on her tray, then at me.

“I’m okay for now, thank you.”

The server left quickly.

“If you’ll excuse me. I need to speak with Grant and Evan.” Malcom kissed Emily’s temple distractedly and hurried away.

“I’m sorry about that. His humor takes some getting used to,” she said.

“I’ll never complain about people thinking I’m younger than I am.” I peeked over at Evan, who was now standing with his dad and Malcolm and looking like he’d mentally checked out a while ago. “His RBF is on point tonight.”

“It always is.” Emily sipped her champagne. “Evan is... He’s my brother and I love him, but he never stood a chance.”

“What do you mean?” I tore my eyes from Evan and turned to her.

“He’s the first born, and the boy. The prodigal male heir.”

“And you were the spare?”

She sniffed. “You could say that. I was the next logical step.”

“I’m not following.”

“Everyone expected our parents to have a second child, so they did. Everything about our family is done for optics and appearances. Everything. They made us, but they didn’t raise us. Did Evan tell you how he called Oksana ‘Mom’ until he was nine? I did until I was eleven.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Vlado. “Your mom?”

He nodded.

“I still call her when I need someone to talk to. And Evan visits her on every holiday, including Mother’s Day. She’s the only reason Evan grew up somewhat normal.”

I shifted so Vlado wasn’t at my back and I could look between him and Emily. “She is?”

“She gave him the space to be a kid. Our parents expected us to be mini adults right out of the womb and treated us like accessories. Always happy to boast about us and parade us around, but completely hands-off when it came to raising us.”

She paused. “Oksana was the one constant source of support in our lives. I’m so glad he had her to confide in when he was struggling with his sexuality.”

“Evan struggled with being gay?”

She nodded, her eyes sad. “He knew it went against the plans they’d made for him. He was supposed to grow up, take over for Dad, marry a suitable woman, preferably one who had connections to a family friend or was in line for a healthy inheritance, and have his own heir and spare.”

“He didn’t struggle with the actual being gay part?”

“If he did, he never told me.”

I glanced at Vlado, who also shook his head.

“That’s really sad.” It felt a bit wrong to be discussing Evan’s coming out with Emily and Vlado and not with him, but I couldn’t deny that I’d been curious about his experiences with being gay in his world. It was hard enough for us regular folks to be queer, but he also had the corporate and political bullshit that was built into the fabric of high society to deal with. “Were your parents supportive when he came out?”

“Mostly. Mom just flipped the script to him finding a suitable husband. Dad had a harder time accepting it. He was never outwardly homophobic to Evan, not as far as I know, but still makes stupid comments like the one about leaving us ‘ladies’ to chat about flowers and dresses. It’s like he needs to point out how Evan is the ‘man’ in the relationship and reduce his partners to feminine roles he can understand.”

“Ev plays it off like he doesn’t care, but it bothers him,” Vlado said. “And he also knows his father isn’t the only one saying those things. It’s another reason he puts everything he has into his work. He feels like he needs to prove himself. Like he needs to be more than everyone else just to be seen as an equal.”

“And the sad part is they have no idea just how much they screwed us up,” Emily continued. “That Evan’s meticulousness and his obsession with being the best came from the same place as when I acted out and caused trouble.”

“Two opposite trauma responses,” I mused.

“I’m glad he hired you,” Emily said slyly.

“What?” She knew?

Emily smiled innocently. “Let’s just say I’m not as oblivious as people think I am. Something tells me we have that in common.”

“We do. It’s annoying, but it can be a blessing.”

“It can.” She patted my arm. “Why don’t you go save Evan before he strokes out. That vein popping out of his forehead is concerning.”

I looked at Evan, who was now red-faced and looking like he was a moment away from punching someone as Grant and Malcom talked to each other, gesticulating wildly and completely unaware that Evan was giving them death stares.

“Good plan.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow. And I’ll talk to Malcom about his jokes. He means well, but he doesn’t understand that not everyone shares his humor.”

I waited until Emily was out of earshot. “Is it just me,” I asked Vlado, “or is Malcom an asshole?”

“It’s not just you.”

“He must be fire in the sack if someone like Emily is putting up with all his bullshit. He knew exactly what he was saying. Those weren’t jokes. And that crap about Emily needing to make peace with his bestie made me uncomfy.”

“Me too.” He made a grievous sound. “I love Emily like a sister, but her taste in men is terrible. Before lemon face, she always ended up with broke losers who used her name and connections to further themselves. Then, when she couldn’t help them anymore, they’d break her heart and leave her devastated. Her last boyfriend really messed her up and unfortunately Malcolm was there to pick up the pieces.”

“Like she trauma bonded to him?”

“Like he made sure she only had him to trauma bond to.”

“Interesting.” I glanced at the trio of men off to the side. “Let’s save Evan before he punches lemon face and gets arrested.”

Squaring my shoulders, I marched up to them and stood beside Evan. “I’m so sorry to interrupt, but I need to steal my boyfriend back.”

Evan slid his arm around my waist. “Is everything okay?”

“Fine. I just need to speak with you.”

“Of course.” He glanced at Grant and Malcolm. “Excuse me.”

“But—” Malcolm started, but his glare was leveled at me.

“We can talk more about this in the office. I’ll see you Monday.” Evan dragged me away from them.

“You okay? That looked intense.”

He sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Fine. Just more of the same crap I deal with day in and day out.”

“Is there anyone else you need to say hi too?” I looked around the ballroom. “Oh my fucking god.” I slapped my hand over my mouth in glee.

“What?” Both Vlado and Evan followed my stare.

“Your mom mentioned that Cecelia was here, and I thought yay, drama that doesn’t involve me. But look at her dress, then look at Maryse’s.”

“Holy shit.” Vlado chuckled. “Now this is what I call entertainment.”

“Right?”

Cecelia was standing with Bryant in a blue dress with a sheer bodice and a mermaid skirt nearly identical to the one Maryse had on. The dresses were slightly different shades of blue, and the cut of the bodice was different, but they were close enough it looked like the women had worn the same dress to the party.

“So, who wore it best?” I asked, craning my neck as I searched for Maryse.

“Cecelia,” Vlado said. “No contest.”

“Yup.”

Evan cocked his eyebrow at me.

“Not because Maryse is a hussy who needs to check herself,” I said, knowing what he was implying. “Even you have to agree that dress was made for Cecelia. She looks like an ethereal mermaid come to bring us landfolk good news from the ocean depths. Maryse looks like she’s on her way to a throwback prom for kids who didn’t get hot until after college. And her shoes are so last century. Someone should tell her that the clear heel and platform is a stripper thing. *Especially* with bejeweled gladiator straps. I know what brand those are, and it’s super sad she spent *that* much money to look like a ‘what not to wear’ BuzzFeed list.”

“I don’t understand most of what you just said, but I’m guessing the tea was hot?” Vlado said.

“Piping.” I grinned.

“Tea?” Evan’s gaze danced between us. “Is this one of those ‘it’s better to just laugh and not ask’ moments?”

“Tis. Do you think Maryse has seen Cecelia? There’s no way in hell that was a coincidence. Who do you think Cecelia’s inside person is?” I glanced around. “Someone had to have told her what Maryse’s dress looked like. Any guesses?”

Vlado and Evan looked at each other. “Emily,” they deadpanned.

I cackled. “Amazing.”

“How did you know what a gloriosa is?”

“Huh?” I asked Evan.

“The flowers. How did you know what they are?”

“Aiden’s girlfriend loves red flowers, especially lilies. One of my friends is an amazing artist and Aiden had River draw a

bouquet of all her favorite flowers for Valentine's last year."

"He gave her a picture of flowers instead of actual flowers?" Vlado looked dubious. "And she's still his girlfriend?"

"He gave her a one-of-a-kind piece of hand-drawn art, with her favorite things in it." I shot him some serious side-eye. "She loved it. And she would have kicked Aiden's ass if he spent that kind of money on cut flowers in this economy. A picture lasts forever, a bouquet doesn't."

"Hmmm." Vlado nodded pensively. "Sounds like your boy is on to something."

Evan sighed heavily.

"What?" I peered at him.

"I need to speak to Arnold."

"The cockblocker?"

Vlado snorted.

Evan kissed my cheek and grinned. "I won't be long. He's been avoiding my calls, and I can't figure out why."

"So weird." I giggled.

"Do I want to know?" Vlado asked after Evan left.

"Arnold kept calling Evan that night you cockblocked me. So he's the first blocker, you were the second."

"There's more to this story if you're involved."

I smirked. "I may have answered the phone and pretended like I had Evan tied up and gagged so he couldn't answer. Worked like a charm."

Vlado laughed. "That sounds about right. And I know for a fact I didn't cockblock you. I just paused things for a bit."

"Did Ev tell you?"

He shook his head. "It's my job to know everything he does. I know he went into your room, and he left a while later. Whatever happened isn't my business, but I can put two and two together."

“Excuse me?”

I turned to find a guy in a suit next to me. He was around Evan’s age and attractive, but he was clearly drunk. “Yes?”

“How much?” he asked, his words slurring a bit.

“How much what?”

“For you.”

Vlado stepped closer.

“I’m sorry?” I glanced around to make sure no one in our vicinity was close enough to hear.

“You’re the hooker Evan hired, right? How much for someone else to get a go at you?”

“You need to take a step back,” Vlado said, his voice eerily calm and cold.

“Why?” The guy waved his hands erratically. “Am I wrong?”

“So wrong,” I started.

“So you’re not a hooker?” he demanded loudly.

Several heads whirled in our direction.

“Why do drunk people lose their volume control before their ability to say stupid shit?” I muttered.

“Time to go.” Vlado stepped in front of me.

“What’s going on?” Evan appeared beside me, his hand on my back and his voice as gruff as Vlado’s.

“Nothing.” Drunk guy grinned, oblivious to just how close he was getting to an ass kicking. “Just asking how much Nicky here charges for a night.”

“His name is Nick.” Evan stepped in front of me so both he and Vlado blocked me from the asshat. “And you will apologize for insulting him.”

“But Angelica said she saw him at Em’s party. That he was part of the entertainment.”

“You need to leave. Now.”

My eyes circled the room. Fucking perfect. We had an audience, and it was only going to get bigger the longer this went on.

“Ev,” I said softly, leaning close to his ear. “Let me handle this.”

I squeezed between him and Vlado. Evan didn’t say anything. I took his silence as a sign to continue.

“That’s what all this silliness is about?” I laughed and gave drunk guy my best smile. “I knew it had to be a simple misunderstanding.”

“You mean you weren’t at Em’s party?” He blinked at me.

I glanced over my shoulder at Evan. He nodded slightly.

“I was there.” I turned back to drunk guy. “And yes, I was part of the entertainment, but I’m not an escort.” I laughed again like it was the funniest thing I’d ever heard. “I’m a dancer.”

“Dancer?” Drunk guy scratched his head. “Really?”

“Yes.” I looked around at the crowd watching us, trying to gauge their reactions. “I work at a club as a dancer. Evan was there that night, but it’s nothing like you’re thinking. We’d already been together for almost six months at this point. We thought it would be fun to pretend like we didn’t know each other.”

“Oh. That makes sense.” Drunk guy kicked at the floor with the toe of his dress shoe like a toddler who’d just been scolded. “I didn’t mean to insult you. I’m just...”

“It’s okay.” I smiled benevolently. “I get it. Sometimes the brain just doesn’t connect the dots after too many glasses of bubbly.”

He nodded sheepishly.

“I think it’s best you leave,” Evan said coldly.

Drunk guy scurried away.

“Are you okay?” Evan spun me around so I faced him, his arm wrapping my waist and his body pressed up against mine.

“Fine,” I said breathlessly. His proximity was doing things to me. “Just a silly misunderstanding.”

Evan leaned forward and kissed me. And not a polite little peck, but a *kiss* with tongue and everything. When he finally pulled away, the crowd around us had dispersed.

“Done claiming him?” Vlado asked with a smirk.

Evan smirked back.

“Is it just me, or is it hot in here?” I fanned myself.

“I think we’ve put in enough face time.” He gave me a smoldering look that raised my body temperature another few degrees. “Let’s get out of here and go home.”

“Yeah.” A shiver of anticipation ran up my spine as his look went molten. I didn’t need three guesses to figure out what he was planning. “Let’s. Wait. What about Dressgate? I can’t miss the drama.”

“I’m sure Emily will have a play by play for you tomorrow.” Evan slung his arm around my shoulders possessively and started toward the exit.

“Hell, she’ll probably have video too.” Vlado fell into step behind us. “You’ll get all the tea.”

“Tea?” Evan asked.

“Gossip.”

“What does tea have to do with... You know what, never mind. I think this is another ‘if you have to ask, you don’t need to know’ moments.”

“Bet.”

Evan looked down at me and rolled his eyes.

“Careful, your eyes might get stuck like that,” I said sweetly.

“You’re lucky I care about Vlado’s sensibilities.”

“Huh?”

“The car we took tonight doesn’t have a partition. If it did, I’d be finding something else you could do with that cheeky

mouth on the drive home.”

“Guess you’ll just have to wait until we get home to have your fun. Let’s go, Vlado. Final destination: Poundtown. Population: us.”

Evan laughed and held me tighter as Vlado muttered something about partitions and Tootsie Pops.

Tonight had been a success on the family side, and hopefully I’d done enough damage control that drunk guy hadn’t fucked everything up with his stupid assumptions.

Now I was on my way home to get my guts rearranged by my super-hot fake boyfriend.

Best. Night. Ever.

NICK

NICK: Worst. Day. Ever.

Quinn: what happened?

Nick: I got fired

Quinn: what?

Nick: the café is closing

Nick: the landlords jacked up the rents again and Vicky cant afford to keep the place open

Quinn: I'm so sorry. Is there anything I can do?

I glanced up to make sure I hadn't missed my stop.

Nick: no but thanks for asking

Nick: I still have the club and the money from you know what so I'll be okay

Nick: I just feel so bad for Vicky and everyone else who works there

Nick: and I'm gonna miss it

Nick: i worked there for almost six years

Quinn: are you sure you're okay?

Nick: yeah, just kinda numb right now

Nick: its so weird that today was my last day at my job. I got up, went in like it was a typical day, then bam. No more job

Quinn: that's a lot to deal with

Quinn: is everything okay with the other thing you have going on?

I glanced up again to check how close we were to my stop. A few more minutes.

Nick: its fine

Nick: rich people live boring lives

Nick: its just fancy party after fancy party where everyone talks about fancy stuff and wears fancy stuff and eats fancy stuff

Quinn: they do like their fancy stuff

Quinn: is he treating you well?

My neck and face heated at the memories of all the times he'd treated me well in the car, in my room, on the kitchen counter, in his office...

Nick: yup

Nick: total gentleman

Quinn: how long have you been fucking him?

Nick: how did you know??????

Quinn: you just told me

Nick: DAMMIT QUINN

Nick: HOW DARE YOU REVERSE UNO ME!!!!

He sent a line of laughing emojis.

Nick: about a month

Quinn: and you're sure he didn't coerce you at all?

Nick: not at all. Fucker made me wait to get the D! this thing has been going on for 2 months now and I've only been getting the good stuff for half the time

Quinn sent more laughing emojis.

Quinn: as long as you're okay with everything

Nick: totally okay. We understand each other

Now were a block from my stop. Gathering up my stuff, I pulled the indicator cord. When I was off the bus, I opened my texts.

Quinn: I have to get ready for a meeting. Let me know if you need anything. Talk soon

Nick: talk soon

I added some hearts and kissy faces and sent the text off.

“Ugh,” I grumbled and slipped my phone away. “Worst day ever.”

All I wanted was some bestie cuddles and to eat my weight in carbs, but Aiden was working tonight, and Gray had to get up before dawn to get to work on time and it was already close to his bedtime.

The twins were on the same crew as Gray, so they got up just as early as he did, and Kai was busy with his upcoming move.

Evan had been away for the past week traveling between his offices and doing whatever businesspeople did on work trips.

I didn't do well with idle time and being left to my own devices usually led to me doing stupid shit because boredom made my brain itchy.

Still moping about having to spend the evening being sad by myself, I took the long way home. My usual route was a straight shot from the bus stop to my building, but the walk was boring and cut through some sketchy side streets. This way took longer, but the streets were prettier and it wasn't as creepy.

Not many people were out and about since it was early evening, but just seeing other people made me feel less alone as I made my way down a picturesque street with stately houses and well-manicured lawns.

Why did they always put rich neighborhoods next to poor ones? Was it to make the rich people feel better about their

situation? Or was it to make poor people feel worse?

Movement caught my eye. I glanced over my shoulder as the hairs on the back of my neck lifted with goosebumps.

A giant of a man was walking about twenty feet behind me. I'd noticed him when I got off the bus. Had he followed me?

Or was he just a regular guy going about his evening?

I stole another look over my shoulder. My stomach exploded with butterflies. Not happy ones. Something about him was off.

For one, it was a nice night. Definitely T-shirt weather, but he was in a black hoodie and black jeans. That wasn't exactly newsworthy, but the way he had his black ballcap pulled low over his eyes and kept his face down and hidden by his hood was right out of the *how to spot a murderer* handbook.

My chest tightened as my heart palpitated wildly.

Was this one of the guys who'd threatened Evan? Had they found me?

Was I about to die?

Gasping a breath, I pulled out my phone and quickened my steps.

Should I call the police? But what would I say? Was the possibility that I was being followed a good enough reason to call them? And what if this guy wasn't a psycho killer and I got him shot by some trigger-happy cop because I didn't like the way he dressed?

But what if he *was* a psycho killer? What if not calling the cops on him got me unalived?

Shit shit shit shit.

With shaking hands I video-called Gray. He'd know what to do.

"Please be home. Please be home," I muttered as it rang.

Gray's face filled the screen as he answered. "What's up?"

“Hey.” I peeked over my shoulder. Wait, what? He wasn’t behind me anymore. Had I been wrong? I looked at Gray. “Can you talk for a few minutes?”

“Yeah, you okay?”

“Fine. Some guy’s been following me for a few blocks. Probably just going the same way as me, but I’m getting sketchy vibes from him.”

“Where are you? Want me to come pick you up?”

“I’m probably just being paranoid.” I looked over my shoulder again. “Shit,” I hissed as the guy stepped out from behind a group of women pushing strollers.

“What? What’s going on?”

“Not sure. Let me cross the street to see...” I looked both ways and hurried across the street. “Fuck. He crossed the street too.”

“Where are you?”

“Like, five minutes from home.”

“Where’s the nearest commercial street? Is there a store or anything close?”

“There’s a gas station a few blocks away.” I peered over my shoulder again. “Wait. Is that...” I stopped walking. The guy stopped too. He pulled a phone out of his hoodie pocket and fiddled with it, keeping his head down and his face out of view.

Something about him was familiar. The set of his shoulders, his big hands, even the way he was bent over his phone. His black hoodie was generic and had no identifying details on it, but I’d seen it before. I glanced at his feet. I knew those boots.

Vlado? Why the hell was he following me around and freaking me the fuck out?

“What?” Gray asked.

Dropping the phone to my side, I stalked back toward where the man stood. He froze but didn’t look up.

“The fuck, dude?” Please be Vlado and not some crazy guy who’ll kill me in broad daylight while I’m talking to my bestie.

“Nick?” came Gray’s muffled voice.

Vlado lifted his head and pushed his hood down, a sheepish smile on his lips. “Hey.”

“Nick? Are you okay? The fuck is happening?” Gray sounded panicked now.

I lifted the phone and gave him what I hoped was a carefree smile. “Sorry, all good. False alarm.”

“What do you mean? Were you being followed?” he demanded.

Dammit. I shouldn’t have bothered him with this. Gray was like the big brother I’d always wanted, and I loved him to pieces, but he was insanely overprotective and I’d definitely tripped his Spidey sense. I guessed that I had two weeks, tops, before he cornered me and demanded to know what I was hiding and why I’d been such a shitty friend to him for the past few months.

“Yeah, but it’s no big deal.” I shot daggers at Vlado. “Just someone being annoying.”

He spun his ballcap around so it was backwards and shrugged innocently.

“I’m okay,” I told Gray. “I just have to deal with this.”

“Deal with what?”

“Nothing.” I blew him a kiss before he could ask again. “Thanks, babes.”

I ended the call and whirled on Vlado. “What the fuck?”

The group of moms with strollers were just passing us. A few of them threw me scandalized looks. Oops.

“Sorry.” I tucked my phone back in my pocket.

When they were out of earshot, I put my hands on my hips and glared at Vlado. “What? The? Fuck?” I repeated.

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Don’t play dumb with me, mister.” I wagged my finger at him. “Why are you following me and making me think I’m about to be murdered!”

“Shhhh.” He did a quick scan around us. “Use your indoor voice. I really don’t need to get shot because someone thinks I’m threatening you.”

“You do realize that telling me to use my indoor voice is the same as telling me to calm down.” I narrowed my eyes. “And what happens when someone tells me to calm down?”

He winced. “You’re right. You have every right to be upset.”

I marched up to him and stood close enough our toes touched. He had a point about yelling accusations at him and using words like *murdered* in public, but he wasn’t about to get off without experiencing the full blast of my anger. “Talk.”

A black car I sort of recognized pulled up next to us.

“Get in.” Vlado waved to the car.

“What the hell is going on?”

“I promise I’ll explain everything when we’re in the car.”

I glared at him, half tempted to sit down on the sidewalk and have a full tantrum until he sang like a canary.

“Please,” he said softly.

“Fine.” I tapped my foot. “Well?”

“Well?” he echoed.

“Are you forgetting something?” I stared at the door handle to emphasize my point.

Vlado huffed out a laugh and peeled the door open. I slid inside and settled on the seat. A bald guy with a bushy beard and a huge and scarily realistic spider tattoo on his neck upnodded me from behind the wheel.

“Do I know you?” I asked him.

“That’s Myron. He’s one of my men.”

“Does Myron know how to answer for himself?” I asked Vlado.

“He does.” Vlado made some sort of motion with his hand and Myron pulled away from the curb.

“Talk. Now. Why are you following me?”

“Evan put me on your security detail.”

“My what?”

“Your security detail.”

“Why do I have security? Is this because of the letter?”

“Letters,” he said grimly.

“What?” I yelled. “Letters as in plural?”

He nodded.

I slumped in my seat, the last of the fight leaving me. “Can you not be all mysterious and intense right now? I had a shit day and I don’t have the bandwidth to handle the word games right now.”

“Did Evan tell you about how the letters have been arriving every week on a schedule since we got that first one?”

“He said the one about me broke the pattern and that’s why he was worried about it.”

“They never resumed their pattern. Now the letters are arriving at random intervals. Some by post, some by courier. Some have been dropped off in person, but they always manage to evade our cameras so we haven’t been able to identify them.”

“Do you think it’s the same person?”

He nodded. “They’re smart, but not smart enough. Whoever it is wears different shoes or boots every time. Different sizes, treads, types. All generic brand and all widely available.”

“So how do you know it’s the same person if they’re wearing different sized shoes?”

“Because we can estimate their height based on reference points in the footage. With that info, we can calculate their weight from the footprints they leave behind, even with the different types of shoes. The letters were all delivered by someone who’s between five eleven and six foot, and about one hundred eighty pounds.”

“That sounds like it could be a lot of people.”

“Right. Without more precise information or any sort of identifying marks, it’s going to be tough finding them based on height and weight alone.”

“So they’re sending letters all willy nilly, and that’s freaking everyone out?”

“It’s a sign that whoever is doing this is getting more and more unhinged. The language in the letters is all over the place, too. They’re mixing singular and plural, calling themselves *I* in one line and saying *we* in the next. And they’re becoming increasingly graphic with their threats.”

“Do I want to know what they’re saying?” A hollow pit formed in my gut.

He shook his head.

My stomach dropped. “Am I in danger? I asked Evan and he said he didn’t think so. What do you think?”

“I think we need to be careful.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I honestly don’t know.” He sighed and pulled off his ballcap to scrub his hand through his hair. “But I will always err on the side of caution when it comes to threats. Stalkers are unpredictable, which is what makes them dangerous. I can’t tell you one way or another if you’re in danger, but I can promise I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“But how can you promise that? You can’t be in two places at once. And why are you following me and not with Evan? Isn’t he the actual target and I’m just collateral damage? Why is no one protecting him!”

“Easy, Nicky.” He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “Breathe.”

I sucked in a shaky breath. Why was I dizzy?

“We’re doing everything we can to keep you safe. You have a full security detail. We’ve been monitoring your apartment, your jobs. You’ve had at least two people on you at all times.”

“I have?” I gawked at him. “When did that start?”

“The night we got the first letter that mentioned you.”

“You mean someone has been following me for a month and I didn’t notice?”

“I’m pretty good at what I do.” He grinned and squeezed my hand. “If I do say so myself.”

“*You’ve* been following me?”

“It sounds less creepy if you say I’ve been guarding you or protecting you.”

“You really want to argue semantics when I *just* found out you’ve been tracking me like a deer in hunting season for a month!”

“Again with the language. Tracking, hunting... I’m on your side here.”

“Are you? What about Evan? You’re his family, and you just left him vulnerable for a whole month while you’ve been *protecting* me?”

“I have a full detail on Evan too. I know this is a shock, but do you really think I’d risk my best friend?”

“No,” I conceded. “But why are you on my detail and not his?”

“Because he might be my brother, but he’s also my boss. He told me to be your primary, so I’m your primary.”

“I still can’t believe you’ve been following me around for a month and I never noticed.” I kicked the back of the seat in front of me. “Am I that oblivious, or are you that good?”

“I’m that good.”

“So good that you messed up and I saw you today?”

He smiled crookedly. “You’re the one who took a different route and made me adjust my routine. And you only saw me because I wanted you to.”

“What do you mean?”

“I love Evan, and I respect him, but he’s not thinking clearly right now. He wanted me to stay stealth because he didn’t want to scare you or stress you out. But you can’t protect yourself if you don’t know what’s going on. And full disclosure, my job is a hell of a lot easier when I don’t have to waste my time and energy ducking behind things or hiding in plain sight.”

“I suppose it would be.” I dug the fidget spinner Zane had given me out of my pocket. “But just so you know, I’m not completely weak and useless.” I flicked the blade open. “I can protect myself.”

“Do you know how to use that?”

“Zane showed me.”

“Have you ever used it on someone?”

I shook my head.

He held out his hand. I carefully placed the handle on his palm.

“This is a nice blade.” He examined it closely. “Where did you get it?”

“Zane and River.”

He snapped it closed and handed it back. “I never said you couldn’t protect yourself. I just mean you can do a better job if you have all the information. That’s all.”

I tucked the knife away. “When does he get back from his trip?”

“He got home this morning.”

“Hey, Myron?” I called to the front of the car.

“Yeah?”

“Can you take me to...” I looked at Vlado.

“The penthouse,” he answered.

“Penthouse?” I asked him.

“Evan’s main residence.”

“Can you please take me to the penthouse, Myron?”

He peered at us in the rearview mirror, his expression filled with questions.

Vlado nodded.

“Where is this penthouse?” I asked. “Is it in Seattle?”

Another nod.

I crossed my arms and turned to stare out the window. The scenery raced by, but I couldn’t focus on anything as my mind spun.

A part of me was grateful Evan cared enough to put security on me, and I was really glad Vlado was the one who’d been watching me. I trusted him, and I liked him, but I was still salty that they’d lied to me.

The news that the threats had ramped up was also terrifying. I’d convinced myself that Evan had been right and this wasn’t something to worry about. He hadn’t said anything since, but then again, I hadn’t asked.

Ugh. Today sucked donkey balls. I’d lost my job, had to say goodbye to the place I’d worked at for almost six years, and I’d freaked out my bestie after I’d been avoiding him for months.

“Are you mad at me?” Vlado asked.

“Yes.” I kept staring unseeingly out the window.

“Is there anything I can do to make you less mad?”

“No.”

“You sure?”

I turned to face him as a wall of emotions slammed into me. Exhaustion, anger, fear, sadness, loneliness. All of them hit at once, leaving me feeling raw and vulnerable and so freaking alone.

“I had a really bad day,” I whispered. “Can I have a hug?”

He opened his arms.

I scooted closer and leaned against this broad chest as he held me tight. The softness of his sweater and the steady beat of his heart soothed the noise in my head, and some of the crushing despair inside me faded.

“I promise I’m not hitting on you or anything.” I snuggled closer. “I’m just a really tactile person and hugs and cuddles help me feel better.”

“I know.” He gave me a little squeeze and rested his cheek on the top of my head. “I get it. Sometimes you just need some platonic cuddles to not feel so alone.”

“Yeah. I’m glad you understand. So many people don’t and they get mad because they think I’m flirting or trying to start something when all I want is a hug.”

“You’re safe with me, Nick. If you need a hug or a cuddle or someone to vent to, I’m here.”

“Thanks.” I sighed and hugged him tighter. “I’m not mad at you anymore.”

“I’m glad.”

“I’m pissed as hell at him.”

“I don’t blame you. Do you want to talk about what happened today?”

“How much do you know?”

“Nothing. I don’t keep tabs on your day-to-day life or listen in on your conversations or phone calls. I just make sure you’re safe from afar and keep an eye out for anything that might help us find this asshole.”

“My boss told us she’s closing the café and today was my last shift.”

“I’m sorry, Nicky.”

“I’ll be fine. I have my other job, and this one. And all my bills are paid for the next few months. It was just a shock. I went in expecting a normal day and instead my whole world got flipped upside down. Then this stuff with you and Evan and the letters...and I freaked Gray out.”

“Gray? How did you freak him out?”

“I FaceTimed him while I was trying to figure out if you were a random dude or a serial killer and I couldn’t tell him it was you because I can’t tell him about Evan and this arrangement and now he’s freaked out.” I smushed my face into his chest. “I’m a terrible friend.”

“I’m sure you’re not.”

“I am. I’ve been lying to him, to everyone, for months. And Gray isn’t just my bestie. He and Aiden are my platonic soulmates. Do you know how soul-crushing it is to lie to the people who’ve chosen to love you? And the thing about Gray is he has massive abandonment issues, and he’s hypersensitive to rejection because of his walking dildo of a sperm donor. I’m hurting him every time I lie or brush him off. And the worst part is he’s too nice to call me on it, so instead he internalizes his pain and it comes out in other, usually unhealthy ways. *And* he’s got some shit going on with his stepbrother and I can’t be there for him because I have to keep my stupid mouth shut about everything happening in my life.”

“I’m just tossing this out there, but your and Evan’s relationship isn’t secret.”

“What do you mean?”

“Evan’s family has a lot of connections, and they’re regularly talked about in certain circles. There’s press about you out there.”

“Really?” I untangled myself from him.

“You have to search for it, and I’m sure it’s not in any sources your friends read, but it’s public knowledge that you’re with him.”

I just stared at him. “I know you’re dropping hints, but my brain is too messy to pick up what you’re putting down.”

“Telling your friends you’re dating Evan doesn’t go against the NDA. Mentioning anything about the contract and your arrangement does.”

“So I can tell Gray and my friends I have a boyfriend and that’s why I’ve been so busy? I don’t have to keep lying to everyone?”

“You can. The key is to not mention anything about a contract, monetary compensation, or that the relationship is fake. Anything else is fair game.”

“Ohmygod ohmygod ohmygod. Thank you!” I launched myself into his lap.

He caught me with a belly laugh and let me hug him like a crazed monkey.

“You have no idea how much lying to everyone has been stressing me out. How guilty I feel every time I lie to Gray or the twins or anyone else from the club about why I’m taking a night off or why I can’t hang out with them.”

“Now you don’t have to do that.”

I wiggled off his lap and settled next to him with my head on his shoulder. “Do you powerlift?”

“You can tell?”

“Powerlifters are usually more comfy than bodybuilders. You’re really comfy.”

“Did you eat today?”

“No comment.”

“Want to stop for a burger before you rip Ev a new one?”

“Yes please.”

I half listened as Vlado talked to Myron about stopping for food, already excited at the prospect of finally being able to tell my friends the truth, at least a version of the truth.

NICK

“EVAN?” I poked my head into the kitchen. It was empty. “Ugh.” I stomped across the hall and threw open a random door. Rows of neatly stacked linens stared back at me. “Seriously?” I shut the closet door and glared at it.

Evan’s penthouse was huge and spanned the thirtieth floor of the fanciest building I’d ever been in. It also had security coming out of the wazoo, and the number of armed guards and checkpoints just to get inside one of the elevators was intimidating as fuck.

Vlado had brought me in through the private entrance and elevator in the parking lot. It was guarded by his men and not the building’s security team, which made Vlado less twitchy.

It also opened my eyes to the kind of life Evan lived. I knew he was rich, but I hadn’t fully comprehended that he was *rich*, and with that wealth came the kind of attention that required armed guards and living in Fort Knox.

Unfortunately, my new revelations only added to my anger. Evan had made the choice to keep me in the dark about his reality, and *that* was unacceptable.

Whirling away from the closet, I made my way through the living room and toward the other side of the massive space. Vlado had assured me Evan was home.

I wasn’t convinced.

The penthouse was gorgeous with cathedral ceilings, huge, airy rooms, massive floor-to-ceiling windows that showed off

the breathtaking view, and cozy yet classy furnishings. Unlike the rental house, this one was lived in. Photos and artwork decorated the walls, and various knickknacks dotted the available surfaces. A threadbare quilt was carefully draped over the huge sectional sofa in the living room, and a stack of books was piled on the coffee table.

“Evan?” I shouted. My voice echoed back at me as it bounced off the gleaming hardwood floors and pristine walls. “Ugh!”

The slap of my shoes on the too-shiny floors was oddly satisfying as I marched toward the only part of the house I hadn’t checked and yanked on the first door.

It didn’t budge.

“Today is not the day,” I grumbled and stomped over to the next door and tugged on the knob. Locked. “You’ve *got* to be kidding me.”

“Vlado?” I shouted. He hadn’t come inside the apartment with me, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t snuck in while I was busy conducting my search. “If you’re in here, stop hiding and tell me where Evan is or you’re going back on the naughty list.”

No answer.

Still seething, I stalked over to the last door and pulled.

It flew open. Shocked, I overcompensated trying to stop it from slamming into the wall and nearly fell ass over tea kettle when it swung back and hit me square in the hip.

“Son of a biscuit.” I rubbed my hip and peered into the room.

It wasn’t a room, but a creepily dark and tiny hallway. “Evan?”

Silence.

A sliver of light caught my attention at the other end of the short hall.

“Evan?” I pressed my ear to the door in question. A rhythmic thumping sound, almost a hollow slap, filtered through the heavy wood.

I tested the knob. It turned in my hand. Pushing the door open, I peered inside.

“Ev— holy mother of dragons.”

Beyond the door was a home gym. Exercise equipment, weight racks, and a multitude of machines that looked like they doubled as torture devices lined the walls. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors gleamed, and in one corner was what looked like a mini yoga studio.

Evan was in front of a hanging punching bag in nothing but a pair of low-slung athletic shorts and boxing gloves. His skin gleamed with sweat, highlighting the individual dips and curves of his impressive muscles as he wailed on the bag like he was trying to punch it into next week.

I stood there, frozen. Unable to do more than stare at the gloriousness of not only his physique, but the show of aggression. Why was that so hot?

“Evan?” I called, my voice far more hesitant than it had been when I’d been searching for him.

He didn’t even pause as he beat that bag like it had insulted his grandmother.

“Ev?” I tried again, louder this time.

Halting his assault, he turned to face me.

Sweat beaded on his forehead. Damp hair hung down over his eyes. His shoulders rose and fell as he breathed hard from the exertion, but it was the look on his face, intense and feral, that sent a prickle of fear through me.

Evan might look like the perfect, put-together businessman when he was around others, but in that moment, I understood just how dangerous and capable he was.

Slowly, he rested one arm over the top of the punching bag and brought the other hand to his mouth. He tugged the Velcro strap free with his teeth and shook the glove off.

“Nick?” He pulled a white earbud out of his ear. “What are you doing here?”

“Um...” I fixed my gaze on one of the many weight machines and not on the bulge under his shorts. “I’m mad at you.”

“You are.” The amusement in his tone was almost enough to make me look at him again.

Almost.

“Yes.”

“Care to explain why?”

“Because you’re a liar who lies.”

“I need a little more context than that.”

I shifted my gaze to him. “Can you put on a shirt or something? It’s hard to be mad when you’re all shiny and looking like a snack.”

He smirked and pulled off his other glove.

“You lied to me.”

“I got that much. What did I lie about?”

“The letters!”

The smirk fell off his face.

“Why didn’t you tell me you got more of them? And why the hell did I only find out today that Vlado has been following me? You’ve been lying to me for weeks.”

“I didn’t lie. I just didn’t tell you the whole truth.”

“A half-truth is still a lie.” I stood akimbo and glared at him. “Why didn’t you just tell me what’s going on? You told me about the first letter. Why hide this from me?”

“I was trying to protect you.”

Adrenaline surged through me as my anger hovered right below flashpoint. “By hiding things from me? By treating me like an empty-headed toy who can’t think for myself? You said you didn’t see me like that. You told me you were different.”

My lip trembled as my eyes burned. “But you’re not. You’re exactly the same as everyone else.”

“Nick.” He stepped closer.

“Don’t! Do you have any idea how violating it is to know someone has been following my every move? That you’ve had people watching my apartment and my jobs? How stupid I feel knowing you lied to me for weeks and I had no clue any of this was going on?”

“The situation is complicated—”

“I don’t care! I don’t give a flying fuck how complicated the situation is. If it involves me, then I have a goddamn right to know about it!”

His jaw worked as he clenched his teeth.

“You’re so afraid of something happening to me that you put your best friend and the head of your security on me, but didn’t think to tell me what’s going on so I could protect myself? I’m not the weak, flighty airhead everyone thinks I am.

“I might love pretty clothes and dancing and say weird shit that doesn’t always make sense to others, but I’m an adult. I’ve been on my own since I was sixteen. I’m not some naïve kid who doesn’t understand how the real world works. I’ve spent my entire life dealing with assholes who’ve taken exception to who I am because I refuse to change myself for the comfort of others.”

“Nick—”

“No, it’s my turn to talk and your turn to listen,” I steamrolled on. “You have no idea what life has been like for me. How many times I’ve been ridiculed and mocked and attacked just for being myself. How many bro-dudes have taken exception to my very existence because I don’t fit into what they feel a ‘man’ should be. Did that ever occur to you while you were deciding to keep me in the dark about my own damn safety?”

“Nick—”

“Fuck you.” The burning in my eyes faded, but the tightness in my throat was making it hard to breathe. “Fuck you for making me think you were different.”

Evan crossed the room, his strides long and purposeful.

I wanted to run, but my feet wouldn't move.

“I'm so sorry.” He hauled me against his hard chest in a crushing hug. “You're right. You're right about everything.”

“A hug isn't going to fix this.” I kept my arms at my sides, still too upset to give in to the comfort he was offering.

“I know. And I'm not trying to fix it. I'm just... I'm so sorry.”

Feeling awkward, I rested my hands on his bare hips. “It's so not fair that you're all gorgeous and sweaty while I'm trying to be mad.”

His low chuckle soothed some of the anger that still flowed through me.

“I'm serious. Why couldn't you be in the middle of trying on parkas or maybe getting ready to tend to some bees?”

“Tend to bees?”

“Yeah, like in a beekeeper suit.”

“I don't have any bees to tend to.”

“Doesn't mean you can't have a beekeeper suit. It's not like they check your beekeeper card when you go to buy one.”

He pulled back and held me at arm's length. “I'm sorry, Nick. I know an apology isn't enough. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I do want to explain things to you.”

“Fine. Explain.”

“Not here.” He pressed a sweaty kiss against my forehead. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

Taking my hand, he led me out of the gym. “My room.”

Still pouting, I followed Evan down the hall to one of the closed doors I'd nearly dislocated my arm trying to open.

"Why do you lock your room if you live alone?" I asked as he pressed his thumb to a sensor.

"Because my bedroom has a door to my office in it." He motioned to the other closed door.

"You have a door connecting your office and your bedroom? My dude, have you ever heard of a work/life balance? No wonder you're a worka— holy shitballs." I stumbled to a stop and gaped at Evan's bedroom as I stepped through the doorway. "What in the enchanted forest is going on in here? This is right out of one of those 'which would you choose' fantasy bedroom videos on my For You Page!"

Evan chuckled and closed the door behind me. "I have no idea what most of that means."

"It means this room will be living rent-free in my head for a long time." I craned my neck to look around. "Now *this* is a vibe."

The bedroom was even more opulent than the rest of the apartment with the same cathedral ceilings and floor-to-ceiling windows. A king bed on a platform dominated one side of the room. Evan's comforter was big and fluffy and a dark navy blue, and his pillows were the same shade, only made of satin. Or silk.

A massive two-sided fireplace separated the bedroom area from what looked like a small sitting area with a chaise, something that could have been a hammock but appeared to be floating, and a lamp that was more art than lighting fixture.

The furnishings were the same dark wood as the floors, and the almost-black walls somehow made the room seem warm and sensual rather than gloomy.

In one corner was an open entryway that I assumed led to a closet, and a heavy, ornate chandelier hung over the bed. The chandelier was probably the most interesting part of the room. The fixture itself looked like an abstract bundle of wires and metal rods all bent intentionally into a complicated ball, but

the light projected onto the walls and ceiling was shaped into branches, like how the sun or moon looked as it filtered through a heavy tree canopy in the woods.

Evan walked over to a panel of sorts and tapped a few buttons. The chandelier dimmed, then went out. Some sort of recessed lighting was built into the insanely high ceilings and bathed the room in a soft glow as they turned on.

“Do you ever wonder about people with binoculars peeping on you while you’re in this giant sky fishbowl?”

“No.” He leaned against the wall and folded his arms over his chest. *Naked chest*. I swallowed heavy. “In fact, I kind of enjoy the notion. That’s why I spend so much time walking around in the nude. If they’re going to look, I might as well give them a show.”

“Great. Now I have *that* mental image of you while I’m trying to be mad.”

He shrugged, his eyes dancing with laughter.

“Where’s the door to your office?” I asked.

“Through there.” He pointed at the wall.

“Um, Ev? I hate to break it to you, but that’s not a door.”

Smirking in that way that was as sexy and disarming as it was annoying, he went to the wall and pressed on a piece of wainscoting. The wall swung open, revealing a heavy-looking wooden door.

“You have a literal secret room and you use it as your *office*?” I tsked. “You could have made a sex dungeon or a hidden library or a sensory deprivation room.”

“A sensory deprivation room?” He closed the door, wall, whatever it was.

“Yeah! Don’t you ever wish you had a place to go when you get overstimulated? Just a nice, quiet room with lots of comfy things and no outside stress.”

“Not sure that would be considered sensory deprivation, but a room like that is appealing. And my office has an entry

from the hallway, so it's not a secret room. The door is hidden for aesthetic purposes."

"No getting distracted." I crossed my arms and focused my attention on Evan. The liar who lied. "Talk. Now."

He motioned for me to follow him to the sitting area of his room. He perched on the chaise part of the chair. I looked at the floating hammock thing.

It was more of a round suspended platform, big enough for two people to lie down on, and covered with pillows and fluffy blankets. Now that I was closer, I could see the thin wire-like cords holding it to the ceiling.

I waved my hand at the confusing contraption. "Is this a rich person's version of a sex swing?"

Evan made a weird sound, like a cross between a splutter and a cough.

"Why is it so big? Are you a swinger?" I snickered. "A swinger who swings on a swing? Have you had sex on this thing?"

"Does sex with myself count?"

"I'll allow it." I gingerly sat on the edge of the platform. "Eeek!"

The world tilted as the hammock swung backward, throwing me off balance. I landed on my back, my feet in the air, as the thing swayed like a pendulum taking me along for the ride.

"Goddamn stupid..." I tried to sit up but only managed to flop around like a fish out of water as the thing swung in a wide arc. "Mother effer!"

"Are you alright?" Evan asked, his voice heavy with laughter.

"Peachy." Giving up, I lay back on the platform and accepted my fate.

The swinging slowed, then stopped. A warm hand circled my thigh.

I glanced down. Evan was holding the hammock still and looking at me like I was a puppy in a pet store window.

“I’m still mad at you.”

“I understand.” He made a face, like he was trying to stop smiling but couldn’t quite manage it. “Do you need some help getting up?”

“Nope. The hammock gods have spoken. They’ve claimed my soul. This is my home now. I have become one with your rich-dude sex swing.”

“I’m really sorry, Nicky.”

“Can you help me up? I wasn’t lying when I said this thing claimed me.”

He clasped my hand and helped me sit up. “Good?”

“Mmhm.”

He sat back down on the chaise.

“Why did you lie to me? And don’t say to protect me. I want to know why you thought you needed to protect me.”

He sighed and raked a hand through his damp hair. “Because that’s what I do. I protect people.”

“Nope. Don’t accept that. Try again.”

“Because...”

“Because you think I’m a stupid kid who can’t take care of himself?” I supplied.

“That’s not it.”

“Then what is? Please, Evan. Tell me. I thought we were friends. I thought you trusted me and—”

“I do.”

“No, you don’t. If you did, you wouldn’t have hidden this from me.”

“What do you want me to say?” he snapped, his eyes blazing with something I couldn’t read. “Do you want me to tell you it’s because of all these things you’ve just decided are

my motivation? You want me to validate all the terrible things you think about me? Fine. Tell me what to say and I'll say it."

"I want you to tell me the truth!"

"I did!"

"No, you didn't. You told me a bullshit story about how you want to protect me because that's your job. That's not an answer."

"I never said that was my job. I *said* I protect people."

"But what does that mean?"

"It means exactly what it sounds like. I protect the people I care about. I don't care what I have to do, what it costs, or what the consequences are. If you're mine, then you're *mine*. And I protect what's mine."

I stared at him in shock. He considered me his?

"The moment that asshole brought you into this is the moment he went on my shit list. I won't rest until he's caught and dealt with." He paused. His face softened. "I'm sorry I lied to you, Nick. This situation between us is... It complicates things."

"Then uncomplicate it for me."

"I should have told you the truth. But I didn't hide it from you because I think you're weak or flighty or can't take care of yourself. Doesn't make what I did right, but I'm so used to people expecting me to solve their problems that I just *do* out of habit now."

"What do you mean?"

"The people in my life don't care how I fix things, as long as they get done. They don't want to know the details or the full truth of the situation, or my methods. They just want the problem to go away."

"Maybe I am a naïve kid, but what kind of shit are you involved with that you need to use these questionable methods? You buy and sell companies, right?"

"Technically, yes."

“So how does that create a world where you get stalked and kidnapped and have people try to kill you? And what kind of shit are your friends and family doing that puts them in positions where you need to fix their problems?”

“I can’t go into specifics, but let’s just say that some of my father’s dealings haven’t been completely above board.”

“Is that a way of saying he’s done or is doing illegal shit without saying it?”

He nodded.

“Not shocking. I got weird vibes from him.”

“My dad?”

“Yeah. Can’t put my finger on it, but he made my brain itchy. Kinda like lemon face and my old bosses. Something about him is like...off. But your mom and sister are awesome. Especially Emily. She’s officially my favorite person in this family.”

“Ouch.”

“I’m still mad at you,” I threw out. “You explained, thank you. But that doesn’t mean you automatically get a pass for lying.”

“I suppose that’s fair. Emily won’t stop gushing about you either.”

“Really?”

“Are you really surprised after you two ganged up on me during the tasting? Or how you spent the whole time we were finalizing flower arrangements last week chatting like sleepover buddies? I haven’t seen her giggle that much since she was a tween.”

“In our defense, you made it really easy to gang up on you at the tasting. You should have known better than to give your opinion on things.”

“I thought that was why I was there? To give her my opinion so she could choose the right menu for her guests?”

“You’re hopeless.” My eyes went to the ceiling for a beat, my sigh theatric. “Your job as the man of honor is to validate her choices. Unless she’s saying she wants liver and onions as her main, and ambrosia salad instead of a cake, then your actual thoughts are not necessary. Your job is to tell her she made the right choice even if you don’t think it is.”

“But...that makes no sense. Why ask for my opinion if you don’t want it?”

“You really are clueless. Why do you think she chose you to help her organize her wedding?”

“Because I’m her brother?”

“Exactly. You’re her brother and she wants you to be there with her, literally right next to her, while she gets married. She chose you out of all her friends, most of whom are already married and who would be way more helpful with all the nitty-gritty of planning a wedding.”

He blinked at me, his mystified expression fading to understanding.

“You know that dumb stereotype that women start planning their weddings when they’re little girls?”

“Sure.”

“Think about what kind of childhood she had. What kinds of things were shoved down her throat when she was young. Did anyone encourage her to play sports or take an interest in science or encourage her to figure out what she loves and who she is? No. She was raised on a steady diet of being told her only purpose in life is to be pretty, get married, and have babies to carry on the family legacy. And she was shamed and punished every time she stepped one toe out of line or tried to take any sort of control over her life and future.”

“I never thought of that.”

“They say that siblings often have different parents growing up, and I think that’s especially true here. You were raised to be the perfect son. The business mogul and ruthless problem-fixer whose sole purpose in life is to generate more wealth and power for your family. Your parents absolutely

fucked you up too, in a different way. They made your entire identity what you could accomplish and how useful you could be for them.

“Emily was raised to be the perfect wife and support her future husband so he could do all that manly stuff for her. She wasn’t allowed to be a person, she was raised to be whoever her future husband would want her to be.”

“I…”

“Did you know she doesn’t give a shit about the wedding? Not in the way you think she does.”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t her dream wedding. All the plans she’s making, all the details she’s stressing over, they’re not things she wants. They’re the things she’s *supposed* to want. What everyone expects her wedding to be because of who she is. She’s still fitting into the tiny little box of what your parents and society think are acceptable. And while everyone has an opinion on her wedding and lists of things she *has* to include because of tradition or whatever, no one is actually helping her plan this giant four-hundred-person party she never wanted.”

“She told you this?”

I nodded. “It’s sad how many people dismiss her or don’t listen when she tries to ask for help. All I did was give her a safe space to talk, and she did. She’s not stressed about her wedding not being perfect, she’s stressed that it won’t be good enough. That *she* won’t be good enough.”

“I had no idea.” He leaned back on his hands, a dumbfounded expression on his handsome face.

“I know. And it’s not your fault. But now that you see things from her perspective, maybe you can cut her some slack and just be there for her in whatever way you can.”

“I will,” he said. “I can’t believe I didn’t see any of this, but you’re right. It’s so obvious, and I missed it.”

“Sometimes we’re too close to a situation to be able to see it clearly. I get why you lied to me.” Distractedly, I used my

toe to gently push the swing into a slow arc and stared at the floor between us. “But I’m not like other people in your life. I don’t want you to swoop in and play savior and solve my problems for me.”

“I promise I’ll keep you informed of what I can from now on.”

“Thank you.” I ignored the vague language of his statement. I was taking the W on this.

“You said you’ve been on your own since you were sixteen...”

I nodded and pushed the swing a bit harder. “I’m surprised Vlado didn’t find that out when he was doing a deep dive on me and my life. It’s not like it’s a secret.”

“His report mentioned it, but didn’t give details. All it said was that you lived with your friend’s family for the final two years of high school and then you and him moved out and became roommates.”

“There’s not much more to it. My family moved when I was sixteen and Aiden’s parents let me live with them until we graduated.”

He studied me like I was a complex math problem.

“It’s nothing scandalous. My dad lost his job when I was fifteen. It took him almost a year to find a new one that matched his pay and position. The job is in Pennsylvania, so my parents moved with my little sisters and I stayed. It didn’t make sense for me to move across the country for a few years and lose all my connections here. And it gave my parents more buying power because they only had to find a place for four instead of five.”

“Your sisters are quite a bit younger than you, correct?”

“Yup. Alice is ten and Cara just turned eight. Again, nothing scandalous. My parents had me young and decided to wait to have my sisters when they were better established.”

“Are you close with your family?” On the chaise, Evan stretched his legs out and crossed one ankle over the other.

“Close enough. We chat and FaceTime. But they’re busy and have a million things going on.” I shrugged. “It’s fine. I made my own family, so I’m not really missing anything.”

He leaned back on his hands and looked at me closely. The muscles in his arms bulged and popped, as did his abs.

I cleared my throat and cut my gaze back to the floor. When I peeked up at him, he was smirking.

“You’re a cocky bastard when you’re half naked.”

“Am I?”

“Yes. Do you have any idea how hard it was to have a conversation with you about all that important stuff while you’re flaunting your hotness like a fitness influencer?”

“Flaunting? I’m just sitting here.” He spread his knees, forcing the material of his shorts to pull tight around his thick thighs.

“Don’t play dumb with me, mister. You know exactly what you’re doing.”

“And what am I doing?”

“Being a distraction.”

“What am I distracting you from?”

“Myself!”

He chuckled.

“That made sense in my head. You’re short-circuiting my brain. Stop it.”

“Stop what?” He ran one hand down his sculpted chest in a move that looked casual but was clearly calculated.

“Cheater. You’re a businessman. You’re supposed to be flabby and soft and resistible. This.” I waved my hand in his direction. “Is unacceptable.”

“You’d rather I be out of shape?”

“No. Well, yes. Sort of. But no.”

He quirked his eyebrow at me playfully.

“Get up.”

“Why?” He stood.

“Help me out of this damn thing so I don’t break my face when I fall out of it like a moron.”

He held the cords, keeping the hammock in place.

Carefully, I slid off it. When I stood up straight, my chest brushed his.

“Now what?” he asked, his voice husky and his eyes molten.

“Now you carry me to your bed and you fuck me like you mean it.”

Strong hands gripped my ass and yanked me off the ground.

“Yikes!”

“Don’t I always fuck you like I mean it?”

I wrapped my legs around his waist and held onto his shoulders. “Mostly.”

“Mostly?”

“You’re too nice.”

“I’m too nice?” He walked me toward the bed.

“Yes. And stop repeating everything I say.”

“How am I too nice?”

“You’re always so sweet and gentle.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“No. It’s amazing. But not every time. It’s like you think I’m going to break if you’re rough. I’m not some delicate flower. I can handle getting railed. Hell, I *love* it. There’s nothing better than a big cock fucking me so hard I can’t walk the next day.”

He stopped next to the bed. “Do you really think telling me how much you enjoy sex with other men is the way to get what you want from me?”

“Maybe.” I shifted up his body and draped my arms over his shoulders. “What? Can’t handle the thought that breakable, delicate Nicky might like being bent over and used like a sex toy? That I like when guys are rough and aren’t afraid to give it to me?”

“I don’t think you’re delicate or breakable.” His eyes burned with passion and his voice dropped to a timbre low enough to send a shiver of excitement up my spine. “If I gave it to you, as you say, you wouldn’t be able to walk for days when I was done with you.”

“Prove it.”

EVAN

“PROVE IT.”

The challenge in Nick’s eyes was nearly as arousing as his hard cock pressing into my stomach.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” I rasped, my self-control hanging on by a thread.

I’d been hard for him since I’d looked up from my workout to find him glaring at me from across the gym. Our conversation helped me tamp down my desire, but he had no idea what kind of fire he was playing with.

“Only if you think you can handle me.” He grinned impishly. “Can you handle me?”

“I can handle you.”

“I don’t know. I think you’re— eek!”

He glared up at me as he bounced on my mattress. “You’re really not helping me stay in character by making me squeal.”

“I thought you *wanted* me to make you squeal?” Shoving his knees apart, I fit my body between his legs and lowered onto him. “Or would you prefer I make you scream?”

“Either or. Potato, potahtoe.” He looked up at me with wide eyes, his cheeks flushed and his chest fluttering as he breathed fast and shallow.

“Tell me what you want, Nicky.” I hitched his leg up around my hip and stroked my fingertips over the generous

swell of his ass. “And be sure what you ask for is what you truly want.”

“I want you to fuck me.”

“I gathered that much.” I gripped his asscheek and squeezed hard, using my weight to press him into the bed. “How do you want me to fuck you?”

“Like a whore.”

“A metaphorical one?”

He nodded flirtatiously, blue eyes sparkling with both mischief and lust.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“I’m sure.” He dragged his tongue over his bottom lip. “Are you sure you can deliver?”

“I can deliver.” I dropped my chest down so it landed on his and our faces were only inches apart. His hot breath ghosted over my cheek, and his lips parted invitingly.

His gasp made my balls tighten and my cock throb.

“Are you sure? I’ve been holding back for a reason—”

“Blah blah blah.” He bumped his hips up and ground his cock against mine. “You’re doing an awful lot of talking for someone who’s supposed to be giving me the dicking of a lifetime.”

The edges of my vision went hazy as Nick grinned up at me. His rosy cheeks, plump lips, and perfect bone structure were all I could see as a low roar filled my ears and adrenaline poured into my veins, moving through me like liquid fire.

“Come on, Ev.” He scratched his nails down my back hard enough to sting. “Don’t you want to stick your big dick in my tight little hole and rail me until I scream?”

My chest shuddered as I let out a shaky breath.

He raked his hand through my hair and yanked hard, forcing my head to snap back. “I bet I can make you come first.”

I huffed out a low chuckle. “You’re good, but you’re not that good.”

He let go of my hair as his eyes narrowed adorably.

I dropped a quick kiss on the tip of his nose, knowing it would piss him off even more. His glare intensified.

“Not only am I going to make you come first, I’m going to make you come twice.”

He let out a little snort-laugh. “Yeah, not happening. I’ve never managed two Os back-to-back, not even when I’m going solo.”

“We’ll see.” Shifting to the side, I flipped him onto his stomach.

“Oh shit.”

“Don’t. Move.”

Getting up on my knees, I quickly stripped off his clothes and shoes. He let me, moving with me to make it easier. When he was naked, I shoved his legs apart and lay between them.

“Wait.” He peered over his shoulder at me, his face bright pink.

I paused, my hands on his full ass. Was he blushing?

“Are you... You want to...”

“If you’re asking if I want to eat you out, the answer is yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“You don’t like it?”

“I... No?”

I let go of his ass so I could focus on the conversation and not on how close to losing control I was. “No?”

“It’s weird,” he blurted out. “Isn’t it?”

“Not to me.” I stroked his soft skin. “I enjoy doing it.”

“I... I don’t know.” He bit his lip, then dropped his forehead onto the bed. “You don’t have to if you don’t want

to.”

“The question isn’t whether I want to, it’s if you want me to.” I pressed a kiss against his upper thigh. “Do you want me to?”

“I... Yes?”

Gliding my hands over his supple skin, I gently pulled his cheeks apart.

He tensed and squeezed them tight.

“Sorry,” he mumbled into the comforter.

“Nicky, look at me.”

“You’re not supposed to be nice right now.” He lifted his head and met my eyes. “You’re supposed to be making me scream.”

“I will.” I gently massaged his strong asscheeks. “But not until you tell me what’s going on.”

I’d tried to get my mouth on his ass multiple times, but it obviously made him uncomfortable so I hadn’t pushed things.

“I just... This guy I used to hook up with was the first, and only guy, who would. I asked him to...you know...and he eventually did.”

Hearing about his former hookup sent little currents of jealousy through me.

“Did you know your eyes go super dark when you’re jealous?”

“I did not.”

“Now you do.”

“Nicky.”

“Ugh. Fine. He did it and it felt really good. But after, he said...”

“What did he say?”

“He said I owed him because it was gross and I was a freak for liking it.”

I drew in a breath, taking a moment to calm the storm of anger that barreled through me. Now Nick's rule about not being judged for what he enjoyed in bed made sense.

"How old was this ex?"

"He wasn't an ex. I've only had one ex and she was a she."

"How old was this former hookup?"

"Twenty-three. Why?"

"Because only someone who is incredibly immature and selfish would ever say that to their partner."

"Is it gross?" he asked timidly. "Do you actually like it? Or do you just say that?"

Unable to have this conversation while my face was inches from his ass, I got up on my hands and knees. "Flip over."

"Why?" He flopped onto his back.

"Because I want you to look at me while I tongue that pretty hole of yours. I want you to see how much I enjoy it. How hot you get me."

"But you haven't even done it yet. How do you know you'll like it?"

"Because it's you." I motioned to my dick, which was still rock hard despite the break in the action. "Just being near you is enough to make me lose control. I'll enjoy it because I'm sharing it with you."

"There you go with that being nice stuff again." He swallowed hard.

"This isn't me being nice." I lay between his spread legs. "It's me telling the truth. Nothing more. Now, if you want to experience how a man and not an immature boy pleases his partner, lift your legs and prop a pillow behind your head so you can see everything."

Warily, Nick tugged a pillow down and put it under his head. He hesitated, then raised his legs and held his knees up next to his armpits.

His cock lay against his stomach, half hard and flushed and mouthwateringly inviting. I loved going down on him. His reactions were so pure, so real. He didn't hold back, and he genuinely seemed shocked that I wanted to every time I put my mouth on him.

I knew there had to be more to the situation, and it was obvious he had some trauma associated with receiving pleasure. But now wasn't the time to try to fix things. Now it was time to blow his mind and make him writhe on my tongue so he forgot about every asshole who disappointed him or hadn't given him the positive attention he deserved.

"Relax, Nick." I parted him with my hands. He didn't clench, but he was tense and distracted. "I promise I want to do this. I can't think of anything sexier than teasing you with my tongue before I get my cock in you."

"Okay," he whispered. "If you're sure."

Rather than answer him, I bent my head and dragged my tongue over his fluttering hole.

"Ngh," he moaned, but the sound was muted, like he was trying to hold back.

I did it again, then again. Nick's legs shook and his chest heaved. I stabbed the tip of my tongue inside him.

Nick's cry was loud and surprised as he clenched around my tongue.

Wanting more of those cries, I thrust as deep inside him as I could, fucking him with my tongue, and shackled his leaking cock in one hand.

"Oh fuck. Ev, that's... Holy *fuck!*"

Focusing on my pace and not on how he was writhing for me and how much I wanted to see him do the same on my dick, I made sure to keep him right on the edge of orgasm, giving him just enough to get close, but not tip over and come.

Wanting to see if he was enjoying this as much as I was, I glanced up, my tongue deep in his ass.

Nick was staring down at me with a hand clamped over his mouth and the other holding up one leg.

“Don’t hide yourself. Not from me,” I growled. “Let me hear it.”

Tentatively, he pulled his hand from his mouth.

I attacked his ass with the single-minded focus that served me well in my work, stabbing and licking and sucking on his hole. Nick’s cries spurred me on, and the louder they grew, the closer I got.

When he was a whimpering, blubbering mess, I pulled my face out of his ass. “Flip over.”

He did, nearly kicking me in the face in his haste to get on his hands and knees.

“Don’t move.”

He hung his head and stayed still as I climbed off the bed.

“Beautiful.” I stroked one hand down his back.

He stiffened.

“And you’ll be even more beautiful when I’m splitting you open with my dick.”

He relaxed.

Interesting.

I’d noticed how Nick struggled to accept compliments or tenderness when it came to sex. If he didn’t brush them off, he either tried to rile me up so I’d change my tactics, or he switched to his sensual persona and tried to take over.

Not wanting to make him, or myself, wait, I went to my bedside table and tugged open the drawer. “Shit.”

“What?”

“I don’t have a condom.” I grabbed my bottle of lube and threw the drawer closed.

“How can you not have condoms?”

“Because I don’t bring men here. I have some in the spare bathroom. I’ll just—”

“My pants. In my wallet.”

I retrieved the condom from his wallet and positioned myself behind him.

“Remember what you promised.” He arched his back. “No more Mr. Nice Guy. I want Mr. I’m Gonna Rearrange Your Guts to come out and play.”

“As you wish.”

“That’s what I wish. Now fuck me.” He popped his ass.

“Let me stretch you first.”

“Don’t need it.” He wiggled his hips. “Do it.”

“I’m not going to you hurt you.”

He sat up on his knees and glared at me. “Why bother asking what I want if you’re just going to do your own thing? Did it ever occur to you that maybe I like it this way? That I want to feel it? You know what, never mind. I’m done begging. You can just—”

I shoved him back down on the bed with a hand on his back.

“Oh damn,” he muttered and scrambled back up on his hands and knees. “Yes.”

Flipping the cap on the lube, I drizzled some onto his hole.

“Yes yes yes,” he chanted deliriously as I rubbed it over his pleated skin.

After squirting more into my hand, I tossed the bottle, then fished my phone out of my shorts and dropped it on the bed.

Nick stared at me with hungry eyes as I shoved my shorts down and stepped out of them. My eyes on his ass, I tore the condom wrapper open and suited up, then slicked up my length.

Lining myself up, I notched my cockhead against his hole.

Nick pushed back. I grabbed his hips and held him still.

“Ungh,” he moaned as I pushed into him.

He was so tight, too tight. I paused to make sure this was what he wanted.

“Don’t stop,” he gasped. “Please, Ev. Don’t stop.”

Grasping his hips, I slowly pumped into him, making sure to go slow enough I didn’t cause damage or truly hurt him, but not too slow so he still got to experience the stretch and burn as I opened him up.

“Holy goddamn fucking shit.” He groaned as I slid home and my thighs brushed his.

Using one of his shoulders for leverage, I slowly dragged myself out, then barreled back in. Testing to see if he was ready for more.

“Yes!”

This time, when he pushed back, I let him. Watching Nick rock into my thrusts, forcing me to go even deeper and harder as we moved together, was beyond erotic. The sight of my dick between his full cheeks and sliding in and out of his perfect body was enough to make my balls draw up and my cock throb with need.

I gave him more, then more, going faster and harder than I ever had with him. He took it beautifully, pushing back on me and keeping up a steady stream of babbling as he begged for more.

Nick had been wrong. I hadn’t been holding back because I thought he was delicate or breakable. It was because I never let this side of myself out.

This side was uncontrollable and reckless and listened only to my hindbrain. It took what it wanted, and it wanted Nick.

Reaching beneath him, I stroked his weeping cock, making sure to move my hand at a fraction of the pace of my hips.

“Oh shit. I’m... I’m gonna...” Nick grabbed my wrist as I jacked him, trying to force me to go faster. “Please, Ev. I need more. A little bit more.”

His entire body trembled and his thighs and ass muscles quivered. His inner walls clamped down around my cock.

Edging had never been one of my kinks. My control meant I could usually outlast my partners, but not with Nick. I'd never felt more out of control than when I was with him.

Speeding up my hand, I gave him exactly what he needed to finally tip over and find his release.

Nick threw back his head, his shout loud and echoing as a full-body shudder tore through him. His inner walls pulled me deeper as he came around me and shot over my hand.

I let go of his cock and held his hip so I could continue to drive into him and fuck him through his orgasm.

"Holy shit," he panted, his arms wobbling from the force of my thrusts. "Yes. More."

Trrrrr. Trrrrr. Trrrrr.

"Ignore it." Nick glared at me over his shoulder.

I smirked and released his hip.

"I swear to a god I don't believe in that I will end you if you stop right now to answer a work call."

Still rutting into him, I picked up my phone and checked the screen. "I really should get this."

"I'm not kidding." He slammed back on me hard. "I don't give a flying fuck who that is. Do *not* answer it unless you can talk and fuck."

"As you wish." Using my thumb, I swiped to answer. "Hello, Malcolm."

Nick's eyes grew comically wide as he gaped at me. I held onto his shoulder and continued to tug him back so he met my slightly slower pounding.

"*We need to finish our earlier discussion,*" Malcolm said dryly, not bothering with a greeting.

"We do? I'm a bit occupied at the moment."

Nick snickered and clenched around me.

I snapped my hips and drove as deep inside him as possible in retaliation. He moaned. I did it again.

“I don’t care. You can finish whatever trivial thing you’re doing later.”

“Fine.” I threw Nick a smirk. “You have ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes?” Nick whisper-hissed.

“Who’s that? Are you alone?”

“You called to talk.” I snapped my hips hard and circled my hand around Nick’s throat. “Now talk.”

Nick moaned and pressed against my hand.

“Arnold told me about the proposal you sent to Legal.”

“Did he now?” I dropped my gaze to Nick’s ass and the mesmerizing way his cheeks jiggled every time I drove into him.

“What the hell do you think you’re up to?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. You’re up to something. Why are you suddenly so interested in our Eastern European dealings?”

“Because it’s my job to know what’s happening at my company.”

“It’s not your company yet,” he snarled. *“I will not let you destroy all the work I’ve done to make it what it is today.”*

“And how am I destroying it?”

“I don’t know, but I will find out. You’re not as smart as you think you are.”

Deliberately, I nailed Nick’s prostate.

He made a strangled sound and gripped my hip, silently encouraging me to go faster and harder.

“You’re going to fail, and you’re going to drag everyone down with you.”

“Is that so?” I kept my tone mild and distracted, knowing that would drive Malcolm crazier.

“Yes! Grant is going to wish he’d listened to me. You might be the heir, but you’re not the one who’s put his blood, sweat, and tears into this company. I’m the one who’s been here. I’m the one who should be running it. You know that, I know that. Everyone except your father knows that.”

I squeezed Nick’s neck a little tighter as his moans grew in volume.

“You’re going to fail, and I’ll be there to pick up the pieces of whatever is left and rebuild it into something better. Something you won’t be able to get your hands on.”

“Is that a threat?”

“It’s the truth.”

Switching to rolling my hips instead of thrusting, I angled my dick so I hit Nick’s spot exactly the way I knew drove him crazy.

“Is that why you decided to bother me tonight?” I wondered calmly. “To ask about a report and throw around baseless accusations?”

“I want to know what you’re planning.”

“I’m not planning anything.”

“You are! I know you are.”

“Ev,” Nick gasped. His back arched and his ass quivered. He was close.

I half listened as Malcolm ranted at me. We’d had this conversation a dozen times and his script was getting old.

Instead, I concentrated on Nick and watching him come apart on my cock as I kept up my ruthless fucking.

He crushed my hip, urging me as he panted and moaned. I added the slightest bit of pressure to his throat, making sure to not press on his windpipe. Nick enjoyed the sensation of having the blood flow in his neck gently restricted. I hadn’t

thought I'd be into that, but I loved knowing that he trusted me enough to put him in such a vulnerable position.

The throaty, mewling sounds he made as he frantically drove back on me nearly sent me over the edge. I loved when he gave in and let me take over, but also loved how he wasn't afraid to take what he wanted from me.

Nick was moaning up a storm, and as much as the thought of Malcolm realizing what was going on amused me, I didn't want to embarrass Nick. He'd only given me consent to talk and fuck, not to expose to anyone else what we were doing.

Releasing the pressure on Nick's neck, I slid my hand up and covered his mouth. His cries grew in volume, but my hand muffled them enough I wasn't worried about the phone speaker picking them up.

"...won't get away with this!"

"I'll take your concerns under consideration. If you'd like to discuss this further, you can schedule a meeting with me the next time I'm in the office."

"Don't you dare dismiss me, you son of a—"

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm in the middle of something important and I really need to finish him."

I ended the call before Malcolm could reply and tossed the phone aside. My hand over Nick's mouth went to the back of his head and tugged hard.

"Oh my god that was the hottest thing ever." Nick's voice was absolutely wrecked. "I'm so close. You have no idea how hard it's been to hold back. I didn't want to come while thinking about lemon face."

With a low growl, I yanked him up on his knees and slammed him against my body. The position gave him better leverage, and he began bouncing on my dick as I drilled into him.

"Are you still thinking about him?" I growled in his ear.

"Huh? Who?" He dropped his head back against my shoulder and grabbed my hips. "Fuck, Ev. Hard. Just like this."

Need it.”

Wrapping one arm around his waist to anchor him to me, I put as much power as I dared behind each thrust.

“Oh god. Oh fuck. That’s... I’m...”

“Who do you belong to?” I snarled.

“You.” He let go of my hip and tangled his hand in my hair.

“Whose ass is this?”

“Yours!”

“Say it.”

“I’m yours!”

My rhythm faltered. I knew he’d only phrased it that way because I told him to, but the fanciful part of me wanted it to be true.

“Yeah you are.” I sucked on his neck.

“Kiss me,” he begged.

I lifted my head and caught his lips under mine. It was messy and sloppy, more of a mashing of mouths than an actual kiss.

It was perfect. Goddamn perfect.

My thighs shook as my stomach muscles went taut. My balls, already high and tight, drew up even further as my orgasm crept closer.

Refusing to come first, I let go and let my instincts take over as I fucked Nick as hard as I could.

When he came, shaking and shuddering in my arms, he screamed his affirmations and shot his second load of the night onto my bed.

My own orgasm tore out of me with almost no warning, stealing my breath and all rational thought as my vision went black and pleasure overtook me.

Nick's body gave out and he went limp in my arms. I tried to hold him up, but we ended up falling on the bed in a panting, sweaty tangle of limbs.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Nick muttered.

I went to roll off him.

"Don't." He clutched my ass. "Stay like this."

"As long as you want." I pressed a kiss against his overheated cheek.

"You really are a man of your word," he mumbled, his voice dreamy. "You made me come twice. And you made me scream. I thought that was a myth."

"Multiple orgasms?"

"Yes. But not that. Screaming." He made a little snuffling sound. "No one has ever made me scream. Not for real at least. I thought that was just a thing people did when they were trying to sell it."

"Sell it?"

"You know. When the D isn't D-ing so you gotta make a big show and pretend like it's the best D ever so they'll nut and stop."

"Can I roll us over and hold you?" I asked softly.

I knew Nick's mind was a little fuzzy after his orgasm, but the thought that he'd faked it with others because he'd wanted the sex to be over made me irrationally mad. He deserved so much more than selfish partners who couldn't be bothered to put the effort into making sure it was good for him.

Nick was one of the most, if not the most, generous lovers I'd ever had. He was almost too generous and struggled to accept the same kind of treatment or enthusiasm he happily doled out.

How anyone could find themselves lucky enough to be with him and not do everything in their power to make him feel good was beyond me.

“Mmmhmm. I like being squished, but you’re getting heavy.”

Mindful of his altered state, I rolled us over and hugged him against me. He nuzzled into my pec and threw one leg over my thighs.

“You’re comfy.” He sifted his fingers through my chest hair.

“So are you.”

“Is there something wrong with me?”

“No. You’re perfect.”

“Are you sure? That phone thing was soooo hot. Is it weird that I liked it?”

“I liked it. Do you think I’m weird?”

“No.”

“Then why would I think you are?”

“Because...”

“Because?”

“I don’t know. Never mind.”

“Do you want to take a shower with me?” I asked, knowing now wasn’t the time for a discussion.

“Really?”

“Or you can take a bath if you’d prefer.”

“Is your bathroom as fancy as this room?”

“Fancier. The master bath was the main selling feature when I bought the place.”

“Then hell yeah.” He smiled up at me. “But cuddles first. My legs are still trembling.”

I kissed the tip of his nose. He let out a little giggle-breath and pressed his face into my chest. “Take all the time you need.”

He snuggled into me and sighed happily.

My mind raced as I held him, gently stroking his back and hair.

One of the reasons I never let go of my control wasn't just because I worried I could hurt people. I kept it locked down because releasing it turned me into a possessive, single-focused bastard who ignored reason and put the object of my desire above anyone, and anything, else.

It left me vulnerable and gave my enemies a weakness to use against me.

Because of that, I'd always been able to maintain a level of emotional distance with my partners, even with my one failed relationship.

But I was finding it harder and harder to convince myself that Nick and I were nothing more than fake boyfriends who fucked.

He felt like mine.

But he wasn't.

"Ready to show me your amazing bathroom so I can pretend like I'm mad at you for having it?" Nick asked, breaking me free from my spiral.

Chuckling, I kissed his temple and pushed all negative thoughts from my mind. "How are your legs?"

"Still trembly, but I think I can walk without falling now."

"I'll carry you." I waited as he untangled himself from me.

"I'll break you."

"You think so?" I dismounted the bed and stood.

"I know you're all sculpted because you do the gym thing like a bro," he said as I pulled off the condom. "But I'm way too heavy for you. You'll throw your back out and end up all hunched over like an old man and you won't be able to fuck me again until you're better. Nope. Not worth it now that I know you can do *that*."

"You think so?" I tied off the condom and tossed it on the bed. I had to change the comforter anyway since Nick had

made two wet spots on it.

“I know so.” He got to his feet. “I’ll just be careful so I don’t—eek!”

“You were saying?” I arranged him in my arms and started toward my bathroom.

“How are you not dropping me?” He clung to my neck.

“Because you’re not nearly as heavy as you think you are. And because I’m stronger than I look. Did you know I work out with Vlado?”

“Are you a powerlifter too? Is that why you’re so comfy?”

“I do powerlift. Not sure what that has to do with being comfortable.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that.” He grinned cheekily. “And just an FYI, I’m never walking around you again now that I know you can carry me without dying.”

Still chuckling, I carried him into my bathroom, bracing for his exclamation when he saw the lavish space.

NICK

“CAN you drop me off away from the entrance? Maybe down the street a bit?” I asked Vlado from the passenger’s seat of Evan’s town car as he drove me to a rehearsal at Crimson.

“Oof, now I know how my mom felt the one and only time I asked her that as a teenager.” He smiled teasingly. “I didn’t think I was *that* embarrassing.”

“You’re not. But this car...”

He patted my thigh. “I get it. But you know I can’t. It’ll leave you vulnerable.”

“I know.” I sighed. “Thanks for not being a dick about this and demanding to come in. I can explain the car and the drive, but my friends will lose their minds if they think I’m in danger. No way can I tell them I have a bodyguard.”

“Your friends really care about you, don’t they?”

“They do. And they’re not just my friends, they’re my family.”

“Can I ask something about your coworkers?”

“Sure.”

“The twins...”

“What about them?” I bit back a grin at his sudden hesitation.

“Is it weird for them?”

“Is what weird?”

“Dancing together. I’m an only child, so all my experience with siblings is secondhand. But it just seems...unusual.”

“Zane and River aren’t like most siblings, or most twins,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “They don’t see dancing together as something sexual, so for them, it isn’t. And Zane is ace while River is straight, so dancing with another guy wouldn’t be a sexy thing for them even without the twin thing. It’s a job, and they have a rare selling feature. People love things that are considered taboo, so why not cash in on that?”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

“The twins are...different. They had some shit happen to them when they were younger, and it really messed them up. It’s true they’re codependent as fuck, but not in a weird or creepy way. They can function perfectly fine apart, they just prefer not to.”

“How did you get into stripping, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Aiden’s ex is a pole fitness instructor and she invited me to take her class. I thought it would be good for a laugh, but I loved it. She taught me the basics, and I used my dance background to figure out the rest. I looked into teaching classes but went with stripping.”

“Did you choose stripping because the money is better?”

“Nope. I chose it because no one would hire a male pole instructor. But Crimson was hiring dancers right after I turned twenty-one so I applied and never looked back.”

“And the people in your life, outside of your work friends, are okay with you dancing?”

“Yup. My parents are totally fine with it. They’ve always been very pro sex-worker rights. My sisters are too young to understand it, but they know I dance as a second job. And Aiden helps me come up with routines and critiques my practices. He even came to watch my sets when I first started working there to be my anchor person. Rearranged his work schedule and everything.”

“Anchor person?”

“Every time I’m on stage, I pick someone in the audience and I use them as my anchor. When my mind wanders or I get distracted or overstimulated, I focus on my anchor person for a few seconds and it centers me.”

“That’s a clever strategy.”

“Kai told me about it. I’ve been dancing and performing my entire life and have never had stage fright, but I sure as heck was a nervous nelly when I started at the club.”

“Really. Why?”

“Because I look like me and not like you.” I shot him a flat look. “I’m scrawny compared to the other guys. It’s good because it makes pole work easier, but I don’t make nearly as much as the other guys when I dance on stage. I’m not the usual body type people think of when you say *male stripper*.”

He gave a pensive nod. “I’m glad your friends and family are supportive.”

“Me too. But if they weren’t, then they wouldn’t be part of my life. I’m not afraid to cut out toxic people. Everyone gets one chance, people I care about get two. That’s it. If you can’t appreciate and accept all of me, then I don’t need or want you. What’s that thing all you millennials used to say? Bye, Felicia? That’s the energy I’m matching.”

“I really admire that. Not many people have that kind of confidence or the ability to enforce their boundaries.”

“It hasn’t been easy.” I glanced out the window to check our progress. We were about five minutes from the club. “I had to put up with a lot of shit to develop such a thick skin. I’m all about letting my sparkle shine now, but it took years of bullying and being told I’m a freak before I was able to shut down the part of my brain that cares what other people think of me.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. I’ve never understood why people are so obsessed with gender-based stereotypes. Life is too short to shove yourself into a box and change for the comfort of others.”

“That’s exactly what I say!”

He grinned at me. “Great minds.”

“What’s the rest of that saying? Aiden told me it’s *great minds think alike and fools are different.*”

“It’s *fools seldom differ.*”

“Okay, I’m a little slow today because I only had five cups of coffee and they were teeny tiny because Evan’s machine is more complicated than a super-computer. And I’m a barista! Who needs a machine with thirty-seven settings and no freaking labels on any of the buttons? But, like I was saying, doesn’t that mean the same thing? Like great minds think the same, and fools don’t think differently from each other?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“Good to know.” I drummed my fingers on my leg as he approached the club.

“Ready?” Vlado asked as he turned into the parking lot of Crimson.

“Shit.”

Zane and River were just getting out of their car. Both men stopped dead when they saw us pull up in front of the main doors.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” I craned my neck to look out the window at the twins. They were doing that thing where they stared at each other and had a silent conversation. “Of course it had to be the twins who saw me first. Couldn’t have been Kai or Knox or Blaze. They’re the rational ones. I like to think of them as the club daddies.”

Vlado stopped the car and snickered.

“Not *that* kind of daddy.” I backhanded his shoulder. “Ow.” I shook out my hand. “I’m gonna need Zane to get me some non-stabby brass knuckles so I don’t end up breaking my hand. All you guys are so damn solid.”

“Non-stabby brass knuckles?”

“Not important. But like I was saying, I don’t mean daddies like *that*. I just mean they’re mature and smart and tend to be the voices of reason.”

“The twins aren’t those things?”

“Think Jekyll and Hyde, only make them murder kittens.”

“Murder kittens?” Vlado glanced at the twins, who were walking toward the car completely in sync and looking intimidating as fuck.

“Yeah. Like they’re all scary and murderly if you piss them off or mess with someone they care about, but they’re actually big softies at heart. Just like a kitten. Super sweet and snuggly when they want to be but can turn on the murder toe beans if you’re dumb enough to poke them.”

“Are they in murder or snuggle mode right now?” Vlado asked, his eyes on the twins as they stood in front of the car and stared at us through the windshield.

I waved to them.

River smiled and waved back. Zane upnodded me and crossed his arms as he pinned Vlado with a glare.

“Yeah, Zane is definitely in murder mode. River is in kitten mode, but that can change pretty quick. Probably best if I don’t sit in here for too much longer.”

“I’ve faced off against a lot of bad people in my life, but they’re scary.” Vlado gripped the steering wheel so tight the leather squeaked. “Like the drama masks. One happy, one murderly, both big enough to fuck me up if they know how to fight.”

“They definitely know how to fight. And the drama masks are actually tragedy and comedy, but I’ll allow it. Thanks for the drive. I shouldn’t be more than a few hours.”

“Have fun. I’ll be in the back part of the lot. Text or call if you need anything.”

“Thanks.” I shoved the door open. “Hey,” I greeted the twins as I stepped out.

“Hey,” they said together.

“Who’s that?” Zane asked when I was in front of them, his eyes on Vlado.

I glanced inside the car where he and Vlado seemed to be stuck in some sort of macho-guy stare-off.

“That’s Vlado. He gave me a ride.” Slipping my arm through his crossed ones, I turned Zane from the car and tugged him toward the club.

“And who is Vlado?” Zane fell into step beside me.

“Funny story about that. He’s my boyfriend’s bestie.”

“Boyfriend?” Zane pulled me to a stop.

“Yup.”

“That’s awesome,” River congratulated. “Is he rich? He’s gotta be rich if his bestie is driving an Audi.” He made a thoughtful face. “You could always go for the best friend if your man is broke. He’s hot.”

“My boyfriend is even hotter.”

“Go you!” He held up his hand for a high-five.

“You’re not telling us something,” Zane said as I slapped River’s hand.

I gave Zane my best innocent look.

“Yeah, the doe eyes don’t work on me, Angel Face.” His lip twitched in a ghost of a smile.

“I don’t want to say this a million times.” I yanked on his arm, trying to move him along. He didn’t budge. The twins were only two inches taller but outweighed me by forty pounds. I couldn’t make either of them move if they didn’t want to. “I’ll tell you everything inside.”

He gave me a long look, then nodded.

All the other dancers were already in the club in their workout gear.

“You’re not late.” Kai ruffled my hair as I walked past him.

I swatted his hand away. “Crazy, huh?”

“How about we get started now that everyone is here,” Knox said.

“Nick has a boyfriend.”

Every head in the room swiveled toward me.

“Dude!” I spun on Zane. “You have zero chill. Zero.”

“What?” He blinked, all innocent.

“Boyfriend?” Gray asked, the hurt in his eyes and the rest of his face as clear as day.

“Yeah.” I hurried over to him and perched on his lap. He stiffened but didn’t make a move to push me off. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

He shrugged, his eyes still shrouded with hurt. “It’s fine.”

“It’s just...things have been really crazy and I wasn’t sure what this was and...”

He slung his arm over my shoulder and pulled me in for a one-armed hug. “It’s fine. I’m just glad you’re okay. You’ve been so distant and squirrely lately, I was worried about you.”

“I’m fine. Just getting used to dating someone who’s an adult who adults.”

“Translation?” Kai asked.

“Oh, I know this one.” River put up his hand like we were back in school. “He’s dating someone who has his shit together and has a really important job that he’s good at. Older, definitely hot, and rich as fuck. Am I right?”

“Nailed it.”

He winked. “And I’m gonna add that he’s fire in bed.”

“You know it.” I held up my hand for a phantom high-five.

He did the same and we mimed high-fiving.

“How rich?” Knox asked. “Are we talking millions, or...”

“Yes.” I grinned.

“Damn, Nicky,” Kai complimented. “Good for you.”

“Yeah, you get that bag.” Dash didn’t look up from his phone.

“I hate to be that guy, but maybe we should start rehearsal?” Blaze suggested.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked Gray softly as the rest of the guys agreed with Blaze.

“No.” He kissed my cheek. “But that thing when you were being followed, what was that? Are you really okay?”

“That was...a misunderstanding. Evan, that’s my boyfriend, his friend was checking up on me and I overreacted when I saw him because I didn’t recognize him until he got closer.”

“Are you sure that’s all it was?”

“I’m sure. And I’m sorry I scared you. Things have just been so insane lately. I’ve been staying with Evan in Seattle and—”

“You’re already living with him?” Gray exclaimed.

I shook my head. “No, no. I’ve just been crashing at his place since it’s easier than having to commute to see him.”

“You’re sure everything is okay?” Gray asked again.

I slid off his lap. “Yup. All’s good—*Jesus!*”

River burst out laughing as I stumbled back from Zane, who’d come up behind me and scared the ever-loving daylights out of me when I turned around.

Gray steadied me as Zane stuck his phone under my nose. “Is this your guy?”

I looked at the screen and the photo of Evan and Emily on it. “How the hell did you figure that out? I didn’t tell you anything about him.”

“You told Gray his name is Evan and said he lives in Seattle. Wasn’t hard to find him based on that.”

“The FBI or the CIA or whatever agency deals with spy stuff should have recruited you years ago. You’re one scary dude when you do that shit. You know that, right?”

He winked and graced me with a rare smile. “Just looking out for you, kiddo.”

“Thanks, babes.” I pecked a kiss against his cheek. “You okay? Your face is extra grumpy today.”

“Fine.” He shrugged and looked away. “Just dealing with an asshole at work.”

“Not this guy, I hope.” I poked Gray in the butt.

He jumped and let out a surprised squeal.

“Nah.” Zane whipped off his shirt. “A new guy.”

“What did he do?” I tugged off my hoodie.

Like Zane, I’d layered my workout gear under my street clothes so I didn’t have to bother changing before rehearsal.

“Exist.” Gray snapped his rolled-up shirt at Zane’s ass.

Zane didn’t flinch as it smacked him.

“Exist?” I asked when no one elaborated.

“Zane doesn’t like Rath but can’t give anyone a reason why,” Gray explained. “So he pretty much hates the guy for existing.”

“Rath?”

“His last name is Rathbone,” River said. “And since we love nicknames on the crew, he’s Rath.”

“Bone.” I snickered. “What’s his first name?”

“No clue. But it’s probably something stupid like Brett or Hayworth.” Zane laid his phone on a nearby table.

“But what’s the real reason you don’t like him?” I asked Zane.

“His face is stupid.”

Gray and I traded a look.

Zane wasn't great at using his words, but he wasn't as moody and angry as everyone assumed. He was guarded as fuck and didn't trust anyone who hadn't proven themselves to him. Once he did trust you, he would protect you with his life, no questions asked.

But, he was also one of the most stubborn people I'd ever met, and once he got an idea in his head, it was nearly impossible to change his mind. If he'd decided he didn't like this Rath guy, then one of two things would happen. This guy would reveal himself to be whatever had triggered Zane's instincts, or we'd find out the dude was harmless and hadn't yet figured out that you didn't touch murder kittens' toe beans or try to give them belly rubs.

Either way, this guy was in for a rough go. I needed to get all the tea from Gray later.

River was staring at his phone and frowning. "You okay?" I asked. "What happened?"

"Nothing." He put his phone on the table next to Zane's. "Had a date tonight but she canceled."

"Shit. I'm sorry. That sucks."

He shrugged and stripped off his jeans, leaving him in a pair of tight capris. "It's fine. I kinda figured she was going to. We made plans to meet up last week, but she stopped messaging me back a few days ago."

"Did she at least want to reschedule or have a good reason?"

"Nope." He smiled, but it wasn't his usual buoyant one. "Last time I checked she'd left me on read. Just looked again and she unmatched me. Message received."

"Seriously?" Gray asked. "How long had you been talking?"

"Only a few weeks. At least she didn't stand me up. That's way worse than being ghosted. I need to stop telling girls I strip."

"Is that usually when things go sideways?" I asked.

River was one of the sweetest and happiest guys I'd ever met, even with his murder-kitten tendencies. He was also drop-dead gorgeous, loyal to a fault, and would happily give anyone the shirt off his back if they asked.

Even with all that going for him, he had the worst luck when it came to dating. He wasn't the best at understanding social cues, and that made having text conversations with people he didn't know difficult. He wasn't the dumb jock people assumed he was and didn't deserve to be constantly ghosted or stood up because people couldn't look past the surface and see what an amazing person he was.

"Usually. It's weird because some girls are super into it at first but then they seem to change their minds and suddenly it's a problem. Or they do what this chick did and just go dark."

"Anyone who can't accept all of you isn't worth your time," Zane said in that soft voice he reserved for River. "If she has a problem with your job, that's on her. Not you. You'll find your person, but she obviously wasn't it. Better to learn that now and not after wasting time or energy on trying to build on something that isn't there."

"Yeah. I know." River smiled, this time a real one. "And it's not like I'm not used to this. I'm fine." He glanced at Blaze, who was glaring at us impatiently. "We'd better start before Daddy gets mad."

"I heard that."

"Sorry, Daddy." River winked.

"I thought I was Daddy?" Gray punched him in the shoulder. "You cheating on me?"

"Only 'cause you cheated first and started banging your stepbro." River punched him back.

"Yeah, I'm going to need all the story time on that." I poked Gray in the side.

He pinned me with a flat look. "Only if you tell me yours."

"Deal."

“Are you done lollygagging?” Blaze griped.

“I’ll give you something to lollygag on.” River grabbed his own crotch.

Blaze opened his mouth like he was going to correct him, but just shook his head in defeat.

“Good one.” I held up my fist for River to bump.

“Whore,” Gray teased. “I thought I was gonna be your big bi experiment? Now you’re offering the goods to Blaze? You wound me.”

“You can have firsts.” River slung his arm over Gray’s shoulder. “Blaze can have sloppy seconds.”

“I’m honored,” Blaze drawled.

“As you should be.”

“Can we get star—”

“Okay, enough chatter,” River cut off Blaze with a grin. “Time to get to work.”

Blaze threw up his hands. “It’s like dealing with overgrown toddlers.”

“Don’t be mad, Daddy.” River blew him a kiss.

“I’m going to laugh my ass off if you end up having a mommy kink.” Kai came to stand next to River. “Ever give that a whirl?”

“Been there, done that.” River shrugged. “Not terrible but not my thing.”

“Hey, Nick.”

“Yeah?” I turned to Zane.

“You said you were going to show us that new combo and dismount you’ve been working on.” Zane pointed to the stage.

“Oh yeah.” I bounded over to the stage and jumped up on it. “It’s basically floater to ninja to shoulder-mount roll to floor splits, but with extra transitions so it looks like a drop combo.”

Gripping the pole in my hand, I pushed off the floor and jumped, starting the momentum I needed to get into my first spin.

“HOLY JEEPERS!”

The room exploded with laughter as I nearly flew right off the pole from the unexpected speed.

Most poles had two modes—static and spinning. In static mode, the pole stayed stationary and you spun around it, but in spin mode, it spun with you.

Last week the stage pole had gotten stuck in static mode, so that’s what I’d been expecting. Spinning poles were easier to work with, but they were a flying hazard if you tried to use them like a static one.

I managed to get my feet under me and stay upright as the pole twirled me around like a top, but it wasn’t pretty.

“Did you know it was on spin?” I asked the twins, my heart racing from adrenaline. That was one way to get the blood pumping.

“Maybe.” River bit his lip.

“Yes,” Zane answered at the same time.

“And you didn’t think to warn me that Biggs fixed it?” I tried to glare at them, but it was half assed. That had been funny as hell, and I’d have done the same thing to them if I’d thought of it.

“I did, but this way was far more amusing,” Zane deadpanned.

“Sorry not sorry.” River cackled.

“How about you show us what you’ve been working on.” I waved at the pole and smiled sweetly. “At least it’ll be easier for you now that it’s fixed. You won’t get as tired hauling your dump trucks around it if it’s doing all the work.”

“You saying we have big asses?” River jumped up on the stage and sauntered toward me.

“If the extra-large granny panties fit...”

“Granny panties? Nah, we’re more manties guys.”

“Ew.” I wrinkled my nose. “Never say that word again.”

“What? *Manties*?” River needled. “What’s wrong with *manties*?”

Kai flinched. “That sounds so wrong.”

Zane climbed onto the stage and slowly came over to us like a jungle cat stalking its prey.

“Come on. Show us the good stuff.” I waved at the pole. “I dare you.”

Zane grinned, but it was his dark, *I’m about to fuck shit up and have fun doing it*, smirk.

I glanced at the rest of the crew. They were watching us with keen interest. Even Blaze looked invested in what was going to happen next.

“If you insist.” Zane ran his hand through his dark hair, casually pushing the long strands back from his face. “Ready?” He flicked his gaze to River, whose smile was a slightly brighter version of Zane’s and no less terrifying.

“Ready, bro.”

River took two steps toward Zane, planted his foot in Zane’s waiting hands, which he was holding out in a cradle, and pushed off.

“Jumping Jehoshaphat!” I stumbled back as Zane launched his brother into the air.

River did a flash kick backflip when he was at the apex of the throw, and managed to catch the pole with his legs, anchoring himself to it in a move that defied both gravity, and reason.

While he hung there with his body parallel to the floor, Zane hurled himself into a moon kick, then right into a B-twist. Somehow, like River, he managed to catch himself on the pole with his legs and laid out in the same position River was still in, only on the opposite side and facing up so they looked like reflections of each other.

The other guys whooped and cheered as the twins did a series of flips and spins on the pole, moving perfectly in sync like always.

For such big and solid guys, they were incredibly flexible and made pole work look easy. Duo work was epically hard, especially on the stage pole because it had a limited amount of height to work with. The twins were within inches of each other with every spin and transition, giving the illusion they could crash at any second, which only heightened the difficulty of the routine.

They ended the short demo in a double handspring pose, and casually flipped off in a modified iguana that I'd never been able to replicate.

"Well, shit." I dropped down into a theatrical bow. "Long live the pole kings."

"Pole kings." River snickered and lifted his hand for a high-five.

"You know that parkour shit gives you an unfair advantage," I said as the rest of the guys climbed up on the stage. "And the twin thing too."

"Not our fault you keep forgetting what we're capable of." Zane smirked.

"I won't be making that mistake again."

"Until next time, at least." Kai grinned. "Your memory is about as good as your sense of timing."

"Hey," I said indignantly. "I was on time today!"

"And was that because of you, or because you got a ride?" Gray slung his arm over my shoulder.

"No comment."

"Okay!" Blaze, well, blazed. "I hate to be a task master today, but some of us have shit to do after rehearsal."

"I'm hungry." River turned to Zane. "Can we get burgers on the way home?"

"Yep."

“Ugh, now I want a burger.” I rubbed my stomach just as it grumbled loudly.

“Did we forget to eat again?” Gray asked.

“Um.”

“Wait here.” Gray patted my ass and did a running flip off the stage.

“Showoff!” I groused.

He flipped me off with one hand and dug through his bag with the other.

“Can you guys maybe back me up here?” Blaze glared at Knox and Kai, who were standing back from the crowd and watching us with amused grins.

“We could,” Knox said.

“But it’s way more fun to watch you try to wrangle them. Like herding cats, isn’t it?” Kai chuckled.

“Like dealing with a herd of labradoodles on crack,” Blaze countered.

“Wouldn’t a herd of labradoodles be considered a pack?” I asked.

“Are all groups of dogs considered packs?” Dash asked. “That’s not very imaginative.”

“Here.” Gray came up beside me and shoved a small container in my hands. “Eat these so you don’t drop dead on us.”

“What is it?” I tore the top off and peeked inside. “Cookies! Yay.” I shoved one of the cookies with rainbow chocolate chips into my mouth. “Sooooo good,” I moaned around the food. “Thanks, babes. You’re the bestest.”

“Speaking of labradoodles.” Kai grinned at me. “You look like a puppy who’s just been given a stack of his favorite biscuits.”

“Don’t be hating my golden retriever energy just ’cause you’re a German shepherd.” I stuffed another cookie in my

mouth. “And just for that, no cookie for you,” I said with my mouth full.

“So classy.” Gray stole a cookie and gently hip-checked me. “But we’d better focus on rehearsal before Blaze has an aneurysm.”

“Sorry.” I turned to Blaze, who looked like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to laugh or cry. “You were being a master tasker?”

“Close enough,” he muttered. “Did anyone think of anything they wanted to add to the routine we’ve been working on?”

“We should let the flippy twins do some of their tricks for the finale,” I suggested. “Give them the spotlight. That way we can still use the routine with Stone or any other headliner and only have to change our final marks. Hey. No backsies.” I snatched the cookie Gray had swiped out of my hand.

“I made them.” He stole it back.

“And I claimed them.” I caught his wrist and yanked it closer. “Mine.” Leaning over his arm, I licked the length of the cookie.

“You really think that’s gonna stop me? Newsflash, I swallow.” Gray winked.

Blaze threw his hands up in exasperation. “I’m done.”

I snatched the cookie out of Gray’s hand as he went to take a bite and shoved it into my mouth. “Stop misbehaving. You’re making Blaze stroke out.”

“Cookie me.” River held up his hand.

I tossed him the second-to-last one. “Anyone else who isn’t Gray want the last one?” I wiggled the container.

Zane’s hand flew up.

I flipped the cookie out of the shallow container toward him. My aim was off, and River plucked it out of the air. Casually, he flipped it up like a coin. It spun in a high arc and fell right into Zane’s open mouth.

“Labradoodles for the win!”

Gray elbowed me.

“Sorry.” I ducked my head at Blaze. “I’m done.”

“No, you’re not.” Blaze’s shoulders shook with laughter.

“Probably not.” I shoved the empty container at Gray. “Be a dear and take care of this for me.”

“Okay,” Knox said loudly. “You guys want to try the ending while the twins freestyle? See how we feel about that? Then we can work out new marks and adjust the ending for event nights.”

Everyone nodded and made various noises of agreement as we moved into position.

“Ever notice how we’re here practicing routines for nights when Stone is making all the money and he isn’t?” Dash asked, his tone petulant.

“What crawled up your butt and died?” River asked.

“More like what didn’t go up my butt,” Dash grumbled. “Men are trash. I said what I said. And no, I will not be taking questions.”

“It is a bit strange that Stone is never here for rehearsals,” Knox said.

“Did anyone think to invite him?” I asked.

The silence was all the answer I needed.

“He’s not the bad guy Corey and Ray made him out to be. And he had no idea what was going on. He thought everyone hated him because he’s in porn.”

“Really?” Kai asked. “He thought a bunch of strippers would have issues with him doing porn?”

“What else was he supposed to think when no one would talk to him?” I asked. “I’ve gotten to know him and he’s a nice guy. Really sweet and thoughtful, and he’s not even mad that we treated him like hot garbage because of the lies Corey fed us about him.”

“Way to make us feel like a bunch of assholes,” Blaze said.

“Well, to be fair, you are a bunch of assholes.” I smirked. “I’m just saying that pretty much everything we were told about him is a big lie and he’s not the bad guy in this story.”

“Did you know he paid our severance packages when Biggs took over?” Gray threw in. “And he pays out the house on feature nights to offset our tips. We might not have seen that money because Corey and Ray stole it from us, but that doesn’t take away from the fact he put that in his contract *for* us. Like Nick said, he’s not the villain here.”

“That’s true,” Kai said. “Corey and Ray are the bad guys. They stole from us, nearly ran the club into the ground, and orchestrated this whole Stone villain story to keep us in the dark about the shit they were doing.”

“I heard they’ve had some bad luck recently,” Zane said casually.

We all swung our heads to look at him.

“So much bad luck,” he continued. “An electrical fire at their vacation home, flooding in their rental properties. Such a shame.”

I knew better than to ask Zane how he’d found out about this, or if it really was a coincidence. Gray had taught me about plausible deniability, and with the twins, that was usually the smartest approach.

“On that little bit of happy news, everyone get into position before we get distracted again,” Kai said.

Rehearsals were always chaotic, but I loved them. We didn’t get paid or anything, but hanging out with my friends and fucking around while making up choreo was some of the most fun I’d had in years.

We all had different backgrounds and abilities, but somehow, we always found a way to play to everyone’s strengths and give everyone a way to shine during group routines.

Most people don't realize how much work goes into stripping. Sure, we had to physically do the routines during our sets, but we also had to choreograph and perfect them, and we were constantly tweaking them so they didn't get stale.

I liked that process as much as performing, but it was hard to keep my mouth shut when people went off about how stripping was easy money and how the only thing you needed to make bank was having abs and good rhythm. The number of hours we put into each and every set to make it look easy would astound non-performers, and as male strippers, we weren't raking it in like our female counterparts could.

Our audience was smaller, and while women tended to tip more, there were far fewer of them, so we made less over the course of the night. That meant we all had other jobs because no one was getting rich shaking our junk on stage twice a week.

It was a job, and the money could be good, but you didn't stay in this industry unless you enjoyed it. Before Biggs took over, the turnover rate for dancers at the club was high. Most guys would only last a few months, or even weeks, before moving on to something else. We hadn't had someone quit in almost five months, and Gray, Kai, the twins, and I were all coming up on our one-year anniversaries.

It was amazing how much of a difference having a healthy work environment made.

"Everyone ready?" Kai called when we'd gotten back on our marks.

Focusing on Kai, I shut down the multiple trains of thought racing through my mind and waited for him to count us in.

EVAN

DING.

The elevator chimed as it reached my floor. The doors slid open, and I stepped into the apartment, already scanning the main room for Nick.

He'd only been staying with me for a few days now, but each night I'd come home to find him waiting on the couch for me.

I'd never had that, and knowing he was going to be there, full of smiles and his contagious energy, made coming home something I looked forward to instead of something I dreaded.

"Hi," he greeted as I came into the room.

"Hi." I loosened my tie. A little flare of possessiveness went through me when I noticed the oversized sweater he had on. "Is that my hoodie?"

"Do you mind? I got cold and it smells like you."

"Not at all." I swallowed. "It looks good on you."

"It's not as comfy as you, but it did the trick while I was waiting. How was your day?"

"Long." I smiled wryly and tugged off my tie. "But it's over."

"Yikes. That's not good."

I stopped behind the couch and pulled off my suit jacket. Nick's eyes tracked the jacket as I tossed it over the back of

the couch. I needed to have it cleaned after Nick's lunchtime visit so I wasn't worried about wrinkles.

"Well, it's good because it's over, but not good that you wanted it to be over. I mean, I guess you'd want every day to be over, but not *over* over. Like game over, you're dead over. That would be bad."

Chuckling, I rolled up the sleeves of my dress shirt. "Your mind is a fascinating place."

"It's something, that's for dang sure," he grumbled. "Try living with it and see how *fascinating* it is."

"Did you have a good day?" I asked.

"Good enough. Better now that I got my daily dose of suit porn."

"I thought you got that when you came to my office for lunch?" I flirted.

"That was bonus content. I'm talking about the nightly suit-porn show."

"Did you get up to anything interesting?" I leaned my hands on the back of the couch. The last of the tension that had been simmering under the surface of my skin dissipated.

His stare dropped to my forearms. "I swear I never had an arm fetish until you. How are your forearms so sexy?"

"Maybe it's the rolled-up sleeves. I've noticed they can have quite the effect on people."

"That's got to be it." He lifted his eyes to mine and pouted. "You're late."

"I know." I smoothed one hand through his hair. He pressed into the touch with a happy little sigh. "But I think you'll forgive me when you see why I'm late."

Ding.

Nick got up on his knees and looked around me as Vlado stepped out of the elevator carrying two handfuls of shopping bags.

“Prezzies for me?”

“Yes.” I smiled indulgently at his enthusiasm.

It didn't matter what I gave him, Nick always responded with the same level of excitement. He didn't care about how much something cost, he only cared that I'd thought of him. That wasn't just refreshing, it tickled the part of me that loved to spoil and provide for the people in my life.

“Gimme!” He made grabby hands at Vlado, his smile wide and brilliant.

“There's something I want to show you before you open them.” I took his hand.

“You know that's just mean, right? Dangling presents in front of me but making me wait to open them is a form of torture. It's basically the same as being waterboarded.”

Vlado let out a strangled snort-laugh. “Do you know what waterboarding is?”

“Isn't it that thing where they drip water on your head to drive you crazy?”

“That would be water torture.” He grinned. “Waterboarding is a little more...involved than that.”

Nick took my hand and let me pull him off the couch. “Either way, making me wait is torture.”

“I'm sure you'll be fine.”

“I don't know about that.” He followed me as I led him toward my gym. “Are we going to your room? Oh! Are we going to bone on your swinger's hammock? That's like the only thing in there I haven't jizzed on yet.”

“Do I want to know?” Vlado asked me over his shoulder.

“No.” I turned to Nick. “And also no.”

“Boo. You're no fun.”

“That's not what you said while you were kneeling under my desk at lunch,” I pointed out.

“I wasn’t saying anything then because your dick was too far down my throat to talk,” he countered sweetly.

“You had a better lunch hour than I did,” Vlado mused as I opened the hallway door to my home gym. “I was drowning in paperwork and you got some afternoon delight.”

“We need to find you a girl,” Nick said. “That way you can get some afternoon delight too.”

“I’ll take all the help I can get. It’s been...a long-ass time since I had the opportunity for any delight.”

“Is that because Evan is a bossy boss who works you too hard and won’t let you have a life?”

“You know it.” Vlado grinned and shot me some finger guns, rattling the handful of packages he was still clutching.

“I’m standing right here,” I said dryly.

“So where’s my surprise?” Nick asked. “Are you guys going to do some lifting for me? You know how much I love it when you get all grunty and sweaty.”

“Not quite.” I pushed the door to the gym open. “I did some redecorating. What do you think?”

“What in the fifty shades of stripping is this?” he gasped.

I’d had a crew come in and install a small stage Nick could use where the yoga area used to be. It had lights, a music system, a detachable pole, and the whole thing was on a floating pad that would absorb any shock or impacts to help protect his joints. Across from the stage was a new leather armchair.

“You said you needed a place to practice.” I motioned to the stage. “Does this work?”

“It works.” He slid his gaze to mine. “And I’m guessing that chair isn’t there for me to rest my heinie in while I’m taking a water break?”

“You could also use it for that.”

“I’m just going to put these in your room, Ev.” Vlado slipped out of the hallway and into the main part of the

apartment.

“Are you angling for some private shows, Mr. Williams?” He arched one eyebrow at me.

“That was my hope. But it’s not contingent on the setup. I know this is your work and practicing is part of your job, so if you don’t want—”

“Of course I’m gonna dance for you.” He smacked my arm with the back of his hand. “Did you forget I have a major performance kink? Give me a captive audience and I’m gonna sparkle like a diamond in the rough!”

“I think you mixed up a few different sayings there,” I said, unable to keep the affection out of my voice.

“Probably. Now. Is it prezzie time?” He gave me big blue puppy eyes.

“You’re a brat.”

He batted his lashes. “Pretty please can I have my presents?”

“In my room. Vlado should’ve had enough time to set them down and escape.”

“Yay!”

Spinning on his heel, he darted for my room.

I followed at a slightly more leisurely pace, my anticipation building with each step that brought me closer.

“Slow poke,” he chastised as I crossed the threshold. “Could you walk any slower?”

“Probably.”

“Cheeky,” he muttered and leapt onto the bed. “It’s kind of a dick move that you made Vlado carry this stuff up here,” he said as he grabbed the closest bag.

“I didn’t make him. He wanted to come up and say hi and used carrying the bags as his excuse.”

“Awwww, he’s a sweetie. We really need to find him a girl. He needs someone he can spoil and take care of.”

“Agreed.” I sat on the edge of the bed.

Nick carefully pulled a decorative bundle of tissue paper free from the bag, then dug out the small, wrapped item.

“Breakable?” he asked.

“Not breakable, but some of them are delicate.”

Gingerly, he unwrapped the bundle, revealing his present. “Are these...” He picked a pair of underwear and unfolded them. “Oh wow.”

The low-rise briefs were gorgeous. The front was made from sheer black mesh that was as soft as silk, and the back had a large heart-shaped cutout over the ass, but instead of being bare, chains of glittering jewels hung from a metal ring in the middle of the heart and connected to the V part of it.

“I never got to take you to my friend’s boutique,” I explained. “I had him send me a selection of his best pieces. That one might be hard to dance in because of the chains, but can you imagine how incredible they’ll look draped over your ass?”

“Um, yeah. I can. And I’m gonna look hot as fuck. The chains, the cutout, the material. I love everything about them. See how they doubled up the material to make the dick pouch? It’s just opaque enough that you won’t be able to see my dick unless you’re up close and personal. Sexy and revealing, but still classy and mysterious.” He carefully laid them out on the bed. “Are all these lingerie?”

I nodded.

“Eep!” He grabbed the next bag and flung the excess tissue paper aside.

Watching Nick open the packages was as much of a delight as it had been picking out which ones I thought he’d like best. I’d tried to get a little of everything, and by his reactions, I’d chosen well.

He held up every pair or set he opened and gushed about all the things he loved about them. I’d chosen the items based on how I thought they’d look on him and from what he’d told

me about his preferences, but it was fun to learn the correct terms for the various styles.

I'd picked out a few bodysuits, one of which he'd called a gladiator style and another he'd said was harness style. There was also a selection of jocks and briefs, and few pairs of boy shorts. I already knew he preferred cage and garter styles with those and had made sure to get some of each type.

I'd also included a couple of bikini sets, a silk robe, some body chains, and a collection of stockings and garters.

"What do you think?" I asked as he rubbed the robe against his cheek.

"They're beautiful. All of them." He put down the robe and ran his finger over a line of cascading jewels on a strappy jock. "Thank you."

"I have one more thing for you."

"Really?"

I nodded and stood. Nerves fluttered in my stomach as I went to my dresser and pulled open the top drawer. Inside lay the necklace box I'd stashed in there a week ago.

"Ev?" Nick asked when I hesitated.

Steeling my resolve, I picked up the box and closed the drawer.

He studied me as I approached the bed. "You're nervous. Why?"

"I'm just... This might not be your taste, and it might be presumptuous, but I saw it and I knew it would look amazing on you and..."

"Are you going to let me see it?" He held out his hand, a soft smile on his lips.

I handed him the box and perched on the edge of the bed. I'd gone back and forth on whether I should give it to him. It was too much, I knew that, but my desire to see him in it overrode my good sense.

Nick mindfully opened the box.

Inside lay a stretchy black strap with long, dainty chains that sparkled with tiny jewels. The chains were attached to the strap so they draped down in cascading loops. Another chain, just as sparkly and pretty as the others, hung down in a straight line and connected the loops, only this one had a jeweled “e” hanging from the end. The pendant was small enough that from afar it would look like a squiggle or even a drop pendant, but up close it was clearly my initial.

“Do you know what that is?” I asked hesitantly.

“It’s thigh jewelry.” He looked up, his eyes bright and a little shimmery. “I love it.”

“Really?” I moved closer to him. “Are you sure? I can get you one that doesn’t have the charm—”

“The charm is why I love it.” Putting the box on the bed, he turned to me.

I took his hand and rubbed my thumb over his knuckles. “It is?”

He nodded and swallowed, his throat working. “I know it’s not a claiming thing like it would be for lifestyle people, but I like the idea of wearing your name, even if no one else can see it.”

“You do?” My voice cracked embarrassingly.

“Yeah.” He drew in a deep breath. “This means a lot to me. Not just the money you spent or giving me presents. But also how amazing you’ve been. People tend to react badly when they find out what I like to wear under my clothes. I don’t let people I’m getting naked with see that kind of stuff.”

“You didn’t hide it from me.”

“No, I didn’t.” Letting go of my hand, he stood. “You’ve never made me feel unsafe or like I have to hide parts of myself. I’ve never had that before. Definitely not with someone I’m sleeping with.”

I focused on his words as he stripped off his clothes. “You’ve said stuff like this before, but without context, I can only guess at what it means.”

“You’re talking fancy again.” He tossed his briefs aside and waved to the bed. “Which one do you want to see first?”

“This one.” I handed him the mesh briefs with the heart cutout and chains.

“Good choice.” He smiled. “Anything else?”

I looked over the items spread out on my bed. “These.” I picked up a fitted long-sleeved mesh crop top and a matching floor-length pencil skirt with a deep slit up one side.

Nick tried on the underwear. They looked even more spectacular on him than I’d imagined.

Grinning, he tugged on the top, then the skirt. They fit him like a second skin, and the wide slit showed off most of his leg.

My breath caught as he gently pulled the thigh garter out of the box and slid it up his leg.

The effect was breathtaking. *He* was breathtaking.

The jewels on the chains sparkled under the soft light. The loops rested on either side of his thigh and accentuated his lean muscles, and the sight of my initial resting against his creamy skin made my already-hard dick twitch.

“What do you think?” Nick asked shyly and turned so I could see the back.

The chains on the underwear were dulled and held in place by the mesh skirt, but the way they cascaded over the swell of his generous ass was as sexy as the heart-shaped cutout framing his cheeks.

“Do you like it?” he asked, twirling back to face me.

“I love it. You look... You’re breathtaking.”

He blushed and held out his hand. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“We’re going to try out my new stage and break it in, and maybe your chair if you’re up for round two.”

“Am I ever not up for round two?” I let him pull me toward the door.

“There was that one time you weren’t.”

“When was this?”

“Three days ago. Remember? We had some fun in your rich-dude shower after I was done playing with all your creams and serums? I was ready to go for round two after, but you passed out in your bed before that could happen.”

“The shower was round two, if I recall correctly. Round one was on the counter. The shower was after that. The bed would have been round three.”

“Semantics.”

“And round one happened because I was trying to distract you from playing with my creams and serums.”

“Yeah, distraction doesn’t work with me. You tell me you have custom skincare products made by a world-renowned dermatologist, and I’m going to use them. I have to. It’s a cannon event.”

“I assumed as much. But perhaps next time you can refrain from using my under-eye serum on your balls?”

He snorted. “I was testing to see just how anti-wrinkle it is. I figured the old dingleberries would be a better test considering I’m twenty-one and have the skin of a teenager.” He tugged me down the hall. “Although, I have to say, my balls are loving that stuff. They’ve never felt so silky and soft. I’ve been playing with them all day. Next time get a bigger size. That tiny tube doesn’t cover a lot of surface area.”

“I’ll be sure to do that. What would you say if I told you I’m in the process of getting you your own products so you don’t have to keep stealing mine?”

“It’s pronounced *borrow*.” He shot me a cheeky grin. “But I say thank you, and you know I’m still gonna steal yours.”

“I know.” I chuckled and followed him into the gym.

“Just curious, but how much does that ballsack cream cost?” he asked.

“You mean my under-eye serum? About three thousand a tube.”

“What?” he yelped and whirled at me. “Are you serious? I thought it was like, a few hundred, tops. I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“Relax, Nick. I don’t care about the money or that you had some fun. I would have said something earlier if it was a problem.”

He shoved me down into the armchair. “Still, I feel bad. That’s...” He narrowed his eyes. “That’s actually not a lot of money to someone like you, is it?”

I shook my head.

“Then you’d better get some extra ballsack serum because the next time I have your balls on my face, I want them to feel like silky little cum clouds.”

I laughed at both his ridiculous analogy and the proud, luminescent smile on his face.

“Now, give me a minute to figure out how this setup works, then you can sit back, relax, and enjoy the show.” Nick struck a pose that was probably meant to be over-the-top and silly, but only accentuated his good looks and the sexy outfit he had on.

I looked down at the “e” on his thigh. My balls twinged and my dick throbbed as it tented slacks.

“We have lots of time for that.” He licked his bottom lip, his eyes on my crotch. “First, let me get my dance on, then I want that in me.”

“As you wish.”

He tore his gaze from my dick and slinked over to the stage. I leaned back in my chair as he stared at the stage.

“Um, Ev?”

“Yes?”

“Does this thing have a remote or...”

“There’s a control panel built in to the side of the stage. On the left. My left. Your other left.”

“This?” He crouched next to it and flipped it open. “Good golly miss molly that’s a lot of options.” He hummed thoughtfully. “Now, what does this do?” The stage lights began flashing like a strobe light. “Oops, not that one. Seizures are not sexy.” The lights flickered off. “And what do you do?” This time the entire stage tilted to the left. “Eek!” He landed on his ass as he was thrown off balance. “Why? Why would you make a stage that can randomly turn into a Tilt-A-Whirl?” He pushed another button and the stage righted itself.

“Do you need help?” I asked, barely managing to stifle my laughter.

“I got it. I’m a professional, remember?”

Nick kept up a steady stream of commentary as he continued fiddling with the controls.

“There’s a manual,” I said after he’d fallen on his backside when the speakers had blasted what sounded like an air-raid siren. He’d turned it off just as quickly, but my ears were still ringing.

“Manuals are for people with no sense of adventure.” He poked at the panel. The lit floor began to glow softly. “There we go! Now to sync the lights with the music. You look like that could be your job.” He toyed inside the panel. “Am I gonna regret it if I press you?”

“Are you sure you don’t want to look at the manual?”

“Nope. I’ve got this.” He pushed a button with all the flair of someone launching a missile.

Soft music filtered out of the speakers and the lights flashed in time with the beat.

“Told ya!” He wagged his eyebrows at me. “One sec, I just gotta pick a song. I can’t dance to this.”

I didn’t recognize what was playing, but it was slow, the tone melancholy.

“Oh! Found one. This’s one of my faves. Ready?”

“Ready.” I settled in the chair and gripped the armrests, already wound so tight I felt like my muscles might snap from tension.

The opening notes to “Buttons” by The Pussycat Dolls filled the room and the pulse of the lights changed to match the beat.

Nick slowly stood, one hip cocked to the side and a hand on the pole. As soon as the vocals kicked in, he spun around and leaned his back against the pole, using it for balance as he gyrated his hips and ran his hands over his body.

I sat there, mesmerized by not only his beauty, but his confidence, as he danced to the song, using the pole as a prop rather than as something to swing and flip around like he had during Emily’s bachelorette party.

He’d incorporated belly dancing into this routine. I could barely breathe as he rolled his body in a slow, deliberate wave, then added some hip lifts, shimmies, and belly rolls that were almost surreal in their fluidity.

Every snap of his hips, low drop, and hot look made my already-rock-hard dick ache with desire. My body temperature rose as he slowly stripped off the shirt, then the skirt, leaving him in the briefs and thigh garter.

Around the two-and-a-half-minute mark in the song, when the music changed, Nick jumped onto the pole and spun around it, hanging upside down with his legs off to the side. He did a few more twists and spins, then flipped off it and landed in a crouch on the stage.

Eyes blazing with passion, he stood and slowly stalked toward me. He stopped about a foot in front of me and resumed dancing, dropping low and popping back up in ways that made my knees ache just watching.

As the song was fading out, he slung one leg over the arm of the chair and landed on my lap.

I clutched his hips and hauled him closer as he rolled his body in more of that delicious rhythm.

He dragged his cheek over mine. The scratch of my stubble against his smooth skin made us both shiver.

“Ready for round two?” He raked his hand through my hair.

“Wouldn’t this be round one? I think enough time has passed since lunch we can restart the clock.”

He pulled on my hair, a sexy smirk on his full lips. “Fair point. Ready for round one? I know you like to be in charge, but now it’s my turn.”

“It’s been a while for me.” I rubbed his ass. The smooth chains on his underwear were warm under my hands.

He froze as the music ended. “Been a while?” he asked, his tone careful.

“Since I bottomed.”

His jaw dropped and his eyes went comically wide.

“You said you wanted to bend me over and make me scream, remember?” I traced my finger around the edges of the heart cutout. “In the car that first night.”

“You said you don’t like it.”

“I don’t. But I’m happy to switch if that’s what you want.”

He chewed his lip. “That statement wasn’t entirely accurate. I’m a big ole bottom with dudes. I like messing with tops and making them think I wanna rail them, but I don’t.”

“There are other ways you can make me scream.” I dipped my finger between his cheeks and stroked his hole.

“Please tell me you have your wallet on you because I totally forgot the supplies and I need to get your dick in me like, yesterday.”

“Back pocket. Now kiss me and make me scream.”

Smirking, he bent his head and slid his hand into my pocket.

The realization that we only had three weeks left together hit out of nowhere as he molded his lips to mine and kissed me

so tenderly it made my toes curl.

How was I going to be able to say goodbye to him? I'd miss the sex, but that wasn't what made my heart break. The thought of not seeing him after a long day or not having him by my side at the multitude of tedious events in my future were the things I'd truly miss.

His sunshine smiles and wild tangents, the way I found myself laughing and forgetting to think about work or my responsibilities or the dozens of other things that constantly weighed me down when he was near.

How he always found an excuse to touch me when we were in public. The way he loved to snuggle up to me and would loudly demand cuddles when he felt neglected.

We hadn't slept together because I knew that was one boundary I wouldn't be able to come back from, but we'd spent hours lying in bed as we cuddled and talked about random things.

I'd never had that with previous partners and hadn't realized how much I craved that kind of emotional intimacy.

Nick was...everything. And I didn't want to give him up.

But I'd have to.

He sighed against my mouth and dropped my wallet between us. Focusing on him and not on the future, I matched his kisses and let myself get lost in his taste, his scent, and the feel of having the man I'd accidentally fallen for in my arms.

NICK

EVAN'S KISS was soft and sweet mind-numbingly perfect.

His strong hands gripped my ass, squeezing hard as I rocked on his lap and dragged my cock against his.

Evan was an amazing kisser, and it wasn't just because he was experienced or assertive. It was how he tailored his kisses to be exactly what I needed. Maybe we just happened to be on the same wavelength and it was a complete accident, but knowing what I did about him, I would bet he was just that intuitive. I would also bet he had no idea he was doing it.

At his core, Evan was a protector and provider, and that extended to every aspect of his life. He wanted to take care of people, and he'd let it slip more than once that people had used that against him in the past and he thought it was a weakness.

It wasn't. It made him the amazing man he was. Yes, he could be grumpy and arrogant and he was obsessed with his work. He was also stubborn and single-minded and ruthless.

But in the time we'd spent together, he'd shown himself to be kind and compassionate and surprisingly sweet. He just needed people in his life to remind him that he was more than his work or his family. That it was okay to put himself first and focus on his happiness over the expectations of others.

Vlado did that; so did Emily. I liked to think I helped a bit, but there was no way in heck I could ever give him even a fraction of what he'd given me.

Evan didn't know this about me, but he was the only intimate partner I'd had who'd given a shit about me or my pleasure. He was the only one who wanted to make me feel good and hadn't made it all about them.

People loved it when I turned on the sexy and played seducer, but no one ever did the same for me.

No one except Evan.

He dipped his finger between my asscheeks and pressed the tip against my hole.

"More," I breathed against his lips. "I'm ready."

"I have to prep you," he rasped.

"Don't need it." I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and arched my back to pop my ass the way I knew drove him insane. "This might be round one for you, but it's round two for me. I had some fun when I got back from our lunch date and I'm still prepped."

"You did?" He pushed harder.

I rested my forehead against his and bore down. He popped through my outer ring. "Oh yeah."

"Is that okay?"

"Feels good," I assured him. "Go deeper."

He slid in a bit more. My body accepted the invasion with almost no resistance.

"Still feel good?"

"So good."

"What did you do when you were alone?" He pushed in some more.

"You want to hear all about how I fucked myself with a toy while pretending it was your cock?"

He groaned and drove his finger all the way inside me. "Tell me."

"Give me two and I will."

He worked another finger in and deliberately rubbed my spot. Hot pulses of pleasure danced over my skin as nerves deep in my body crackled to life.

“Goddamn,” I groaned and clenched around him.

“Tell me.”

“I was really horny when I got home.” I rocked on his fingers, forcing him to keep teasing my spot. “All I could think about was how much I loved going down on you in your office. How much I wanted your cock in me.”

Warm breaths fanned over my cheek as he snagged my hip to hold me still.

“I was going to jerk it to take the edge off until you came home, but it wasn’t enough.”

“More”—his voice was shredded—“tell me more.” He sped up his fingers, pumping them in and out of me.

“I was in your shower.” I ground down on his touch, trying to get more of that delicious pressure on my prostate. “It smelled like you, and it reminded me of all the times we messed around in there. It wasn’t enough.”

Reaching back, I shackled his wrist and pulled his fingers out of me. “Get yourself ready.”

With a shuddering breath, Evan thumbed out a condom and a packet of lube from his wallet. I took it when he was done and tossed it on the floor.

He met my gaze and slowly lifted the condom wrapper to his mouth.

Another pulse of need throbbed deep in my balls as he tore open the wrapper.

“Do you remember that toy you got me? The one with the suction cup so I could get double-teamed even though it was just us?”

He nodded, his eyes dark with lust.

“I used that. I stuck it to the wall of the shower and fucked myself on it. The whole time I was picturing you, thinking

about how good you feel, how you always make me come so hard.”

He groaned and reached between us.

I shifted back so he could pull his dick out.

“It felt so good, but it wasn’t the same. I missed being able to feel you, kiss you. See the way you look at me.”

“And how do I look at you?” he asked in that sexy rasp that made my belly swoop.

“Like I’m precious,” I whispered.

“You are.” Tilting his head, he pecked a kiss against my lips. “You’re so precious, Nicky.”

“I like that you call me that.” I closed my eyes against the onslaught of emotions welling up in me. “I feel safe with you.”

“Open your eyes.”

I did.

“I feel safe with you too. I didn’t expect you. I didn’t expect any of this.”

“Me neither.” I chuckled, but it was forced. “I figured you’d be an uptight fuddy-duddy who didn’t know how to relax or laugh or have fun. I thought the best part of our arrangement would be the free clothes and going to fancy parties and seeing how the other half lives.”

“What’s the best part?”

“Getting to know you. Getting the chance to be part of your life, even if it’s only for a few months.”

“That’s the best part for me too. I went into this thinking it would be a simple ruse. I figured we’d be amicable and I’d hoped we could maybe have fun or become surface friends, but you’re... You could never be surface anything. You’re the main character.” He winked and rolled the condom down his length. “Did I use that right? Is that how you kids would say it?”

“Close enough.” I watched his strong hands as he ripped open the lube packet.

“What did you think about in the shower?” he asked.

I blinked a few times, trying to circle back to what we’d been talking about before the confession dump.

“I was thinking about the Walcott’s party.”

He chuckled and slicked up the condom. “I can honestly say I’ve never done that before.”

“Me neither. But it was so freaking hot. I think we need to do that again at the next party.”

“I think you may be right.” He ran slick fingers over my hole.

Evan and I had started our “trouble in paradise” portion of the agreement and had started having stupid arguments in front of others so our big breakup wouldn’t come as a shock.

At one of the parties we’d gone to last week, I’d been bored out of my tree and had decided to storm away after our “fight” to add some extra drama to things.

Evan had followed me, but instead of continuing the fight or apologizing for the sake of the people around us, he’d dragged me into an empty room and fucked me against the door while other partygoers milled about in the hallway.

We’d called it our fight and fuck plan, and I’d learned that I had more than just a performance kink. I was a full-on exhibitionist.

“Are you sure you’re prepped?” He slipped a slick finger inside me.

“Mmhmm.” I gripped his cock by the base and lifted myself over him.

The position was awkward since my legs were over the arms of the chair and I didn’t have any leverage except for Evan’s shoulders, but he slid his hands under my ass and helped me get situated.

“I want you to look at me while you take me.” His dark eyes were molten with lust. “Can you do that?”

I nodded, eager to not only please him, but to be good for him.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“So ready.” I notched his cockhead against my hole and slowly sank down.

The sensation of him splitting me open was so hot, but I hadn’t been as ready as I thought, and a slice of pain shot through me.

“It’s okay.” He tightened his grip and held me still. “You’re okay. Just take a second and get used to it.”

Nodding, I gulped in a breath and held it.

“There you go,” he purred. “Now, let go.”

I did, blowing out my breath at the same time he lowered me down until he was fully seated in me.

“God, Nick. You feel so good.” He held my hips. “Can you stay like this?”

“Uh-huh.” The pain was gone, but the burn from being stretched lingered. I clenched around him a few times. We both moaned when my body finally relaxed around him.

I tried to rock my hips, but he held me still.

“Ev?”

“Just stay like this if you can.” His breathing was already shallow and rough. “Just feel me. Let me feel you.”

“Okay,” I whispered, unable to look away from his hot stare. “You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Looking at me like I’m precious.”

“You are. Everything about you is precious and perfect, Nicky.”

The fullness in my ass shifted to a strange sort of pleasure. I was full, almost too full, but it didn't hurt.

“Stay just like this. Feel me. Let me feel you.”

The pressure inside me built, as did the need to move.

“Ev,” I gasped. “It's too much.”

He rocked his hips and gave me a few shallow thrusts, then stopped.

“Ev,” I whined.

“I know, darling.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “Do you trust me?”

I nodded, even as my heart fluttered from the endearment.

“Just a little bit longer.”

“Does it feel good?” I asked, trying to distract myself from the way my walls kept instinctively squeezing around him.

“So good.” He shifted again, pushing deeper but not pulling out. “One of these days I'm going to have you sit on my cock and hold me inside you.”

“I mean, I'm pretty much doing that right now.”

“Mmm. Yes, you are. But next time we'll stay like this until we're both desperate with need. Until we can't take it anymore and we come.”

“That sounds really hot. We should do that now.”

He laughed. “I would, but after watching you dance, I don't think I can hold out long enough for that to happen tonight.”

“Boo.” I rocked over him. “Guess you'll just have to fuck my brains out.”

“Patience.” He stopped me by gripping my hips tighter.

“Don't wanna be patient. Wanna come all over you and mess up your fancy suit. I thought about that while I was in the shower. About how hot it would be if you walked around all day with my cum on you, hidden under your jacket, like a secret that's just for us.”

He groaned and tensed under me.

I clenched around him.

“Like my new garter. I love the idea that no one but us will know I’m wearing your brand. So hot.” I clenched it again, desperate for more pressure on my overly sensitive prostate.

“Brat.”

“What?” I asked coyly.

“You’re trying to make me lose control.”

“Maybe. Is it working?” Now I clenched as hard as I could, holding it until the pressure was too much and my body let go.

“Fuck,” he grunted and shifted his hands so he was cupping my ass. He circled his hips, slow and shallow, but that somehow made it even better, more intense than when he took me hard and fast.

“Yes,” I closed my eyes with a sigh.

“Look at me. There you go. Let me see you. Let me see it all.”

I gulped. *Don't let him see what I'm feeling. Please don't let him see how much I love him.*

The realization that I’d fallen in love with Evan hit out of nowhere, stealing my breath and nearly my consciousness as my brain short-circuited.

“Breathe, Nicky.” Evan moved me faster over him. “I’ve got you.”

I nodded, gasping in gulping breaths as the emotional onslaught and building pleasure battled it out inside me.

“Do you want to come?” he asked in a broken, rumbly voice.

“Yeah. Need to.”

“Kiss me.”

I did, slanting my lips over his as I kissed him with everything I had. I could never tell him how I felt, and I’d

have to find a way to get over this before we parted ways, but I could show him.

I could let him know how much he meant to me, how important he'd become. I could give him some of what he gave me every time we were together.

Evan's big hands clutched my ass as he thrust up into me. Every glide of his dick dragged his cockhead over my prostate, towing me closer and closer to my orgasm.

"Do you need my hand?" he asked against my kiss.

I shook my head, still kissing him like my life depended on it.

He moaned against my lips and moved faster, lifting me, then dropping me down on his cock in quick, sharp thrusts.

His body went taut, his cock pulsed. He tried to stop kissing me, but I kept our mouths fused together. Evan never came first, and I wanted his orgasm more than I wanted my own.

Finally he came with a low cry, squeezing my ass so hard I was sure he was going to leave marks. Warmth filled me as he emptied into the condom.

That triggered my own release, and I came only seconds after him, shooting all over his fancy dress shirt just like I'd wanted to.

Evan wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tight, breathing hard as I gave into the pleasure and let go.

When I opened my eyes, Evan was staring at me with a strange look on his face.

"What?" Self-doubt cleaved me. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you were perfect." He leaned in to give me a soft kiss. "You just... It's nothing."

"You sure?"

"I promise." He brushed a lock of hair back from my forehead. "I'd say round one was a success."

I laughed as euphoria washed over me. “You can say that again.”

“I’d say round one was a success.”

I rolled my eyes at his proud grin. “Cheeky. Can I ask you something?”

He nodded.

“I noticed that you seem to...”

“Seem to what?”

“Seem to like kissing while you come.”

“You noticed that, huh?”

“Yeah. It’s not a bad thing,” I added quickly. “In fact, I’m a big fan because I love kissing you.”

“Kissing is the only thing that can make me lose control,” he said softly.

“Does it make you lose control? Or does kissing someone makes it easier for you to come?”

He sighed. “You really do have my number.”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“It’s nothing dramatic. Control is something I’ve always been good at. Controlling my voice, my expressions, my emotions. It was the only way to survive my childhood.” He rubbed my ass, his eyes thoughtful and a little faraway.

“That control has spilled over into every aspect of my life, and that includes my sex life. I learned to separate sex from intimacy to protect myself from manipulation, and that’s given me an edge when it comes to how I can perform. But all that control shatters when I kiss someone.”

I gently stroked his cheek, playing with his stubble the way I knew he liked.

“For me, kissing is intimate,” he continued. “I can only enjoy it with someone I trust and am comfortable with, and those people have been few and far between.”

“You kissed me that first night. Before you let me suck you off.”

“I did. Partly because I didn’t want our first kiss to be a public affair and to happen while we were playing our parts, but also because I wanted to have that connection before anything physical happened between us. I didn’t want things to be impersonal with you. I didn’t understand why at the time, but my gut has never let me down. I’m glad I listened to it.”

“I’m glad you did too.” I gnawed at my lip.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s my turn to listen and not take over the conversation.”

“If you have something to say, I want to hear it.”

“I just... Did you know I was acting that night in the car? I wanted to blow you,” I said quickly. “And I really wanted to kiss you, but I was being who I thought you wanted me to be. The person everyone wants me to be.”

“I knew. You played the part beautifully, but I could see that wasn’t who you are, or what you wanted.”

“I’ve only had one relationship.” I looked away, my eyes burning. “And we were sixteen and stupid. She got tired of me after about six months. But no one else has wanted me like that. I’m the guy they mess around with while they look for their forever person. The guy they take home for a night then ignore. The fun-time guy who’s only good for sex, and only if I do the work.”

“I’m sorry, Nicky. I guessed something like that had happened based on some of the things you’ve said, but I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“For a long time I thought there was something wrong with me. I thought I was broken and a freak. That no one would ever want all of me and I was only good for sex.”

“You’re not broken.” He kissed my lips. “You’re perfect, and I’m so grateful I’ve gotten a chance to know you. You deserve the world, Nicky.”

His cock finally softened enough it fell out of me. I frowned at the loss.

“How about we take a shower and I’ll put some of your ballsack serum on you? I need my cum clouds next time you fuck my face.”

Evan laughed, but his eyes told me he knew I was trying to change the subject.

I was too raw and vulnerable to hear him say all these nice things about me right now. It made me want things I couldn’t have.

It made me want all of him the way he had all of me.

“How about I give you a facial?” He pinned me with a look when I giggled. “Not *that* kind of facial.”

“I mean, both is always an option.”

This time his laugh was genuine. “I may need a little extra time to recover after that last round.”

“Thirty really does hit like a ton of bricks, doesn’t it? Soon you’ll be eating dinner at four in the afternoon and yelling at kids to get off your lawn.”

“Brat.”

“Eeek!” I clung to him as he stood, bringing me with him. “How are you so strong?”

“Powerlifter, remember? And like I said, you’re not heavy.”

I laid my head on his shoulder and slung my legs around his waist as he carried me out of the gym.

“Tell me more about all the pampering I’m about to get.”

“Well, after your facial, I was thinking a nice steam would help you relax and prepare you for a full-body massage.”

“That sounds like heaven,” I murmured. “But you don’t actually have to do any of that. A snack and some cuddles is enough.”

“Maybe so, but I want to pamper you. Will you let me?”

“Yes. As long as I get to pamper you too. I feel like that doesn’t happen nearly enough in your life.”

He didn’t answer, but his arms tightened around me like steel bands and nearly forced the air from my lungs.

I relaxed against him and let him carry me to his room, already daydreaming about sharing some self-care with the man I loved.

NICK

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?” Emily shoved her phone under my nose.

“Oh. My. God.” I snatched the phone out of her hand and enlarged part of the photo. “This is *exquisite*.”

“Right?” She grinned and leaned over me to zoom in on the bodice of her wedding dress. “Check out the beadwork. It’s hard to see in this photo, but the crystals all have different-hued undertones and the effect is gorgeous under the light. Here, this video shows it better.”

“Stunning,” I said as the video played. The beads sparkled in a starburst of colors, shifting and transforming as the light hit them at different angles. “I love that you didn’t stick with the ‘safe’ choices and included warm tones. The reds and yellows add so much depth to the effect.”

“And you know the best part? It has pockets!”

“Love love love it.” I wanted to ask why the dress on her phone looked completely different from the photos she’d shown me a few weeks ago.

That dress had been sheath style with asymmetrical rouching angled toward her left hip and a sarong-style slit. The intricate beading, straight neckline, and off-the-shoulder loop sleeves added to the goddess-like energy of the gown.

Simple, elegant, and exactly what I would have expected Emily to choose.

The one I'd just looked at had the beading and angled rouching, but with a scoop neckline, butterfly sleeves, and giant ballgown skirt.

"Do you have any new ones of your reception dress?" I asked.

"We decided it was best if I didn't waste money on a second dress." She flipped through the gallery on her phone. "The skirt is detachable. This is what it'll look like during the reception."

The mermaid skirt was gorgeous on her, but the heavy material and restrictive style just didn't hit the same as her original dress. None of what she was showing me tracked with what I knew of her tastes.

I flicked my gaze to her expression. Her tight smile and sad eyes told me everything I needed to know about how she felt about all these last-minute wardrobe changes.

"That silhouette was made for you," I said carefully.

"Want to see the after-party dress?" she asked, her tone hopeful again.

"Is water wet? Of course I want to see the after-party dress!"

She giggled and angled the phone toward me.

This dress was exactly what I would have pictured on her with the deep V-neck that ended just north of her belly button. The actual dress was a shimmery silver, and the airy blush overlay softened the look and gave it a fairytale feel while still being edgy and making a statement.

But what really stood out for me was how happy Emily looked in it. In the other dresses she'd smiled and posed like the ex-model she was, but in this dress she radiated joy and literally glowed.

"Pardon my French, but holy shitballs." I looked closer at the photo. "This. Is. Stunning. Ten out of ten. Five stars. I'm literally *ob*-sessed with this. The cut, the fit. The color choices. You're a goddess."

She beamed. “This was supposed to be my ceremony dress, but we ended up going in a different direction. I’m glad I still get to wear it for the after-party.”

“Why did you have to change to a different dress?” I asked.

“It’s not appropriate for a wedding or reception.”

“What’s not appropriate about it?” The dress was floor length and didn’t have any slits that I could see. The neckline exposed a lot of skin, but covered all the important parts.

“She might as well walk down the aisle naked.”

I looked over at Imogen, who was sitting on the couch across from us with her phone in one hand and glass of wine in the other.

She was a blonde version of Emily and nearly as pretty, but her resting bitch face and attitude to match took her from a solid eight to a hard three. Right now she was hovering around a negative seven and dropping every time she opened her mouth.

“It’s also extremely disrespectful to not wear white. Everyone knows the virginity train left the station long ago, but Malcolm deserves to have his bride wear a proper dress at his wedding.”

“But it’s *their* wedding.” I turned to Emily. “It’s your day too. This dress is perfection. There’s nothing inappropriate about it.”

“Like you’d know anything about what’s appropriate.” Imogen scoffed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked icily.

“Didn’t Evan find you working at a strip club? And you’re a baby with no life experience. It’s understandable you’d confuse lingerie with proper wedding attire.”

“A baby with no life experience? Excuse you?”

“You’re what, eighteen?”

“Twenty-two. Almost.”

“You’ll understand when you’ve lived a little and can’t rely on your ass to make money.” She smiled serenely and sipped her wine.

Emily’s hand on my thigh stopped the tirade I felt brewing under the surface.

“What about your shoes?” I asked, trying to bring back her earlier happiness. “And jewelry?”

“I’m still deciding on those.” She sipped her wine, her face blank.

I shot Imogen a glare as she scrolled on her phone. I hated people like her. If you didn’t like something, that was fine, but to deliberately make someone feel bad about something they were excited about was a dick move of epic proportions.

“How are my favorite ladies?” Malcolm asked, striding into the room. “Nick.” He didn’t spare me a glance.

“Bored out of my mind.” Imogen looked up from her phone.

“Fine.” Emily gave him a tight smile.

Malcolm motioned for Imogen to stand. “I need your help with something.” He glanced at Emily. “Excuse us.”

She nodded and took a long sip.

Evan and I had arrived at Emily’s house just over an hour ago for what was supposed to be a small family party. Their parents had canceled ten minutes after we got there, and Malcolm’s brother, sister, and their families hadn’t bothered to show up. His parents were out of the country, so they had an excuse, but it made me sad that she’d gone through all the work of planning something, only to have three quarters of the guests not show up.

“Are you okay?” I asked quietly.

“Fine.” She put her glass down and grabbed her phone. “I need to check on a few things.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, thank you. I won’t be long.” She patted my shoulder. “Will you be alright?”

“Fine, but I may or may not need to use the little boys’ room...”

“Use my ensuite. The guest bath smells like someone emptied an entire can of Axe body spray in there.”

“Oof, instant flashbacks to walking down the hall in middle school and having to dodge the chem trails from all the dudes drenching themselves in that stuff in between classes.”

“Did you know Evan was a big fan?”

“Shut the front door. Mr. *I only wear custom cologne* went through an Axe phase?”

She grinned. “He went through a whole bottle of Recover in less than a year. He loved the stuff.”

I sat with that for a beat. “Thank you for trusting me with this information. I promise I’ll use it for good, and not evil.”

“He’s going to kill me for telling you.”

“I’m gonna kill Vlado for *not* telling me. I take it he was aware of this sacrilege?” I fake-gasped. “Was he part of it too? Did he also fall to the dark side?”

“He did.” She giggled. “But he realized the error of his ways when he asked Sarah Milton to go to the movies with him and she had an asthma attack in the car on the way there.”

“I’m weak.” I laughed. “That’s not how you want to make a girl breathless on a date.”

Her phone chimed and she peered at the screen. Her smile fell. “I need to answer this.” She stood. “Take a left at the door, then down the hall and through the arch. It’s the last door on the left.”

“Thanks.”

Following her directions, I made my way down the hall, through the arch, and to the last door.

I expected to find a bathroom, but instead, the door opened into a bedroom.

A bedroom with a big bed.

Where Malcom and Imogen were in a rather *compromising* position.

What the actual fuck?

I closed the door as quickly as I'd opened it and slowly backed away.

“Holy shit. Holy *shit*.”

Lemon face was cheating on Emily with Imogen? Imogen who was supposedly his bestie?

My shock melted into anger. I hated cheaters. Like *ha-ted* them. There was never an excuse to be unfaithful to someone. But to cheat on your fiancée weeks before the wedding was peak assholery.

Not only was Malcom cheating on Emily, who was worth a million of him, with his skanky side bitch during her party, they were doing it in *her* bed. Malcolm might live here, but this was Emily's house.

How was I supposed to tell her? I hated lemon face with the intensity of a thousand burning suns and he was a giant dickweed to her, but she loved him. This would devastate her.

Evan. I needed Evan.

Wrenching my phone out of my pocket, I opened my text thread with Evan and scurried down the hall.

Nick: where are u??? its an emergency

The click of a door opening caught my attention as I was slipping my phone back in my pocket. The pounding of feet on the hall floor sent a rush of terror through me.

Malcom was racing toward me, his face red and his clothes askew.

“Shit!” I squeaked and tried to pivot toward the arch to get away into the main hall before he caught me.

My shoes looked amazing with my outfit, but they were definitely a fashion over function choice and had almost no grip. The nearly smooth soles slid over the polished floor. Arms windmilling, I managed to stay on my feet, but the lost time was enough for Malcolm to catch up to me.

“Ev—!” I tried to scream, but Malcolm grabbed the back of my shirt and jerked hard enough my collar cut into my throat, effectively silencing me as I tumbled back.

I landed on the hard floor, my ass and elbows smarting from the impact.

“You little shit,” Malcolm sneered.

“Let go,” I croaked, pulling my collar away from my throat so I could breathe.

“Mal?” Imogen’s voice filtered down the hall.

“Get back to Emily and distract her while I deal with this,” he said, his voice soft and almost sweet.

He’d never talked to Emily like that in all the times I’d seen them together. My blood boiled for her.

“Get up.” He yanked on my shirt.

“Fuck you.” I rolled out of his grip.

He made a strangled sound and lunged at me.

“Ow!” I yelled as he snatched a handful of my hair and wrenched hard. My head snapped back and I was thrown off balance. “Evan!”

“Shut up!” Still holding my hair in a death grip, he slammed my head into the floor.

Pain and a strange cold feeling exploded at the back of my skull. My ears rang, and my brain felt like it was vibrating from the impact. My vision went hazy as the edges went black.

“Fuck,” I muttered, stuck in that weird place between passing out and being awake.

“Get the fuck up.” He yanked on my hair again.

I was too dazed, and at too much of a disadvantage, to fight. I needed to let my head clear before I made my next move. Rolling over, I scrambled to my knees as he dragged me toward a door.

He got the door open and shoved me inside. I landed on my hands and knees in what looked like an office or maybe a library.

“Stay down.” He kicked me in the side.

I’d seen it coming and managed to get my arm between my ribs and his fancy dress shoe as I’d twisted out of the way, turning a direct hit into a glancing blow.

“Fuck you,” I spit out. “What do you think you’re going to accomplish here? Do you really think smacking me around is going to make me forget you’re a cheating asshole who doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air as Emily?”

He looked...deranged. His normally perfect hair was mussed and sticking out in feral cowlicks. His face was red, eyes crazed, and he was panting like he’d just run a two-minute mile and not sprinted down a twenty-foot hallway.

“I knew there was something between you and Imogen—”

“Shut up,” he seethed. “Keep her name out of your filthy whore mouth.”

“My whore mouth? What the fuck do you think your skank-ass bitch is—”

The slap to my cheek wasn’t nearly as hard as it could have been but was still enough to rattle my already-rattled brain. Pain spread over my skin and my cheekbone ached.

“SHUT. UP!”

I dodged his attempted backhand, another manic slap, and what could have been a right hook, but tripped over an armchair I hadn’t noticed while I’d been distracted by his Rock ’em Sock ’em Robots style of fighting.

I landed on the floor again, my ass and thigh taking the brunt of the impact.

“You ruined *everything*,” he shrieked.

“*I* ruined everything?” I climbed to my feet, a little slower this time as the multiple hits and falls caught up with me. “How the fuck is it *my* fault that you’re a cheater who cheats?”

“It doesn’t matter what you think you saw.” He smoothed a hand over his hair, not fixing it at all. “No one will believe a word you say.”

“I think the fact that you just played slappy slap with my face will lend some credibility to my statements.” I pointed to my still-smarting cheek. “How are you going to explain this? Gonna try and convince them I walked into a door?”

“I won’t have to explain anything. No one will fault me for defending myself.”

“Defending yourself after you choked me and bounced my head off the goddamn floor? You attacked me.”

“Did I? That’s not what I remember.” He laughed manically, sounding as unhinged as he looked.

“Evan is going to kill you for this. Not only are you cheating on his sister, but you just put hands on his partner.”

“You’re not his partner.” He primly tucked in his shirt, still red-faced and breathless.

“Newsflash, you unfrosted Pop-Tart. I am his partner.”

“No. You’re not.”

“I’m seriously questioning which one of us just took two hits to the head because you’re talking crazy.”

He snarled at me and adjusted the sleeves of his shirt. “I’ve known Evan for a long time. I know his tastes, his proclivities, and his history. You might think you won the lottery and bagged yourself a rich sugar daddy, but you’re not special, Nick. You’re just one in a long line of boy toys.”

“You’re wrong.”

“Evan has a pattern, did you know that? He finds a young, pretty plaything and uses them for sex until he gets bored. It’s only a matter of time before a shiny new toy catches his eye

and you're right back in the strip club shaking your ass for tips."

"You're so far off the mark, my dude."

"Am I?" He grinned darkly. "Are you saying he hasn't been showering you with lavish gifts? He's not paying your bills and he didn't move you into his house so your ass would be available whenever he wanted it?"

"You're wrong."

"He bought you. Plain and simple. You're the only one dumb enough to not see it. Do you really think someone like Evan could ever truly be interested in someone like you? You're a prop, kid. A pretty piece of eye candy he can parade around. You're nothing. You come from nothing, and you will always be nothing."

"I don't know what you're playing at, but it's not gonna work. You can't distract me from the fact you're a cheater, and I'm going to sing like a damn canary to anyone who'll listen."

"I'm not trying to distract you." He glared at me, the casual cool from a moment ago already gone. "I'm merely explaining why no one will believe a word you say. I'll deny what you think you saw, and so will Imogen."

"You can deny it until the cows come home and you're blue in the face, but you're not going to get away with any of this."

"I already have." He grinned, but it just looked wrong. Like if an alien were trying to recreate what they thought a human smile looked like without ever seeing one.

"You're insane. Like certifiable."

"And you're naïve if you think anyone in this family gives a shit about you. Evan is using you to get his inheritance. It's obvious to everyone with eyes. You're nothing but a means to an end for him."

"I'm done listening to your villain monologues. I'm out." Throwing up my hands, I stalked toward the door.

Malcolm's hand closed down on my shoulder.

I dropped my arm and spun away, forcing him to lose his hold.

He growled and grabbed at me again.

This time I was ready, and caught his arm, using his momentum to take him off his feet. As he was falling, I torqued his arm, got my hip under him, and flipped him onto his back.

He landed on the floor with a high-pitched squawk and a satisfying thud.

Still holding his arm, I twisted his shoulder until he screamed. Then, for good measure, I yanked his hand back and added just enough pressure on his elbow that it hit his max stretch point.

“Let go!”

“Fuck you.” I resisted the urge to kick him square in the ribs, and the balls, as payback. The fucker didn’t deserve my self-restraint, but I refused to fight dirty. “Fuck your stupid face and your shiny hair.”

He hissed and spluttered on the floor, trying to pull out of my grip even as he forced his joints to hyperextend.

“Fuck you for cheating on Emily and fuck you for all that shit you said about me.”

He swiped at my ankle. His fingertips brushed the hem of my slacks.

“Try that again.” I wrenched his arm back, stopping right at the point before it snapped. “I fucking dare you.”

He screamed in what sounded like pain and frustration and made another grab at my ankle.

Shifting so I was holding his arm with one hand, I reached into my pocket and pulled out my fidget spinner knife. Flipping the trigger, I snapped the blade open.

His scream echoed in the room. Loud and bloodcurdling.

SLAM.

The door to the office flew open and a crush of bodies spilled in. A woman screeched and loud male voices shouted over each other as I twisted toward the commotion.

“Help!” Malcolm shrieked from the floor. “He’s trying to kill me!”

EVAN

“I DON’T FEEL RIGHT about this,” Vlado said, not looking up from Malcolm’s computer.

“I know.” I shut the drawer to the file cabinet with a sigh. “But we can’t risk bringing any sort of allegations against Malcolm to Emily without solid proof.”

“Good plan,” a voice said from behind me.

“Jesus!” I whirled around to find my sister leaning against the wall as casual as could be.

“You okay there, big bro?” she asked.

“How the hell did you get in here?” I asked, my heart still racing.

“You forgot about the hidden entrance in the closet?” She raised one perfectly shaped brow and looked pointedly at Vlado. “That’s not like you.”

He shrugged. “How did you know we were in here?”

“You sweet summer child.” She pushed off from the wall. “You set up my security system and not only hired, but also trained, my team.” She gave him a shrewd look. “Did you really think you’d be able to bypass my camera network without tripping the safety protocols *you* put in place?”

Vlado grinned. “Oopsie.”

I twisted toward him. “You wanted her to find out?”

“We’re all on the same side here.” Vlado looked between us. “We’ve been best friends since we were babies. This hiding shit and sneaking around behind each other’s backs is getting old and I’m sick of being in the middle of it.”

“We’re not sneak— Wait, each other’s backs? You two have been working against me?”

“Dial back the paranoia.” Emily rolled her eyes. “Vlado and I haven’t been working against you or going behind your back. We’ve just been... That’s a discussion for another day. Right now I want to know why you’re in Mal’s office.”

“We found something.” Vlado came around the desk and leaned his hip against it.

“What?” she said. “Does this have to do with your inheritance scheme?”

I shook my head. “This is far more serious.”

“My team was able to trace the origin of the letters,” Vlado revealed.

“Really?” Her eyes darkened as her expression went tight. “And you’re in here because Malcolm has something to do with them?”

Vlado nodded. “I had a hunch the call was coming from inside the house, so to speak, and I had all the printers at your dad’s offices checked again. My team just confirmed that one of them is a match for the letters Evan’s been getting. That printer is in an isolated part of the building and behind multiple locked doors. Only a few people have access to the area. It wasn’t Evan, and I’m confident that it’s not Grant...”

“*Malcolm’s* been sending them?” Her eyes were saucers. “Are you fucking serious?”

“As a heart attack,” Vlado said grimly. “Luckily for us, he’s not nearly as smart as he thinks he is. We checked that area a few weeks ago and the printer wasn’t there. He tried to cover his tracks, but my guys were able to not only trace the printer history to his office computer, but they also recovered the original files.” He glanced at me. “We weren’t sure how to proceed since we didn’t have solid proof it’s him and not

someone trying to frame him, but there's no doubt in my mind he's behind everything."

Her eyes blazed with fury. "That pencil-dicked, two-faced *bastard*. I *knew* something was going on."

"You did?" I asked incredulously. "And you didn't think to tell me?"

"Why would I tell you my suspicions when you didn't bother telling me yours?"

"Children," Vlado inserted firmly, "can we focus on what's important here? As much as I want to go find lemon face and beat his ass into next week, we need tangible proof he's behind everything."

"You're not going to find shit in his files— Wait, lemon face?"

"That's what Nick calls him," I said.

"Better than what I'm going to call him." She stalked over to the desk. "You need to look in the safe. That's where he hides the important stuff."

"There's a safe in here?" Vlado asked.

She tugged on the painting mounted behind the desk. It swung away from the wall like a door, exposing the front of a large metal safe. "He had it installed when he moved in."

"Did he download *The Movie Villian's Guide to Being Sus as Fuck*?" Vlado asked. "A wall safe behind a painting? It's like fucking *Clue* around here. Malcolm in the study with the wall safe."

"You're starting to sound like Nick." Emily spun the dial on the safe.

My brow knitted. "You know the combo?"

"One thing about Malcolm is that he thinks he's smarter than everyone." She tugged on the handle, popped it up, pushed it down, then twisted it in three cranks. "And because he's so arrogant, he underestimates people, especially those he

thinks are nothing more than a pretty face.” She opened the safe. “The combo is his birthday backwards.”

“You’re taking this way better than I thought you would,” I said, suspicion creeping into my voice. “He’s your fiancé, yet you didn’t even blink when you heard about the printer.”

Emily pulled a leatherbound journal out of the safe and glared at me. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing.”

“Liar.”

“Okay, kids.” Vlado peeked around Emily and into the safe. “Can we focus on finding evidence so I can kick lemon face’s ass?”

“I’m just saying, it’s a little suspicious that you’re not even a teensy bit shocked.”

She rolled her eyes and stepped aside so Vlado could rifle through the safe. “Because I’ve had my own suspicions.”

“About the threats?” Vlado slid her a look.

“Not necessarily.” She flipped open the journal and thumbed through the pages. “I wasn’t sure what was going on, but I had a feeling he was hiding something. He’s been different the past few months. I thought it was wedding stress, or him having a temper tantrum about Dad’s retirement plans. But he’s just been...off.”

“Holy shit.” Vlado spun to face us, a folder clutched in his hand.

“What?” I asked, resisting the urge to grab the folder.

“This is bad, Ev. Really bad.” Vlado stood behind Emily. “Do you remember that offshoot company you discovered, the one operating out of Romania?”

“Yes.” I’d found the records of the company while doing an audit of my father’s files. The thing that had tripped my suspicions was that the records were not only incomplete, but close to eighty percent of the file had either been redacted or was outright missing.

“This is the uncensored file. It says exactly what that company was set up for.”

I took the file and flipped it open. A quick scan of the first page told me everything I needed to know. “Human organs?”

“Excuse me, what?” Emily gaped.

“Your man is using Grant’s company to start his own organ trafficking ring,” Vlado told her.

“Are you sure it’s just Mal?” She looked nauseated. I’d never seen panic like that in her eyes as she swung them toward me. “Dad’s not in on it, is he?”

“Doesn’t look like it,” I said, “unless Dad is using Malcolm as his Patsy.” I snapped the file closed, desperately trying to tamp down my building rage. “*This* is why he’s been in Dad’s ear about changing the terms of his retirement. He’s planning on using the company to branch into the black market and he knows he can’t do it unless he’s in full control of everything.”

“I’d guess this is only a small part of what he’s doing.” Vlado took the file from me and replaced it in the safe. “You don’t go from law-abiding businessman to trafficking human organs in one step. He’s got to already be into some shady shit, possibly drugs and arms dealings.”

“I... I can’t even.” Emily put a hand to her stomach. “To think I’ve been sleeping next to him. That I was going to marry him! All because my goddamn parents wouldn’t shut up about how perfect he is and how it’s time I settle down and do my duty to the family. He was supposed to be a safe choice!”

Vlado’s arm went around her in comfort.

“I went along with all this bullshit because he’s exactly like our father and I know how to handle men like him. But this?” She waved the journal. “He’s a monster. I knew something was off about him, but I ignored my instincts because everyone gaslighted me into thinking *I* was the crazy one. That there was something wrong with *me* because I dared to question him or his motivations.”

Vlado hugged her against his body.

She leaned against him and shoved the journal at me. “This has all the proof you need about the threats. The fucker is so arrogant he chronicled everything. His reasons, methods. Even his contacts and the randoms he hired. It’s all in here.”

Ping.

I checked my phone.

Nick: where are u??? its an emergency

“Where’s Malcolm?” I barked.

“He’s with Imogen. At least he was twenty minutes ago. Why?”

“We need to find Nick.” Shoving the phone in my pocket, I took off at a run.

“Ev?” Vlado caught up as I flung the door open.

“He’s in trouble.” I took off down the hall.

“We’ll find him.” Vlado kept pace with me, his features hard and determined.

I glanced over my shoulder. Emily had kicked off her shoes and was only a few paces behind us. “Where was the last place you saw him?”

“He’ll either be in the sitting room, or my bedroom.”

The three of us raced across her house, cutting down hallways and taking corners at breakneck speed.

My mind raced with all the worst-case scenarios. What if Malcolm wasn’t working alone and someone else had gotten a hold of Nick? What if Malcolm wasn’t the prissy little prick I’d assumed he was and he’d hurt Nick?

An image of Nick on the floor, broken and beaten, flashed in my mind’s eye. Bile rose in my throat as terror and rage swirled through me in equal measure.

“We don’t have any facts.” Vlado pulled ahead of me. “Just focus on finding him. He’s going to be okay.”

I nodded and picked up the pace, my lungs burning from a tightness that had nothing to do with overexertion.

We skid to a stop in front of the sitting room. Vlado went in first, but I was right on his heels. Our protocol was that he cleared a room before I entered, but fuck that. Nick was in trouble, and I'd happily take a bullet if it meant he didn't.

"What the hell?" Imogen jumped up from the sofa as we spilled into the room.

"Where's Malcolm?" I demanded. Blood pounded in my ears as my vision went dark around the edges.

"Why?"

"Answer the question, bitch," Emily snapped.

"Bitch?" Imogen's fear melted into indignation. "Excuse me, but—"

"Where is he?" I said again. "I'm losing my patience."

"This way."

I turned to Vlado, some of my haze clearing. He was just putting his phone in his pocket.

Not questioning him, I took off at a sprint, following my best friend as he tore out of the room, turned left, and sprinted toward Emily's personal suite.

"There." He pointed to the door of her office as I rounded the corner and nearly slammed right into the wall as my shoes slid on the polished floors. "Fall back," Vlado ordered, his gun at the ready.

Every instinct told me to ignore my best friend and burst into the room, consequences be damned, but he was right. If Nick was in trouble, then we needed to be smart about this.

He motioned for us to move to the side so we weren't in line with the door. I tugged Emily over. He put his ear up to it, one hand on the knob.

A bloodcurdling scream echoed from the other side.

"Nick!" Forgetting all about our safety protocols, I lurched toward the door.

Vlado shoved it open and stepped in front of me, shielding me with his body as he leveled his gun at the two men in the room.

Imogen screamed; Vlado shouted. Emily yelled something, but all I could do was stare at the scene in front of me.

Nick had Malcolm on the floor, Malcolm's arm in a pinning hold, and a colorful and shiny knife in his free hand.

"Help!" Malcolm shrieked from the floor. "He's trying to kill me!"

"Mal!" Imogen screamed. She managed to take two steps toward him before Emily grabbed the back of her blouse and jerked her to a stop.

"Slow your roll, bitch."

"Help me!" Malcolm shrieked again.

"SHUT. UP." Nick wrenched his arm, which made Malcolm scream and writhe on the floor like the snake he was.

"You good?" Vlado asked Nick, his gun pointed at Malcolm.

"I got this." Nick grinned, and the effect was both angelic and feral.

"What are you doing?" Imogen squawked. "He's going to kill Mal! Shoot him!"

"Shut the fuck up." Emily yanked Imogen back.

"Someone do something!" Imogen continued on hysterically. "Mal!" She lunged at him but stumbled to a stop as Emily jerked her back again.

"Park your ass in that chair before I rearrange your stupid face."

"Mal!" Imogen sobbed.

"Help me," Malcolm begged Emily. "Please, sweetheart."

"Sweetheart?" Nick kicked Malcolm in the side. "Don't you dare talk to her. Don't even look at her, you two-timing lemon-faced adulterer."

“What?” Emily stilled.

“He’s a cheater.” Nick glared down at Malcolm, his face red as his breaths came out in stilted gasps. “A cheater cheater pumpkin eater.” He snapped his gaze to Imogen, giving her the same death stare as Malcolm. “Isn’t that right, pumpkin?”

Imogen blanched.

“He’s lying.” Malcolm was still staring at Emily. “He’s working with whoever is after Evan!” His crazed eyes flew to me. “He’s been lying to you about everything.”

“He’s lying! Ev, I swear—”

I crossed the room in four strides.

“Evan,” Nick said. His big blue eyes were wide and wet. A bruise on his cheekbone caught my attention and the surge of rage that hit me was so strong it stole my breath.

“Give me the knife.” I held out my hand, somehow managing to keep my voice steady.

He snapped it closed and put it in my palm.

“I swear I’m not working with any—”

Yanking him into my arms, I hugged him tight and pressed my nose into his messy hair. “I’m so sorry.”

He clung to me.

“Emily, sweetheart—” Malcolm started but was cut off by a loud slap.

“Whoa there, killer.”

I cracked one eye open in time to see Vlado scoop Emily up and drag her back from where Malcolm still lay on the floor, one hand on his cheek.

“Five minutes,” she snarled. “Give me five minutes with this waste of space.”

“He’s not worth it.” Vlado hugged Emily to his chest but kept his gun aimed at Malcolm.

“He’s lying—”

“Shut up!” Vlado and Emily both yelled at Malcolm.

“Evan?”

I looked back down into Nick’s tearstained face.

“I’m so sorry.” I brushed his hair back from his forehead, blocking out whatever was going on with Malcolm and the others.

“Why are you sorry?” He blinked up at me.

“Because I couldn’t protect you.”

He gave me an incredulous look, his earlier distress gone. “Really? Did you not see me just now? I don’t need someone to protect me. I did just fine on my own.”

“Yes, darling, you did.” I pressed a quick but desperate kiss to his lips. “You’re right. You don’t need my protection. I’m just sorry you got dragged into all this.”

“Is Emily okay?” he asked softly.

I glanced at my sister, who was still clinging to Vlado and glaring at Malcolm like her stare could turn him to stone. And hell, maybe it could.

“She’ll be fine.” I looked at Nick. “Him, I’m not so sure about.”

Nick gave a wobbly smile. “Can we get out of this room and away from cheater mccheaterface?”

I peered over at Vlado.

“Go. I’ll take care of things here.”

I tightened my arm around Nick’s shoulders. “Em?”

She shook her head, her eyes still ablaze with fury as she stared down Malcolm. “I’ll help him.”

Imogen’s sobs increased in volume.

“Can we gag her?” Emily asked Vlado, her voice and expression suddenly sweet as pie. “Pretty please?”

Satisfied she’d be okay, I told Nick, “Come on.”

Nick caught Vlado's eye, then looked down at Malcolm. "Bye Felicia."

Vlado chuckled.

Before I could ask, Nick slung his arm around my waist and let me lead him out of the office. "Are you mad at me?"

"Of course not. Why on earth would I be mad?"

"Because I beat up your dad's COO and now Vlado has to deal with it?"

"No, darling. I'm not mad. But there are a few things I need to tell you about Malcolm."

"What do you mean?" he asked as we walked.

"Malcolm isn't just a cheater. He's behind the threats on your life."

Nick skidded to a stop and pulled out of my grip. "What?! Oh hell no." He spun on his heel and stalked back toward the office.

I caught his arm and gently pulled him back. "It's over, Nicky."

"No it the fuck isn't. I'm gonna rip his balls off and turn them into Christmas ornaments. No one threatens my man."

The surge of both pride and overwhelming love that swept through me at Nick's declaration chased away the last of my rage. How the hell had I gotten so lucky to have not only found Nick, but to have earned his loyalty?

"I know, darling. I want to kill him for what he's done to you, to Emily. But he doesn't deserve a quick out. He's going to spend the rest of his life behind bars, and I have ways to make sure his time there is as unpleasant as possible."

"That's the scariest, and the sexiest thing anyone has ever said to me." Nick grinned impishly. "Competency is hot." His smile dipped. "You knew about the threats before the cheating?"

"We only just figured it out."

Hurt shrouded his eyes. “Like you and Vlado?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” He rubbed at his neck. “Well, that’s good. At least you solved the mystery. Like the Hardy Boys, only you’re not bio brothers. Or teenagers. And this wasn’t really a mystery. And—”

“I’m sorry we didn’t include you.” I sighed. “I messed up. I should have told you what we were doing.”

“What *were* you doing? How did you find out?”

“Can we walk and talk?”

He fell into step beside me.

“Vlado got a call from his team about ten minutes after we arrived. They found the printer the letters were being printed from, and traced them back to Malcolm.”

“They did?”

“Yes. We couldn’t be sure if it really was him, or if someone was trying to frame him, so we broke into his office and searched it.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me about this plan?”

“It wasn’t really a plan, more of a spur-of-the-moment decision.”

“I can accept that. And I guess I did kinda help. Sort of. I’m not happy that you used me to keep Emily distracted so you could snoop through her house, but body-slammng lemon face and watching him almost pee himself with fear was soooooo cathartic that I forgive you.”

“I should have told you, even just to keep you informed. I just... I was irrational. If I hadn’t needed evidence against him, I would have killed him just for being adjacent to the threats against you. Mastermind or no.”

“Look at you being all badass.” Nick smiled, some of his usual brightness back. “I’m guessing you found something while you were playing spy?”

“We did. Evidence that he’s behind the threats, and evidence of some disturbing things he’s been doing behind the scenes of my father’s company.”

“Disturbing like he’s a secret furry with a scat fetish, or disturbing like illegal?”

“Both. No furry or scat, but highly illegal and extremely unethical.”

“And you’re not telling me because you don’t think I can handle it, or because *you* can’t?”

“Because it makes me sick to think about. He’s involved with human organ trafficking.”

Nick stumbled. “Jesus H Christ. Actual organs? Like on the black market?”

I nodded.

“I knew there was something hinky about him. I *knew* it.” He rubbed his throat again.

I tugged him to a stop. “What’s wrong with your neck?”

“Nothing. I think it got a bit bruised when lemon face used my shirt like a leash and tried to choke me out.” He undid the top button of his shirt. The skin underneath was already a soft purple.

My vision went red.

“Ev!” Nick grabbed my arm and hauled me to a stop.

“I’m going to kill him,” I snarled.

“No, you’re not.” He shoved me back and put himself between me and the hallway we’d just walked down. “I’m fine. It’s just a few bruises.”

The shock of the last hour had worn off, and now all I could feel was pure, unadulterated rage at Malcolm for everything he’d put Nick, my sister, and me through.

“He hurt you.”

“I hurt him worse.”

“It doesn’t matter. He knows me. And he knows what happens when you fuck with what’s mine.”

“You saying I’m yours?” He quirked his eyebrow at me.

“Of course you are.”

“I am? Since when?”

“Since...” I paused, some of my haze clearing. “I forgot to tell you, didn’t I?”

He put his hands on his hips and gave me an unimpressed look. “Um, yeah. So, is there something you want to tell me?”

“You’re mine.”

“That’s a good start. What else?”

I pulled him toward me and held him close as our chests bumped. “I’m yours.”

“Better,” he said quietly. “What else?”

“I love you.”

His breath caught. “You do?”

“Yes. I love you, Nick.” I looked into his eyes so he could see how true the words were.

He swallowed thickly. “I love you too. But you really need to work on your timing.”

“I know.” Chuckling, I bent to give him a soft kiss. “I didn’t expect this. I thought I was done with love and relationships, but then you happened and now I can’t imagine spending a single day without you.”

“You’re saying all that sweet stuff again.”

“And I mean every word. I love you, Nick. I want to build a life with you.”

“Are you sure? It’s only been a few months. How do you know you won’t get sick of me? Maybe you should take that back until you’ve had to put up with me for longer.”

“Nick—”

“I can’t do it. I can’t love you and be with you and then lose you because I’m me. I won’t survive it—”

I cut him off with another tender kiss.

“I love you, Nicky. I don’t care if it’s been two months or two years or two lifetimes. I.” A kiss. “Love.” Another. “You.” A third.

“So, are we like, real boyfriends?” he asked tentatively when I pulled back, his cheeks ruddy and his lips already kiss-swollen.

“Yes.”

He beamed. “I didn’t lie to everyone!”

“I’m sorry?” I asked, trying to keep up.

“My friends. I told them you’re my boyfriend and now it’s true, so I didn’t lie to anyone. But now I have to tell Aiden that you’re not just my sugar daddy. Ugh. He’s gonna be all *I told you so* because he did and he’s never gonna let it go.”

Circling my arm around him again, I tugged him down the hallway.

“Ev?”

“Yes?”

“Can I sleep in your bed tonight?” he asked, peering up at me through his lashes.

“You’ll be sleeping in *our* bed every night from now on.”

“Our bed?”

“Yes.”

I’d never forgive myself for putting Nick in harm’s way, even if he had. And I’d never forget how proud I’d been when we’d burst into the office to find Nick standing over Malcolm and completely in control of the situation.

Nick was strong and capable and the most incredible person I’d ever known. I needed to make things right with him, and with everyone in my life.

“Nicky.”

He stopped and faced me.

“I’m going to tell my father the truth.”

“The whole truth?” he squeaked.

“No, not everything,” I amended.

“Why?”

“Because I’m done with the games and his micromanaging and control issues. He was so focused on me and my personal life and trying to orchestrate my future that he completely missed all the shit Malcolm was doing right under his nose. I’m with you because I love you, not because of some stupid inheritance. I refuse to taint our relationship with any more lies.”

“Taint.” He snickered.

I pinned him with a flat look, even as the corners of my mouth twitched into a smile.

“Sorry.” He batted his eyelashes at me, the picture of innocence. “But are you sure? This is a huge deal and you’ve just been through the ringer. Maybe now isn’t the time to be making that decision.”

“I’m sure.” I dragged him forward for another kiss, this one deep and filled with all the emotions and love I felt for him.

“Are you sure you’re sure?” he asked after we pulled apart. “We’re talking millions of dollars. You’ve been working toward this your entire life. This is your legacy.”

“No, it’s his. I’ve made my own legacy, and if he can’t accept that, he can find someone else to leave his life’s work to.”

“I don’t want you to do this because of me. I’m perfectly happy to go along with the plan. We can even break our fake engagement after everything is signed and—”

“No more faking anything. Not with you. When we announce our engagement, it will be after I’ve proposed properly and we’re ready for that next chapter in our lives.”

“*When* we announce it?”

“I’m in this for the long haul. I’m not saying it’ll happen anytime soon, neither of us is ready for that yet, but I know you’re the one I want to spend the rest of my life with. There’s no point pretending otherwise.”

“Ugh.” He punched me in the shoulder. “You can’t say all that nice stuff to me when we’re in your sister’s foyer and I can’t jump you.”

“How about you jump me when we get home?”

“Fuck that. I’m jumping you as soon as we’re in the car.” He grabbed my hand and towed me toward the front door. “Come on, old man. Get the lead out of your pants. I need kisses, cuddles, and a dick in my mouth. *Stat.*”

Laughing and feeling like the luckiest guy in the world, I followed Nick out of the house.

I’d meant every word I said to him. Nick was mine, and I didn’t give a fuck about my parents, or my father’s, plans for me.

When I hired Nick to pretend to be my boyfriend, I never could have imagined how much of an impact he’d have on not only my life, but on *me*.

He’d shown me it was okay to slow down, to focus on the little joys in life, to measure my happiness in smiles and laughs, and not in dollars or achievements.

Now he was mine, and I couldn’t wait to spend the rest of my life showing him just how loved he was.

EPILOGUE

Nick

One year later

A SHADOW FELL OVER ME, blocking the sun I'd been lazing under.

“Go away.”

“Is that any way to talk to the man you love?” Evan asked with a chuckle.

“It is when the man I love is blocking my sun.” I cracked one eye open and peered up at him. “Why are you in clothes? I thought I made it clear that this is a naked vacation.”

“You did. But I figured it would be best to not be nude when everyone showed up.”

“Everyone?” I sat up and pushed my sunglasses on top of my head. “Have you been out in the sun too long? It's just us here.”

“Is it?” He held out a towel.

“Um, yeah. Didn't you make a big deal about how this place is all about privacy and discretion?”

“I did, and it is.” He dropped the towel on my lap.

Evan and I had been at the resort for three days out of our ten-day vacation. Traveling with a rich boyfriend meant we didn't just get a room at a hotel, we had an entire suite of

rooms, two pools, an infinity pool, a private beach, and a staff of people to take care of our every whim or wish. All completely isolated from the other guests at the resort.

The last year had been a rollercoaster of events and massive changes for both of us.

Malcolm had been arrested and was currently awaiting trial for a litany of charges that would ensure he never saw the light of day again unless it was in a prison courtyard.

Once the truth about what he'd done came out, Grant terminated the stipulations in his retirement before Evan had a chance to confront him.

I kinda hated that he never got that big *fuck you* moment, but it was for the best. Grant was not only completely accepting of us, he'd also put real effort into rebuilding his relationships with both Evan and Emily.

It wasn't going to happen overnight, and there were years of trauma and neglect to work through, but he was trying.

After the incident with Malcolm, I spent the next few months splitting my time between Evan's place and my apartment. I had a warehouse of issues of my own to work through, and I spent months waiting for Evan to dump me or ghost me. Things hadn't been perfect, or even easy, those first few months, but we got through them together.

Once I officially moved in with him, Paige moved into the apartment with Aiden, and a few months later, they announced they were getting a puppy together, which for them was the same as putting a ring on it.

I'd recently cut my hours at Crimson down to one weekend a month so I could be more present for Evan now that both of his companies were flourishing. Because of this, he spent more time traveling, and I got to tag along and shop and eat to my heart's content while he was stuck in one boring meeting after another.

I loved dancing, and my friends had become my family. I knew I'd eventually quit, but it meant the world to me that Evan understood I wasn't ready yet.

“How the fuck do I sign up for this?” a familiar voice asked from behind me.

I jumped up from the lounge.

River, Zane, Gray, and Quinn were walking toward us.

“Eeek!” I hurdled over my lounge and launched myself into Gray’s arms. “Hi, bestie!”

He caught me with a laugh, rocking on his feet from the impact. “Um, Nick.”

“What?”

“I think Evan is plotting my death.”

“No he isn’t.” I pecked a kiss against his cheek and threw myself at Quinn. “Hi!”

He laughed and hugged me tight. “Your man is definitely plotting my death right now.”

“You’re silly.” I squeezed him, then slid down his tall body.

“One of these days we’re going to start taking it personally that you hug us last,” Zane said as I jumped into River’s waiting arms.

“Why?” I squeezed River extra tight and looked at Zane. “Don’t you save the best for last?”

“Darling.” Evan cleared his throat.

“One sec.” I grabbed Zane’s shirt and dragged him into a group hug with River. “You know I love you, you big goobers.” I pecked a kiss against each of their cheeks.

“Darling.” Evan’s tone was a little more forceful.

“Yes?” I twirled around, still hanging off the twins.

“Perhaps you could put something on next time you greet your friends?”

“Huh?” I stepped back from the hug.

“Your dick’s out,” Zane said in his usual monotone.

“It is?” I looked down. “Oopsie.”

“It’s not a big deal,” River said to Evan. “We’ve seen Nick’s ding-a-ling more times than we can count.”

“I don’t think that’s as helpful as you think it is,” Quinn said as Gray folded his lips into a tight line, like he was holding back a laugh.

“You’re lucky you’re hot,” I said to River, my voice heavy with affection.

He winked, still grinning.

Evan came up behind me and wrapped the towel around my waist. “I know your friends are used to seeing you nude, but I’m not used to seeing that, so perhaps you could cover up while I’m around?”

“I’ll try to remember.” I grinned at him. “But you know me, I’m all about having a free-range tallywhacker while on vacay.” I dropped a kiss to Evan’s lips as my friends snickered behind me. “I’m really happy, but I’m so confused. What’s going on?”

“I invited your friends to stay with us for the rest of our vacation.”

“For real?” I gaped.

“Yup.”

“We found this guy at the airport.” Gray pointed at the door to our villa, where Vlado and Emily were standing. “He was nice enough to give us a ride.”

“Eeek!” I sprinted across the deck and leapt at Vlado. “You’re here too!”

He laughed and let me koala hug him. Once I was on the ground again, I turned to Emily and caught her as she gave me the same treatment I’d given her man.

Vlado and Emily had gotten together shortly after the incident with Malcolm had gone down, and I was beyond happy for them. They were the cutest couple, and they absolutely adored each other.

“Is this the new piece?” I asked, catching Emily’s wrist so I could look at her inner forearm.

One thing no one had seen coming was the physical transformation in Emily now that she was completely free of all the bullshit expectations that had been put on her.

Now she fully embraced her inner goth girl and was in the process of getting all the tattoos she’d put off because of the constant pressure she’d been under to fit in with all the other socialites.

“It is.” She peered around me and waved River, who’d drawn the artwork for her, over.

He bounded over, a big smile on his face.

I glanced over at Evan as River, Vlado, and Emily talked tattoos. He stood with Gray and Quinn, laughing and chatting about something while Zane had claimed my lounge and was sipping from the bottle of water I’d stashed beside it.

Evan caught my eye and gave me a little wink.

My heart swelled with love.

This was the life I’d always imagined for myself. Not the fancy vacation or the exotic locale, but being surrounded by my chosen family and having the opportunity to share new experiences with them.

Evan wasn’t just the love of my life, he was my soulmate. We fit together in every way possible, but still had enough differences to keep life interesting. He balanced out my chaotic energy and accepted all of me without reservation.

He was my person, and I was so damn lucky he chose to love me too.

Interested in reading more about the men of Crimson Club?

What happens when Gray is reunited with the stepbrother he hates and has to rely on him for help after being injured? Find out in [Stepbrother Dearest](#)

What happens when Zane and the new coworker he doesn't like are dared to play a game of gay chicken that neither one of them wants to end, even if they don't understand why? Find out in [Best Served Cold](#)

What happens when Kai is paired up for a presentation with a guy who hates him, who he's also been unknowingly sexting with on a hook up app? You can read their story in [Never Have I Ever: Submitted to my Enemy](#).

BOOKS BY WILLOW DIXON

Crimson Club

A steamy series following a group of dancers at an all-male strip club. The books are connected but can be read as standalones. The series is in the same universe as Never Have I Ever and Step Bully.

Stepbrother Dearest – an enemies-with-benefits-to-lovers romance between stepbrothers who discover that sometimes the person you hate is the only one who can give you what you need. Expect super hot encounters, tons of dirty talk, even more banter, and reluctant feels as these two enemies discover the truth about themselves, and each other. Get your copy [HERE](#)

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Never Have I Ever

A sweet and steamy series following a group of college roommates living in shared housing. The books are connected but can be read as standalones. The series is in the same universe as Step Bully. The series is complete.

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Submitted to my Enemy- An enemies-to-lovers, hurt/comfort romance between classmates who discover they have more in common than they think. Expect lots of super steamy, kinky conversations, and even hotter encounters when this brat and bad boy finally realize who they've been talking with on an anonymous hookup app. Get your copy [HERE](#).

Had a Bromance with a Teammate – A bi-awakening, best-friends-to-lovers romance between teammates who discover that a bromance between besties is exactly what they need. Expect lots of super hot, slightly kinky encounters when these two jocks finally realize they're a perfect match in every way. Get your copy [HERE](#).

Wanted my Brother's Rival – An opposites attract, virgin MC, hurt/comfort, enemies-to-lovers romance between a rich kid who seemingly has it all, and an awkward genius who's never felt like he fits in. Expect lots of banter and steamy first times as these former friends try, and fail, to stay away from each other. Get your copy [HERE](#)

Standalone

Step Bully - An opposites attract, new adult enemies with benefits to lovers stepbrother romance featuring two guys who learn that the line between hate and

love is a thin one. Expect super hot, slightly kinky encounters that evolve into a total schmoop fest when these two finally get their act together. Get your copy [HERE](#).

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A sweet and steamy series following four veterans and best friends as they adjust to life as civilians and find love along the way. The books are connected but can be read as standalones. The series is complete.

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ABOUT ME

About Me

What can I say about myself? It's kind of like being the new kid in school and being asked to tell everyone a bit about yourself. Anyone else forget everything they've ever liked, thought of, and even their name in those moments?

A few facts about me; I'm Canadian, and I love books! I've been writing my own stories since I was eight and wrote my first novel at sixteen. I'm the first to admit those attempts weren't my best work, but they started me on a journey of creating stories that has led me to fulfilling my dream of becoming an author, and I'm so happy to be able to share my stories with people today.

I currently live on Canada's east coast with my kiddo and my cats.

If you're interested in connecting with me, you can do so at the following links.

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