



My  
Best Friends  
To-Do List

Make him want more. ✓

LYNN DARE

My  
Best Friend's  
To-Do List

A DENVER BROTHERS NOVEL

My Best Friend's To-Do List

Copyright ©2023 Lynn Dare

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author/publisher.

# CONTENTS

## About the Book

1. Kinsey
2. Sebastian
3. Kinsey
4. Sebastian
5. Kinsey
6. Sebastian
7. Kinsey
8. Sebastian
9. Kinsey
10. Sebastian
11. Kinsey
12. Sebastian
13. Kinsey
14. Sebastian
15. Kinsey
16. Sebastian
17. Kinsey
18. Sebastian
19. Kinsey
20. Sebastian
21. Kinsey
22. Sebastian
23. Kinsey
24. Sebastian
25. Kinsey
26. Sebastian
27. Kinsey
28. Sebastian
29. Kinsey
30. Sebastian
31. Kinsey
32. Sebastian

33. [Kinsey](#)

34. [Sebastian](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[My Hot Ex's Santa List](#)

[My Hot Ex's Santa List](#)

[About the Author](#)

*For the readers whose to-do lists aren't nearly as fun as this  
one.*

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Number 2: Shave everywhere.

Everywhere, everywhere? Well sh\*\*. Guess I'm doing this.

Hello, it's me, the perpetually single and focused woman trying to kick ass at my job and not get lost in a guy.

Any guy.

Much to the dismay of my two best friends. That's where the second item comes in. We wrote a list. I blame the desert that is my sex life and the drink-wine-straight-from-the-bottle kind of night. It's a to-do list of sorts.

Or, you know, a get laid list. It's a bit of a joke while I prepare for a blind date, my first date in ages. My friends think I need practice before trying to find someone I can see myself with long-term.

But when the only guy who was never supposed to see those dirty things we wrote picks it up, it doesn't seem so funny anymore.

Sebastian has been my best friend since we were kids. Infuriatingly hot in that nerdy techy kind of way, he's never wanted me. Never looked at me with such need.

So, why does his offer of help feel like so much more than charity?

---

## KINSEY

Alarms were the invention of a sadistic person, probably a man, meant to torture the human population into an early grave.

I groaned, rolling over on my Tempur-Pedic mattress—a gift from my aunt after I wouldn't let her finance a better apartment in the city. This place might be the size of a shoe box, but at least I was comfortable. Damn comfortable.

Except that stupid alarm wouldn't stop ringing.

Opening my eyes, it took me a moment to realize it was still dark outside the tiny window I hadn't yet hung curtains over. Affording an apartment in downtown Tampa was new for me, and I hadn't quite gotten the homemaker gene from my absent mother.

“Who sets an alarm for this early?” It had to be some kind of joke. My first thought was that one of the girls, my best friends and business partners, was playing a prank. But they knew how pissy I was without sleep. There was only one person who'd have set the alarm on my phone to go off before the sun even bothered to get out of bed.

“I hate him.” No one heard me because there was no one here. I was almost thirty and preferred to spend my free time on my own. Was it sad? Some people thought so. Did I care? Absolutely not.

Sebastian, however, was a dead man.

I slapped around on the table beside my bed, trying to swipe the screen of my phone to turn the alarm off. Finally,



blissful silence surrounded me. No more blaring Britney Spears—sue me, I was a fan—and I could just sink back into sleep until I had to wake up at six in the morning to run a company.

How ridiculous was that? I, Kinsey Hart, was the marketing manager for a brand-new app that I created with my two best friends. Some rich suckers even financed us. I kind of felt bad for them. While I believed in our app, I still had no idea if we could pull this off.

“Kins?” My cousin’s voice came from the direction of the phone.

Well, shit. That hadn’t been an alarm at all. Vera had called me. In the middle of the night. What kind of hell was this?

“Go away.” I grappled for my phone and pulled it onto the bed beside my head.

Vera sighed, sounding so much like her mother that it made me smile into my pillow. “We need you.”

“Kinsey isn’t home right now. She went into dreamland and will be back in a few hours.”

“There’s a problem.”

Vera had a lot of problems, ones I sympathized with and even felt myself, but I needed to be more awake than this. “Can we talk about it when we get to work?”

“There’s a bug in the app.”

That got my attention, snapping me fully awake. “Have you talked to Eliana?” She was our tech genius friend, the one who’d taken our idea and created something we were all proud of.

“She’s already here. We’re at the office. I promise, we held off calling you until we absolutely had to, but this is an emergency.”

I sat up, pushing a hand through my hair. “Tell me.”

“The help button isn’t working.” A sick feeling curled in my gut. The help button was my biggest contribution, other

than finding the financial backing. Our app was made for single women to connect in the city. They could make new friends, travel companions, or just get out of trouble.

Built into the app was a button a user could press when they were out with a man—or woman—and found themselves in a sticky situation. The location service built in would then notify every user within the vicinity in the hopes that one of them could find the user in danger.

It was what set the app apart from all other social media. We didn't only want to make money or to connect the world. *Only Friends* was designed to make a positive difference in our users' lives.

We couldn't have it fail.

"I'll be there as fast as I can." I hung up and slid out of bed. My cat followed me, meowing to be fed. He was a fat thing with long, beautiful, white hair and big, blue eyes. But all he cared about was his food.

"Tough luck, Chewy." I named him after Chewbacca, but most people thought the name was because he tended to gnaw on my hand. I hid my nerd side well. "It's way too early for breakfast."

I brushed my teeth quickly, panic growing in me at the thought of women hoping for safety and finding none. The button got at least a few clicks every night, many more on the weekends.

In my head, I counted the days. I'd been too busy to keep track. "Sunday night," I mumbled around my toothbrush. This was bad.

Once I was done, I threw my hair into a ponytail and grabbed my running shoes. It was about two miles to the office, an easy jog that was much better than driving when I was this sleepy. I locked the door behind me and took off through the building and out onto the street.

Tampa wasn't like New York City or Chicago. We didn't generally stay up all night here. So early in the morning, there

weren't many cars on the roads that would be packed in only a few hours.

I wasn't awake yet enough to enjoy the run, but still, I didn't slow. My entire body ached from a lack of stretching, a lack of a warm-up before the mad dash across town.

When I finally reached our building, I stopped and looked up. There were thirteen floors, and the tenth floor was ours. It was lit up like a Christmas tree while the rest of the building was dark.

A security guard let me in, and I headed up. When I got there, I realized how long they had avoided calling me. Our entire tech team was here, hunched over computers, some looking past Eliana's shoulder to watch how fast she moved. We were constantly amazed by it.

We had an open-concept office. No cubicles, only areas for employees to rest with their laptops. Tables, couches, even beanbag chairs. Calming pinks and teals accented the gray walls. It had been designed to perfection.

Vera rushed toward me. "Thank the great dragon lord you're here." She yanked me into a hug.

"Back off," Eliana growled at the coders who crowded around her. "Get to work."

We'd learned long ago not to interfere with her when she had her nose in code. It never ended well.

"Who all did you call in?" I asked, scanning the faces.

"Just tech. Your team can handle the messaging in the morning once it's fixed. The fallout will be on you. I'll instruct my team to phrase it to customers calling in however you tell me to."

"This is a mess, isn't it?"

Vera sighed, the normally energetic woman looking worn. "I don't know how bad it'll be." Her eyes scanned me from head to toe, and one eyebrow arched. "But not bad enough that you couldn't get dressed."

I looked down at my Star Wars pajama pants. I'd left so quickly I hadn't realized I didn't have real clothes on. My face heated, and I stepped back, wishing I could run home. My work wardrobe was something any woman would envy. It came from having a fashion designer for an aunt. I never went anywhere without carefully picking out what I needed to wear to get the results I wanted. From meetings to the occasional bad date to lunch with my aunt.

Vera laughed. "You'll be fine. You're not the only person here in her pajamas."

I followed her gaze to a couch where a small frame slept, her little body curled in on herself. Her pajamas weren't visible with the blanket held to her chin, but Melody looked so vulnerable when she slept. "You're babysitting for the night?"

Vera shrugged. "It's not the kid's fault that her parents are garbage. My sister..." She sighed. Vera's sister and my cousin was not a person to trust. She took what she wanted, regardless of whom she hurt. Like her own sister's husband. Abby stole her sister's husband, had a child with him, and never looked back.

Vera only got to see her niece when her and Abby's mother intervened.

"Dammit." Eliana slammed her hands down on the keyboard. "It just keeps getting worse."

Vera and I approached her carefully. She was our best friend, but we knew her famous temper well. "Do you think you can fix it?" I asked. "We need it back up and running."

"Don't you think I know that?" Eliana sent me a glare. "Every time someone clicks that button, the entire app crashes for them. It's a big fucking problem." She raised her voice. "And my team is a bunch of morons."

I lunged forward and clapped a hand over her mouth before she made our entire tech department quit during our first big crisis. "Eliana, your team is amazing. They've been here all night." I looked at their tired faces, the way their

shoulders drooped in defeat. Eliana's anxiety wasn't helping anything.

She got this way whenever there was something she couldn't do. Growing up, she'd always been the smartest in the room, the best at everything. So, she never learned to lose. When she came close, she got anxious and angry.

"Why don't you all take a coffee break?" I sent the team a smile, receiving a few in return. I fully believed we had the best staff in all of tech. Maybe it was that we were in Florida, so we attracted anyone wanting to make a lifestyle change, but they were good.

I sat in the empty chair next to Eliana. As the marketing coordinator, I was good at dealing with people, handling them as my aunt called it. But I'd known Eliana since we were ten years old. I knew everything going on inside that incredible brain of hers.

"Hey, look at me." I turned her chin, so she had no choice but to meet my gaze.

"Kinsey, I have too much work to do. Go... do your little marketing thing."

My brow scrunched. "Eliana Atwood, I know you're not trying to condescend to me right now. I was trying to be nice, but if you need me to be an ass, I can. The truth of the matter is, you can't fix this, can you?"

Looking stricken, she lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "Our team is good, but I need someone better, someone who doesn't know our app so well they can't spot an issue. I'm sitting here staring at the same code I've stared at for the last few years of building this thing, and I'm not sure I'm even seeing it." She leaned her head against her keyboard. "Why do I suck?"

I rolled my eyes. It was such an Eliana thing to say. While I was the calm, logical good girl, and Vera was our wild child, Eliana was pure self-effacing drama.

"Who are you going to call?" Vera asked, reading my mind like she always did.

The first smile I'd seen on Eliana's lips since I walked in appeared small but there. "Ghostbusters?"

I shoved her shoulder and stood. "How about a code buster?"

"Yes, please." The way Vera said it gave me the creeps. She was always crushing on the tech support we called in to give us a hand sometimes. Nerds were in, she'd told us.

But the one person I knew would come in the middle of the night wasn't someone I wanted her crushing on. He was my only friend outside this office, the only person who understood certain parts of me.

I walked into the conference room and dialed his number. He picked up on the third ring, his voice groggy from sleep. "I don't know who this is, but it's way too early."

I rolled my eyes before remembering he couldn't see me. "There's caller ID for a reason, asshole."

He perked up a bit. "Kinsey, if you're the one waking me up, who's the asshole here?"

"You're right." I let out a dramatic sigh. "I can just call someone else. Sorry I woke—"

"No, don't you dare." I could picture him rubbing his face and sitting up, the blanket pooling in his lap. His chest was probably on full display. "I'm awake. What do you need?"

"You," I blurted. "I need you." It wasn't until I explained the situation and got off the phone that I realized how ridiculous that sounded.

---

## SEBASTIAN

There weren't many people I'd get out of bed for in the middle of the night. Was it even the middle of the night? I glanced over at the clock and saw it was one thirty in the morning. It was very early on a Monday morning. My ass curled up in bed at ten last night to watch TV and passed out. There was currently an infomercial on the screen.

What the hell was that?

I cocked my head to the side. It was fake grass you put between pavers. Why not just plant seeds and grow it? Itty bitty strips of grass. I wondered if you stepped on it if it would pierce your skin. Probably not because that would be a lawsuit waiting to happen, but was plastic grass soft on your feet like the real stuff? Who bought this shit?

The inner thoughts of a man when he was awoken out of a dead sleep. Thankfully, no one could hear them.

Standing, I shuffled into the bathroom. Kinsey was my best friend and would only ask me to come if it was an emergency. Still, the call of nature had to be answered first. With that done, I brushed my teeth and looked in the mirror. My brown hair was wavy and down to my ears. Probably should be cut. Luckily, sleeping on it like I was didn't mess it up. I used it to my advantage. That messy look was still in, I thought. I carded my fingers through it and deemed it good enough. Kinsey didn't see me as anyone but a friend. There was no need to impress her.

I glanced down and realized I couldn't wear boxer briefs and nothing else to her office. From my dresser, I pulled out a pair of black basketball shorts and a gray T-shirt. I wasn't dressing up for the office at this hour of night. Or morning. Whatever.

It wasn't long before I was parking my car, waving to Greg, the security guard tonight, and taking the elevator up to Kinsey's office. When the elevator opened, I pulled up short. Behind the glass doors with *Only Friends* on them was a team of people. I had expected Kinsey and Eliana since she was their tech person. But this was more than I bargained for. Good thing I cleaned up... slightly.

No one lifted their heads when I walked in. "What did you break?" I said loudly. Everyone stopped and stared at me, so I smiled and waved. I was wide awake now.

Kinsey rushed over. Her pajamas were so cute, I wanted to hug her and feel her warmth. Nope. I needed to put a stop to that. Kinsey didn't know how long I'd had a crush on her. *Crush*. It sounded so childish, but I didn't know what else to call it.

"The help button isn't working."

My eyebrows drew together. "The one that someone hits if they need assistance in a bad situation?"

She nodded and filled me in on what was going on.

"So, you called me because I'm your nerdy friend who works on computers."

Kinsey smiled. She could light up the room with it. And it was the very reason I was here at this God-awful hour. "Come on. Sit over there with Eliana and make me proud."

"I don't know why I like you," I grumbled and did just as she told me to.

Eliana peered up at me. She was stressed. It was apparent by the lines near her eyes.

"Can I take a look?" I asked. She nodded.



My official job title was IT Systems Engineer, but I did a lot of different things. I worked for the company that owned the building. They specialized in security, but not the kind where there were bodyguards and they went out to protect people. This was the kind where they protected companies digitally and kept things secure for their clients. It was what drew me to them when I saw the job opening.

We spent two hours going through the code. Eventually, I found it. Eliana was the one that built the app, but she'd been staring at the code for so long, she missed it. Plus, she was close to the project. It was hers. When anyone worked that close to a project, something that stood out to another person could go unseen by the owner of it.

I stood and stretched, exhaustion settling back in.

"You don't have to stay," Eliana told me as she finished the fix.

"No, it's fine. Not that you'll need me, but just in case, I'll be over here." I thumbed toward a room. She wouldn't need me. Eliana was crazy smart. One of the smartest people I'd ever met.

Around the front of her desk was a room they used for brainstorming. It was fun and nothing I'd ever seen in an office before they put this place together the way they wanted it. There were beanbags instead of chairs and a low table instead of a big one found in most conference rooms. I pushed two of the bags together and dropped down onto my side. I'd rest my eyes for a bit. It wasn't like I had to be anywhere yet. By eight, yes, but not now.

My eyes drooped, and I let the sounds from the office lull me to sleep.

---

SOMETHING WOKE ME. I wasn't sure what, but when I opened my eyes and saw someone staring at me up close, I reeled back with a yelp.

The little girl grinned.

“Melody, thanks for giving me a heart attack.” I reached up and rubbed my chest. My heart was about to pound through it.

She didn’t say anything. She never really did, and that was okay. She’d been through a lot having the mother she did. Hell, she was still going through it, but she always had a smile when she saw me.

I quickly swiped at the corner of my mouth, feeling wetness there. Lovely. I was drooling. At least Melody saw me and not anyone else.

She chuckled, watching me.

“You thought staring at me like something out of a horror movie while I slept was the way to wake me up?”

She nodded and grinned. I was right.

“I like your pjs.”

She stood and looked down at her pants. There were rainbows all over them on a pink background. A blush colored her cheeks. “Thanks.”

With a quick brush of my fingers through my hair, I stood and walked toward the front of the office with Melody beside me. Since neither I nor my brothers had kids, she was the closest I’d come to being around children. If only I could be so lucky to have a kid as good as her one day.

Kinsey and the others were waiting when we emerged. Melody went to Vera, and Kinsey walked beside me as we headed toward the elevator. She handed me my phone and keys.

“Thanks.” I grinned.

“You’d be lost without me. Admit it.”

“Oh, I won’t even try to dispute that.”

We piled into the elevator and headed downstairs. The sun hadn’t risen yet. We looked like we were extras in a scene from *The Walking Dead*. Greg waved at us as we passed by.

Kinsey and I stopped when we got to my car. Kinsey would have probably come here on foot since she didn't live far. I was ten minutes away by car. My apartment building wasn't anything fancy, but I could afford it, and that was what mattered.

Looking down at my phone, I saw the time. "We have some time before we have to be back here for work. Got any exciting plans?" I asked her.

"Sleep, then more sleep."

"That sounds good."

"You weren't with anyone when I called you earlier, were you?"

It wasn't often I went out to the clubs and brought someone home, but it wasn't unheard of either. I wasn't a woman magnet like my model brother Shea, but I also didn't repel them like my brother Waylen. All he had to do was look at a woman, and she went in the other direction. He did that with Shea and me too. We learned early on that when Waylen gave you the look, you steered clear.

"Nah," I told her. "I stayed in last night. Real exciting."

She glanced toward the street, and it made me want to kick my own ass for not thinking of this a minute ago. I blamed my sleep-deprived brain.

"Want a ride?" I asked. "Unless you want to show off your Millennium Falcon pants to everyone on the walk home."

She put her hand on her hip and, outside of what she was wearing, it was the first time I got a look at her since I showed up before.

Kinsey was tall with light-blond hair that she liked to pull up out of her face a lot. Her clothes were always high-end names I didn't know anything about. She didn't care for makeup, which she didn't need, anyway. It was how I was used to seeing her at work. We often got together while we worked. We'd meet for lunch, coffee, whatever.

But today, with her hand on her hip, accentuating the curve of her waist in her pajamas that were a little too big, this was who she was to me. Not the put-together woman who was ready to take on the world. This Kinsey was my favorite. The true side of her which was only on display now because she no doubt rushed over here.

“I’ll have you know I’ve gotten many compliments on this outfit.”

“Uh-huh. From who?”

She glanced around. “Okay, no one. The only people walking around this time of night are shady or drunk.”

I unlocked my Hyundai Sonata. I liked to joke and say it got me all my dates. But it didn’t. Ever. No one was impressed by my practical sedan. “Get in,” I told her.

We both got inside, and I turned the car on, making sure the air conditioning was blowing through the vents. It might have been dark still, but it was Florida, after all.

“Your place or mine?” I asked. Kinsey and I were close. We’d hung out together a lot. Spent time at each other’s apartments.

“Yours. I just want to pass out for a bit.”

The drive was short, unlike how it would be come rush-hour traffic in the morning. I would be tired. There was no doubt about it. At least my sorry ass did stay home last night and got some sleep before I was awoken.

I wasn’t upset by the phone call from Kinsey. I’d always be there to help her and her friends. Especially when it was something as big as that button not working. It kept people safe.

Glancing over when we stopped at the sign near my apartment, I saw Kinsey had her head resting back in the seat. Her eyes were closed, her face relaxed. The tension I saw on her earlier was now gone.

No matter what time, no matter where we were, I’d always be there for her, and that wasn’t just my crush talking. Kinsey

was a great person. A person anyone would be fortunate enough to call their friend, and I got her as my confidant. My best friend. The person I trusted most. Well, except with the secret of how I felt about her. That was remaining behind my lips, never to be spoken.

---

## KINSEY

I didn't even question it when Sebastian gestured for me to get into his car. Being together had always been natural. We never had to guess what the other was thinking or ask each other stupid questions. There was an ease between us that had been there since the day we met.

It wasn't a far drive to Sebastian's apartment. We spent a lot of time lounging on his ridiculously comfortable couch and watching dumb reality shows. Well, I thought they were dumb. Sebastian secretly loved them. Not like he'd admit it. I just knew. The way I knew he gave the security guard at our office building a bonus every single month since he found out about the man's ailing wife and her medical bills. The way I knew he loved his brothers even when he hated them and would forgive his mother's meddling, no matter what she did.

I followed him up to his apartment and promptly kicked off my shoes. Sebastian went straight for the kitchen and the coffee maker we used way too often. "You want caffeine when we still have a few hours to sleep before work?" I called.

I could hear his laughter in the kitchen. "Kinsey Hart, always the practical one." People had been calling me that my entire life. I was reliable, honest, and stable. Always on time. I didn't eat after seven, never missed a run, and woke promptly at six every morning. Was I that boring?

Sebastian returned a few minutes later with two mugs.

"I said I didn't—"

He cut me off. "It's decaf green tea."

“You hate green tea.” My eyes narrowed as I took the mug, inhaling the calming scent.

He sipped his coffee, avoiding my gaze.

Setting my cup on the coffee table, I stepped around him. “I need to use the bathroom.”

“All yours.” He threw himself onto the couch, yelping when hot coffee sloshed onto his hand.

Every. Time. What a dork. I hid my smile as I stepped into the small bathroom. Once I was done and washing my hands, I lifted my eyes to the mirror, taking in my messy hair that was pulled into a low ponytail that looked like I’d been fussing with it. My pajamas were wrinkled and, frankly, embarrassing. Red tinged my cheeks as I realized how everyone in the office saw me.

There was no way I could ever leave this bathroom. I lived here now.

My breathing came in ragged gasps as I clutched the sink and came up with a plan. If I called my aunt and told her I had a fashion emergency, she’d come, no questions asked. Bad fashion was always an emergency, she’d say. Vera couldn’t be more different from her mom. I could picture my cousin laughing at me right now.

The problem? My phone currently sat out next to the tea that was probably growing cold. What a tragedy.

A knock sounded softly throughout the room. “Kins?” I could picture Sebastian leaning against the wall by the door, one eyebrow raised as an amused smile appeared on his beautiful face. “You okay in there?”

“Stop laughing at me.”

“Why would I laugh at you? You’ve only taken more time in there than a normal human being. Unless you’re—”

“I’m not!” Shit, he thought I was... gross. “Go away.”

“Now I need to know what’s going on. Is it the caffeine? You think I spiked your drink with it or something so I don’t have to hear you snore?”

I slammed the door open. “I do not snore.”

His smile widened. “How would you know?”

He didn’t mean that as it sounded. I knew that. Sebastian didn’t know my true lack of experience, that I hadn’t exactly shared a bed with a man in years, but it still stung.

I shoved him back. “Stop looking at me.”

“Why? You’re adorable.” He pulled the drawstring on my pajama bottoms.

Pushing past him, I ripped a beige knit blanket off the back of the couch, threw myself onto the cushions, and ducked underneath. Why did I have to be such a weirdo?

Sebastian didn’t laugh, didn’t make a sound until, “Uh, Kins? I’m a little confused right now.”

“I need my phone.” My voice was muffled by the blanket.

“Not until you tell me why you’re acting like... well, like you.”

Pulling the edge of the blanket down, I peeked up at him. “You’re mean.”

“And you’re strange.”

I sighed. “I’m in my pajamas.”

His brow creased. “You wore them to the office, and now you don’t want me to see them?”

I dipped my head under the blanket again. “I can’t believe I wore them there.” I couldn’t ever show my face again. “Care to buy my shares in *Only Friends*? There’s no way I’m going to work.”

“Good idea.” He jumped onto the end of the couch, jostling me. “Let’s play hooky.”

I kicked his thigh. “Stop, this isn’t funny.”

He took a sip of his coffee, making a sound in the back of his throat as he tried to stifle a smile.

“It’s not! Hand me my phone.” He ignored me. “Bastian! Please.”



“On one condition.” He set his coffee down.

“I’m not kissing you.”

A laugh burst out of him. “That was a good night.” Sebastian and I met during the summer before high school began. It was at a party, and both of us had been feeling a little lost. There was an upperclassman who wouldn’t leave me alone, and Sebastian said he’d help me for a kiss. It worked. The kiss made the other boy back off. We rarely brought it up after that.

“What do you want?”

He leaned in, his face hovering near mine. His fingers entwined in the blanket. Before I could stop him, he yanked. “To see your pjs again.”

“Hey!” I lunged for the blanket, but he held onto it and reached for my phone, holding it above my head. “You’re dead to me.”

I climbed into his lap, digging my knee into his thigh. He winced in pain, but I kept reaching for the phone.

Using his shoulders for leverage, I pushed up and managed to snatch it away from him, falling back onto the couch. My chest heaved as I tried to calm my racing heart. The too-small pajama top had ridden up, revealing part of my stomach. Catching Sebastian’s heated stare, I yanked it down and looked away.

We couldn’t... he couldn’t... Those kinds of looks weren’t supposed to happen with us.

Trying to distract myself, I called my aunt. She answered on the second ring. “Kinsey, honey. I got your message. I’m on my way now with an outfit from my new business line. We can’t have you going out in public looking like you’re ready for bed. I’ll be at Sebastian’s place in ten.”

When I hung up, I chanced a glance at my friend. The heat had receded, leaving behind the man I knew. “I may have texted her while you were in the bathroom freaking out.”

He'd known exactly what I'd do. I wasn't sure if that was eerie or endearing.

Aunt Delia arrived just when she promised. If I got my punctuality from anyone, it was her. She smiled, showing no sign that we must have woken her up at this hour. Her raven dress was immaculate, her makeup perfect. "Hi, sweetie." She kissed me once on each cheek before doing the same to Sebastian and shoving a garment bag and shoes at his chest.

"Thanks so much for the save, Aunt D."

She smiled warmly. "Anything for my girls. How is V? In his message, Sebastian mentioned a work issue."

"She has Mel." Abby had a habit of doing a drop and dash. Vera might have hated her sister, but she loved her niece. "I'm hoping they're at home sleeping."

Aunt Delia pressed her lips together. "Maybe I'll go grab Melody so V can sleep a bit longer in the morning. Tata, honey. Sebastian." She nodded to us both and left.

No one in this life had done more for me than Aunt Delia. She was the only parental figure I acknowledged. Some saw her as stuck-up or frivolous, but they didn't take the time to look beyond the clothes, beyond the speech patterns.

Sebastian closed the door behind her. I thought about getting dressed right then, shedding the embarrassment of the pajamas, but weariness wound through me, and all I could do was drop onto the couch and lean against the cushioned arm.

Sebastian draped the garment bag over the back of a chair before joining me.

My eyes drooped, the world fading from view. The last thing I noticed was a blanket draping over me, wrapping me in warmth.

---

THE ROOM WAS dark except for the TV screen. *Love is Blind* played quietly with couples talking to one another

through walls. It was a hilarious show, also quite ridiculous. Sure, they couldn't see each other before deciding to be with each other, but it wasn't like they had anyone on it that wasn't conventionally attractive.

My feet rested on Sebastian's lap, and I peeked at him over the edge of the blanket. The drapes blocked out the sunlight trying to creep in through the window in the kitchen. It must be morning.

Sebastian's lips twitched into a smile, and I couldn't help biting back one of my own. He was probably the smartest guy I knew, and it showed in everything he did. But here, he could relax and be just like everyone else. This was my favorite Sebastian.

"Morning." He squeezed my ankle without looking at me.

"How'd you know I was awake?"

"Your breathing changed." The corner of his mouth hitched up. "That sounded creepy, didn't it?"

"Just a bit." I sat up. "Well, stop listening to my breathing and go make more coffee. I need it now."

"Yes, ma'am." He shoved my feet off him so he could stand.

"And don't look at me as I walk to the bathroom to change."

"Whatever you say, Kins." He shook his head with a laugh as he entered the kitchen.

I stood, snatched the garment bag off the chair, and hurried to the bathroom. Aunt D had brought me a gorgeous green dress that was made of thick linen, stiffened with starch. It cinched at the waist and rose to clasp around the back of my neck, leaving my arms bare. Business casual wasn't so casual for her, I guessed.

But she knew me well. I'd worn enough of her designs that she'd started making ones that specifically fit my type of frame. I had a long body and too many curves. Despite my daily runs, my time on the basketball courts, I'd never been

able to rid myself of certain problem areas. Not to mention the boobs. If it wasn't for the amazing sports bra line I'd found, they'd probably make me fall over every time I so much as jogged around the park.

*Thanks, Mom, for that unwelcome inheritance.*

I borrowed Sebastian's hairbrush and toothpaste, making myself presentable. Makeup wasn't my thing, but this morning, I could use some concealer for the bags under my eyes.

When I exited the bathroom, Sebastian was already dressed for work in his suit. He looked good, all lithe limbs and firm jaw. The dress shirt and slacks looked like they had been made for him. He handed me a travel mug of coffee and a small bag that held a bagel with strawberry cream cheese. My favorite.

"Thanks." It wasn't enough for how much he took care of me, but it was all I had.

His lips spread into a mischievous grin, and he leaned down, his breath brushing against my ear. "I miss the pajamas."

I was wrong before. There was more I could do to thank him. Not punching him sounded like a pretty damn good start.

---

## SEBASTIAN

My phone rang as we were nearing the door to leave my apartment. Looking down at the screen, I saw it was my mom calling. I unlocked the phone and handed it to Kinsey. I was too tired to deal with my mom. I was sure she was up bright and early and was well rested. She'd be chipper on the phone.

“Mrs. Denver, good morning.” Kinsey smiled even though my mom couldn't see her. She adored Kinsey and had been not so subtly dropping hints for years that Kinsey and I should be together. Of course, she said that to me, not to my best friend.

Kinsey walked a few steps away, and they got to talking about what a gorgeous week it was supposed to be. I leaned against my front door and settled in. I wasn't sure how long they'd be on the phone. Luckily, I had plenty of time to get to work.

My brothers and I didn't get along, and it was my mom's mission to get us to go to dinner together once a week. Only, we didn't all ever show. It would only be one or two of us. Never three. Because three would guarantee none of us spoke.

It wasn't that one of us pissed off another. We just didn't mesh well. We had nothing in common except that we had the same parents. I wasn't sure if it was the age gap between us or what. Waylen was the oldest at thirty-five. I was seven years younger. Shea was born three years after me. He and I were closer in age, but that didn't seem to matter.

Our parents loved us. We had a great family if we weren't all in the same room. Growing up, we got along better, but as we aged, hit teenage years, everything went to shit and hadn't been the same since. We went our separate ways, and that was that.

But my mom and dad didn't believe in boundaries. They wanted to be involved in their sons' lives. It wasn't done out of this need to control us, but out of love. That was always apparent, so I never got mad at their meddling. Even when my mom tried to get me to confess my feelings for Kinsey. Those words never left my lips in front of my mom. She knew. She had to, but me admitting them would change things. It would amp up her need to get us together, and I didn't want that. Besides, Kinsey would never bite that hook.

Kinsey walked back over and handed me the phone. The screen was dark. I'd tuned out their conversation. Kinsey must have talked enough for both of us. "She wants you over there for dinner tonight."

"Of course she does."

"Shea is out of town, but Waylen will be there."

I groaned. Great. I'd get the evil glare across the table all night. Oh well, at least I'd get a good meal out of it.

Packing those thoughts away, we headed out into the too-bright sun and into the office. Kinsey walked me to my desk. As one of the owners of the app, no one cared if she didn't show up exactly on time. Plus, they'd all been there through the night.

My chair made a groaning noise when I dropped onto it. Lovely. The chair felt like I did. I docked my laptop and logged in while Kinsey sipped her coffee.

I glanced over at her and smiled. "I'm going to see the Millennium Falcon every time I look at you today."

"Shut up," she hissed under her breath. The rest of the people on my team were in as well. Our cubicles had those bullshit half walls where everyone could hear and see everyone else. Privacy? No, we didn't need that. We loved to

hear Anthony's arguments with his wife about which preschool their kid should go to. It made all of our days.

So, there was no doubt that what I said about Kinsey's pants didn't go unheard.

I shrugged. "It's the truth."

Kinsey leaned forward after she took another sip. She was a hair's breadth away from chastising me when she must have swallowed wrong and started coughing. A tiny bit of coffee came from her lips and landed on mine. I dramatically wiped it away. She put her mug down to get a breath in.

I stood and rubbed her back. She was fine. Not choking. If she were, no way would I make a joke. We liked to screw with each other, but never when something serious was going on.

Bending at the waist, I whispered, "That's what you get for scolding me."

She lifted her head so fast she almost clocked me with it. Luckily, I moved out of the way quickly. She took her mug in hand. "I hate you." Then she walked toward the elevator. I doubted she wanted to walk down two floors in a dress and heels.

Her hand propped on her hip as she waited for the elevator. When she turned, I was leaning against the nearby wall, grinning. She flipped me off and smirked when the doors closed. I couldn't help but laugh.

Back at my desk, I did my level best to stay awake. While Kinsey napped on my couch earlier, I was wide awake. It was only fitting that now I wanted to sleep and couldn't.

"Bastian," my boss, Lee, said as he came over.

"I was not falling asleep," I told him and smiled, not even fooling myself. We had a good relationship and had even hung out outside of work with some of the other guys on the team. Not often, but enough that we got along well.

He chuckled. "I didn't say you were. I heard you helped out the business on ten last night."

“I did. You know Kinsey and I are close. Anything I can do to help, I will.”

“And that’s one of the reasons why I love having you on my team.” He leaned his arms on the cubicle wall and bent closer. “Listen, I need your support for something. I’ll email it over, but it would be great if we had you behind the decision as well as some of the others.”

“I’ll take a look.”

“Thanks.” He smiled and left to talk to someone else.

Lee was a good guy, but there was a reason I was in this job and not management. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to have my own team; I hated office politics. I didn’t give a damn about whose ass I needed to kiss. I wasn’t doing it. I wanted my work to show how valuable I was. Not how close I was to this person or the other.

The email came through not long after and when I saw the app Lee wanted me to get behind, I wanted to delete the email like I’d never seen it. Lee’s brother-in-law worked for a big company that provided a chat service, among other things. A lot of companies used their product, but ours didn’t. We had something in place that had been there for a while, and it was solid. Not many glitches, hardly any downtime. And there was Lee, pushing to get his brother-in-law a new account.

Now I had to find a diplomatic way to say no but not come off like an asshole and ruin my relationship with my boss over it. I wondered how many others got this email and what their thoughts were. We’d have a meeting to discuss it, that would be certain. But Lee would want our opinions ahead of time.

So, I refilled my coffee mug and sat to draft a response to his email. One that laid out the pros and cons for each service and why I wanted to stay where we were. I was all for new technology. Hell, I loved it. Give me the newest phone, newest laptop, updated software any time. But I wouldn’t support a decision I didn’t feel was right for the company.

Just as I hit send on the email, after reading it over no less than three times, something on my desk vibrated. I looked



over, lifted a piece of paper, and there was a phone. Kinsey's, to be precise. I'd recognize the phone case anywhere with the Iron Throne on the back from *Game of Thrones*.

Flipping it over, it vibrated again. I couldn't see what the text said since it would only reveal that when it was unlocked, but I did see who it was from.

Greyson Amore.

Who the hell was that and what kind of name was Amore? It sounded made up.

Two more texts came through from him. By that point, I had to put the phone down, or else I would crack the screen with how tightly I was holding it.

I had no claim over Kinsey. It didn't matter what I thought about anything to do with her love life. I didn't know whether this guy was someone she was seeing or just a friend. Maybe someone they wanted to hire? Yet my mind immediately latched on and refused to let go that he was someone she was sleeping with.

As far as I knew, Kinsey wasn't dating anyone. Not that we always told each other whom we took to bed, but we did share stories if something funny happened.

Every time I found someone who I thought could go further than a few dates, something would happen, and I'd end it. Perfect didn't exist. I understood that. But maybe perfect for me did. Maybe. I hoped.

Shit. I scrubbed my hands over my face and promptly ignored Kinsey's phone, which was face down now. That Iron Throne staring at me. I'd never seen the show, but Kinsey loved stuff like that. I'd take the drama on *The Bachelorette* any day over a fantasy show.

I needed to get a life, and fast.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out and was reminded about the dinner tonight. My mom knew Kinsey would have told me, but this way I couldn't use it as an excuse and say she didn't relay the message.

Mom: I'm making chicken cordon bleu. We eat at six.

Me: We ride at dawn!

Mom: Funny.

Me: What? It's fitting seeing as how I'll need armor to fend off the daggers Way will throw at me with his eyes.

Mom: Except dinner is tonight, not tomorrow.

Me: \*eye roll emoji\* Stop being so literal.

Mom: Just make sure you're here.

Me: Can't wait.

Mom: Leave that sarcasm at home.

Me: Never.

My mom cherished the dinners as a family. They weren't set on certain days of the week. Most were impromptu, and if at least one of us didn't attend, we'd all get blasted in a group chat. That was one of the few things my brothers and I agreed on. We loved our parents and when we were able to, we went to dinner even if we couldn't stand each other.

Another text vibrated Kinsey's phone. I needed to bring it back to her. It would have to wait until my lunch break, though. If I got in the elevator right now, it would be to go to the lobby and outside to leave. Unless she realized where she left it and came up to get it first.

Between the early morning wake-up, lack of sleep, email from Lee, and dinner with my parents tonight, this day was on a downhill trajectory. And I couldn't forget the text from Greyson. I wouldn't ask Kinsey who he was. The curiosity wouldn't kill this cat. It would only make me irritable and jealous, which was a great combination.

I was such a catch. It was amazing I was still single. Too bad I wasn't on a dating app. My profile would get all the hits.

*Sebastian, 28*

*Tampa, FL*

*6'1"*

*Works in IT. Likes to swim. No pets, though not opposed to them. No allergies.*

*Loves reality TV but can't stand his brothers. Parents are very intrusive, yet their hearts are in the right places. Lives in his own place, not with before-mentioned parents. Likes to dance in clubs, not the tango.*

*Never been married. Never had a long-term relationship. And never had the balls to tell his best friend how he felt about her.*

---

## KINSEY

“What’s the damage?” I walked up to where Nevaeh Chambers worked from her spot practically inside the beanbag chair. She liked sinking into it every day until she became a part of it.

She lifted pretty brown eyes to me. “Boss?” There was the usual distracted look about her. I’d seen it every time I interrupted her while she worked.

I scrubbed a hand across my tired eyes. At least the rest of my marketing team arrived refreshed this morning. The tech team looked as dead on their feet as I felt. “Has the news gotten out yet?”

“Oh, that. Yeah, we’re screwed.” She pushed thick dark hair behind her ears.

“Elaborate.”

“Well, I’ve spent the morning scouring social media. We already know there were twenty-three attempts to use the help feature last night when it didn’t work. Some of those stories have gotten out. HuffPost already has a pretty damning article out, and it’s been shared four hundred and twenty-six—make that twenty-eight—times.”

“Shit.” I perched on the arm of the couch beside her chair. Nevaeh was our social media manager. She had a team of two people working under her, but I counted on her more than anyone else. Unlike the rest of my crew, whose jobs revolved around crafting our image, Nevaeh could tell me what our

image actually was from the consumer side. “What are people saying?”

“You don’t want to know.” She gave me a tense smile. “Trust me.”

“That bad?”

She nodded. “It’ll take a lot to regain the trust of our users.”

I stood. “Thanks, Nev.” Vera caught my eye across the room, and I nodded, gesturing to the meeting room so we could speak privately. We’d have asked Eliana to join us, but she looked lost in a phone conversation.

My cousin closed the door behind us and turned to me. “We’ve lost ten percent of our subscriber base since last night.”

“It could be worse.” I tried to be the optimistic one of the three of us. We’d gone through a lot to get this app up and running, and now was not the time to believe all was lost.

“Sure, we could have lost them all.”

I dropped into a rolling chair, kicking my feet against the ground to spin once before facing her again. As a privately held company, we were lucky we didn’t have stocks that could fall, but she’d been no doubt fielding calls from our investors all morning. “Is anyone pulling out?”

“Not yet. We’ve managed to convince them to give us time.”

“That’s good.” Vera was the only one of the three of us who was good with people. She could convince them to do anything. It was why our customer service team was so well trained. “So, what do we do next?”

“Make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

“Think you can do that?” I put a finger to the tip of my nose.

Vera kicked my chair, sending me rolling across the room. “You have to ask?”

I shrugged. “Guess not.”

“It’s fixed now, and hopefully, it’s a permanent solution. Thanks to Sebastian. I don’t know what we’d have done if you hadn’t called him.”

“Eliana would have figured it out.”

“Seriously, that man deserves a cookie.”

“I’ll be sure to give him one.”

Vera bit back a smile.

“Stop.”

She shook her head. “Saucy.”

“I meant an actual cookie, you perv.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Hello!” a familiar voice called over the chatter of the open office.

Vera glanced at the door.

My lips twitched into a smile. “Is that...”

“My mother.” Vera loved her mom, but she didn’t understand her in the way I did. Aunt Delia and I were almost the same people at times.

When we walked out of the meeting room, we found Aunt D holding court with a number of the marketing staff. They hung on her every word. I didn’t blame them. The woman was perfectly put together from the cut of her skirt to the shade of her lipstick. She looked like she’d stepped right out of a magazine. Add in a musical voice and the enthusiasm with which she did everything, and it was hard not to be enthralled.

“There are my girls.” She hugged us both.

“Hi, Aunt D.”

“What are you doing here?” Vera asked.

Aunt Delia frowned. “Can’t I come to take my girls to lunch?” I loved the impromptu visits, but Vera tended to need

a warning. “V, honey.” She looked her daughter up and down. “That outfit isn’t one of mine, is it?”

Vera sighed. “You’re not the only clothing designer in the world, you know.”

I’d heard this conversation many times before. Vera preferred more low-key fashion choices. If it was up to her, I was pretty sure she’d show up to work in yoga pants and long T-shirts. Instead, she wore off-the-rack black pants and basic shirts.

“Does Eliana want to join us for lunch?”

I looked back at her as she talked into her headset, hands waving in the air. “I think she’s busy. I’ll meet you guys in the parking lot. I have to stop by Sebastian’s office.”

I hadn’t realized I left my phone until I needed it about an hour into my morning. Yet, I hadn’t had a break in the chaos after last night.

When I got to Sebastian’s cubicle, he was nowhere in sight. I looked over the dividing wall to the man who sat next to him. “Have you seen Sebastian?”

“Probably getting his hundredth cup of coffee.”

Yikes. Sebastian loved his coffee, but he normally limited how much he drank. Unless he was agitated. Then he consumed more and more of it until the caffeine made him jittery as well as mad. It was never a good combination.

I caught sight of my phone on the desk and slipped it into my purse. Then, I grabbed a pen and sticky note to write him a message. I was about to leave it when I felt a presence behind me.

“Loom much?” I turned to face him. Sebastian looked like a storm cloud hung over his head, his expression an angry mask. Something was wrong. “You were just going to leave without saying hi?”

I held up the note. “It says hi. And thanks for babysitting my phone.”

Sebastian moved past me to slide into his chair. “Whatever,” he grumbled.

My brow furrowed. “Everything okay?”

“Fine.”

“Well, if you’re sure. Vera and Aunt D are waiting for me. See you later?”

“Sure.”

Sometimes I wondered if I’d ever understand that man.

I checked my phone as I rode the elevator toward the main lobby. There were a few texts from Greyson, asking if we wanted to get on his schedule. He was our lawyer, a damn good one at that. Meeting with him after what happened last night was probably a good idea. I fired off a text as the doors opened.

Aunt Delia and Vera were arguing about something, but they stopped when I reached them. I was the peacemaker in the family. They’d been through too much. With Abby barely speaking to any of us, all we had left was each other, and I reminded them of that frequently.

We headed for our favorite lunch spot, Cicio Cali’s. It had a beautiful patio set amidst a garden. We loved to sit out there and drink sangria—though not on workdays—and enjoy the freshest food. It was a calming place, yet I couldn’t stop thinking about Sebastian and whatever was bothering him. His mood had seemed to transfer onto me, latching onto the exhaustion I already felt. But I’d always been good at hiding how I truly felt, what I thought. The image anyone saw of me was that of a happy, stress-free, strong woman.

It didn’t take long for the questions I always dreaded from Aunt Delia to come up. “So, Kinsey...” I knew that “so.” I braced for what came next. “Have you thought any more about what I offered you a couple of weeks ago?”

I had thought about it. A lot. Aunt Delia didn’t understand that I was perfectly happy being single. Not every woman needed a significant other to be fulfilled. Plus, I wouldn’t even know how to act with a man. “I don’t need you to set me up.”



“Mom.” Vera sighed. “Drop it.”

“Yeah, why don’t you ever try your matchmaking skills on Vera?”

Vera glared at me like I’d betrayed her. She went out and met people, but ever since her divorce, she hadn’t let anyone get close enough to care about her.

“Because V has more important things to focus on right now.” Like a sister with a tendency to just dump her daughter in Vera’s lap. Her own grief at the broken relationship with Abby. Aunt Delia hid her sadness behind her work. Vera pretended it didn’t exist.

Aunt Delia pushed past the sad moment to continue hounding me. “I have the perfect guy, Kinsey. I’d date him myself if I were twenty years younger.”

“Don’t be weird, Mom.” Vera rolled her eyes.

I couldn’t help laughing. “What makes him perfect for me?”

“For starters, he’s absolutely beautiful.”

“And?” I needed more than looks. If I were to give up my beloved singlehood, I needed someone who understood me, wanted to know every part of me. He had to be kind, funny.

“He’s a model.”

“No, absolutely not.” I knew the world those men lived in. They were surrounded by incredible women, money, and drugs. It wasn’t something I wanted any part in.

“This one is different. I swear.”

“I don’t care. The answer is no.”

“Why?”

“What?”

The waitress appeared and took our order before leaving. It gave me a moment to think.

“Why are you scared?” Aunt Delia knew me too well.

I was terrified. It had been so long since I put myself out there. My last boyfriend called me neurotic when he ended our relationship, and that word stuck with me. “I just... dating... I’m not good at it.”

Both my aunt and cousin gave me sympathetic looks. I’d grown up around them. They knew my history, knew every one of my insecurities.

Vera reached across the table to grab my hand. “Any guy would be lucky to have you.”

Aunt Delia pursed her lips. “When was the last time you had sex?”

I’d just taken a sip of water, and it came spurting out of my mouth as I coughed, trying not to choke. My eyes darted around the patio, looking for anyone who might have heard us. “Excuse me?”

Vera laughed and clapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. Blame the exhaustion. But after last night, I needed this entertainment.”

“It’s important to have regular sexual partners.”

“This isn’t happening.” I hid my face in my hands.

Vera coughed. “Mom, please stop talking.”

“I mean it, girls.” She looked at both of us. “Even if this blind date doesn’t turn into anything serious, it could be a regular bit of fun. It’s healthy to keep an active sex life. Kinsey, it’s been a while, hasn’t it?”

She wouldn’t let up unless I told her. “Eight years,” I wheezed. My college boyfriend was the last man I slept with. And only once. My lack of experience was something I’d always been embarrassed about at twenty-eight years old, but it was more than that. I couldn’t handle people touching me. I let Aunt Delia hug me and I was always comfortable around Sebastian, but that was about it.

And forget about letting anyone see me without clothes on.

I didn’t know whether it was my anxiety or something else, but the thought of having someone that close, let alone

someone I barely knew, sent a chill down my spine.

Both women stared at me, their jaws hanging open.

The waitress returned and set our plates in front of us before scurrying away from the tension.

“Eight years,” Vera breathed.

Aunt Delia’s face morphed from shock to determination.  
“Well, it seems like something has to change.”

---

## SEBASTIAN

Swimming late at night at the gym was one of my favorite things even if I didn't get to do it often. It was quiet, not many people around. Sure, there were a few staff. There was a lifeguard on duty as long as the pool was open. Midnight they left, and this section of the gym closed. Liabilities and all that.

It was Wednesday and had been a hell of a long week, even though I was only halfway through it. Kinsey and I hadn't spoken much because I was being an idiot and still irritated over the texts I saw on her phone. Mature, I wasn't. Plus, she had dealt with the fallout of the help button not working. Since Kinsey was in charge of marketing, I was sure she had her hands full. Which also made me feel shitty since I wasn't being a great friend and asking what I could help with. Not that I knew anything about marketing, but still. I was too caught up in my head. I needed to check in with her and see how she was.

I had just rested my arms on the side of the pool when the door to the room opened on the far side. For a second, I thought the lights were playing tricks on me, but nope. That was my younger brother Shea walking toward me with a pair of Speedos on and every cut muscle of his on display. It wasn't often I ran into him here, especially at this time of night.

He set his towel to the side and then stopped when he saw me watching him. "Seb," he greeted.

"Shea." I turned and went back under the water to start another lap. It was easier than actually having a conversation with him.

I didn't hate my brothers with the heat of a thousand suns or anything, but we sure as hell weren't about to get matching tattoos to solidify our bond. Not that Shea would ever get a tattoo. His agent would flip their shit if he did that.

As I came up for air and swam to the opposite side of the pool, I realized that Shea might not have it as easy and glamorous as I imagined. Not that I'd know, since we hardly spoke. To have an agent always up his ass. To have to eat only so much. Work out often. Constantly look his best.

Yeah, model life definitely wasn't for me.

Back on the other side of the pool, I emerged and saw Shea in the water but not swimming. Was he waiting to talk to me?

"How are you?" he asked when I glanced his way. I guess we were going through the formalities of pretending to give a shit.

"I'm okay."

He nodded.

I sighed... internally because if I did it aloud, then it would show how weird this relationship was, and it was better to pretend we were fine. "When did you get back?" Our mom told us at Monday night's dinner that Shea was in Italy for a photoshoot. That was why he didn't join us.

I'd never left Florida, yet my brother had a passport stamped full of the places he'd been, never mind all the states he'd traveled to. The thing with Shea and me, I always felt inadequate when I was around him. Like no matter what I did, I couldn't compare to him.

All three of us brothers shared a lot of the same features: chestnut hair, hazel eyes, over six feet tall. We were all fit, though Waylen was the most muscular. He was broader too. I was the leanest, then Shea, and Waylen was the biggest. He'd been that way growing up too. Always the strongest out of us.

But I kept in shape. I swam often, worked out in the gym. I had muscles, lean as they were. They just weren't as defined as Shea's. I also didn't get a spray tan and show off my body in front of a camera, but whatever. I didn't even know if he got

a spray tan or if his skin was naturally bronzed like a Greek god from the places he'd been.

"Yesterday," Shea said, pulling me back to our conversation. "Mom made me come to dinner tonight. Said I needed some home cooking since I'd been gone for two weeks."

"Sounds about right. Was Way there?"

He shook his head. "She said he had a rough day of work and couldn't come." He smirked. "Mom wasn't happy since you didn't answer her when she called."

"No, she can't put that on me. She dragged my ass over there on Monday for dinner. I did my weekly duty."

"So did Way apparently, but you know she likes at least two of us there."

"Which means we're destined for Sunday night dinner."

Shea nodded.

That meant fancy dinner. One we had to look nice to go to. When our mom felt like we were drifting apart, which my brothers and I had years ago, she would tell us we had to be there for Sunday dinner. All of us. And there was no getting out of it.

"She brought up her party," Shea said.

"Oh, shit." I'd forgotten what month we were in. My days blended. "That's next month."

"Yup. And she started in on me about my costume and making sure I don't have travel booked for that weekend."

Our mom loved her holidays, but her favorite was Halloween. She would start decorating the moment October first got here. Some people went over and above with Christmas decorations. Did up their whole yard to the point they could probably see the lights from space. Our mom went that crazy for Halloween. Trick or treat was always a big thing too. She turned the front yard into a spooky maze where kids got candy at the end. But nothing rivaled the Halloween party. And she never had it on the same night as trick or treat.

It wasn't that we didn't enjoy the party. Hell, I had a lot of fun at it. It was the stress of finding the perfect costume. Guess I'd better get a jump on that.

"You don't have an idea, do you?" Shea asked with a small quirk to his lips.

My spine straightened. "I do."

"You can't lie worth a damn. You just went ramrod straight like someone shoved a stick up your ass."

My face heated. And I splashed him. Yup, real mature.

Shea laughed and splashed me back. It was so weird to hear but at the same time made me smile in return. God, when did life get so serious?

Then the moment was gone. Shea must have realized he let his inner child out and put his mask of indifference on. I sighed internally... again. My brother, ever the professional, even when no one was around to see it. I wondered if he relaxed. If he had an off switch and could just be himself. Because while I might not be close with him, I knew this fake shit wasn't him. He'd let us see bits and pieces of him at dinner or holidays.

"Ten minutes!" the lifeguard on duty called over to us. I hadn't realized it was getting close to midnight.

"I'm going to do some laps," Shea said and took off, not waiting for me to reply.

Oh, well. Better make good use of the ten minutes.

I did my laps and found Shea in the locker room. We didn't talk as we showered nowhere near each other because no. He was my brother. We didn't speak as we got dressed and put our things into our bags. And we didn't do more than give each other a head nod as we reached our cars to leave.

My brother and I were night and day. Me in my Hyundai and him in his Mercedes. I left the gym in a pair of basketball shorts, a tank top, and sneakers that had seen better days, while he wore a pair of chino shorts, a fitted T-shirt, and

loafers. It made me wonder what he wore when he was in his condo sitting on the couch, flipping through Netflix.

I saw more of him on social media than I did in person. Shea had accounts on every major site. He was always posed. Always looking the part. There were also the contracts he had with various labels to promote their brands. I wasn't sure how he did it. Better him than me.

When I finally got back to my apartment and crawled into bed, my muscles were tired, my body exhausted, but my mind wouldn't shut off. Been like this all week. That was why I went to the gym so late. It wasn't my usual time to go during the work week, but I'd been having trouble sleeping. I thought if I strained my body, maybe I could pass out.

Nope.

I was wide awake, and now it was after midnight, and I had to be up at seven. Fantastic.

For a while, I lay in bed and thought about the different costumes I could buy to wear to the party. I was serious when I said I had to start thinking about it. Costumes were a big deal. My parents even had a best costume contest. I'd never won. Way did one year without even trying. Shea did twice.

The judges weren't my parents. Every party, when a guest came inside the house, they had to write their name down on a slip of paper, fold it, and put it in a bowl. My mom would pick four names to be the judges. That also disqualified those people from being in the contest. Everyone loved it, and it meant the judges were always impartial. There was also the rule that they couldn't vote for their spouse, date, whatever.

*Date.*

Shit.

I needed one of those. If the three of us didn't show with dates, my mom would have something to say. Intrusive, remember? She wanted her boys happy and in love. Like we were trying to live out a fairy tale. Granted, my parents' story could have been born in the pages of a book.



They met in a grocery store as they were both reaching for the same cucumber. Their eyes met, and the rest was history. Love at first sight did exist. At least to them.

I still needed a date. I wasn't seeing anyone, and I couldn't bring just anybody to the party. An unsuspecting new person wouldn't know how to deal with my mom and the questions that would surely come. But did I want someone I hardly knew by my side?

No.

There was only one person I could imagine being there with me.

Kinsey.

My best friend and partner in crime. Except for the past few days because I was acting like a jealous asshole. I needed to get over myself. I also needed to figure out a way to convince Kinsey to go to the party with me.

Not that she hadn't gone in the past. She'd been a few times before. This was peak Elizabeth Denver though. My mom was in her element on Halloween. Which would mean Kinsey would have to be ready for the barrage of life questions.

How's the business going? Are you dating anyone? Why are you here with Sebastian? He couldn't find someone to come with him? Where are you going after the party? What are your plans for the next fifty years? Do they include my son? Do you want children? How does your 401(k) look? Are your investments diversified?

No, she wouldn't be nearly that invasive, but she wouldn't leave Kinsey be either. I had to find a way to convince her to go with me.

I closed my eyes and rolled to my other side. Sleep? Who needed it? Certainly not me.

---

## KINSEY

“I could fall asleep right here.” I lounged on Vera’s couch and hugged a pillow to my chest.

“Don’t you dare.” Vera walked into the living room, somehow carrying three glasses of wine. “We’re having a girls’ night, remember?”

Eliana looked as tired as I felt as she nestled into the overstuffed chair we always fought over. This time, she’d won. “It’s been a long week, V. Give us a break.”

“No freaking way.” She held out a glass to me, and I stared at the beautiful crimson life fluid. If I started drinking, it wouldn’t end with just one. I wasn’t much of a drinker, but the fruity wines Vera bought were my weakness. I didn’t even know what they were called.

Vera passed off the other two glasses to Eliana before picking up her phone and scowling down at a text. It was most likely from Abby. She was the only one who could bring out such a look in my happy cousin. Vera stormed off, pressing the phone to her ear.

Eliana and I shared a look, waiting until she was out of sight to speak. I took a long drink of the wine before pulling it back to stare into the glass, trying to figure out what it tasted like.

“It’s a blend.” Eliana rolled her eyes. “Probably merlot with something else.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Vera is predictable. We can guess what wines she’ll buy just like we know she’ll eventually forgive Abby for stealing her husband.”

She was right. Vera won everyone over and never held a grudge. With her bubbly, outgoing personality, she didn’t always fit with me and Eliana. I was more reserved, more awkward. And Eliana was intimidating with her attitude, dark eyes, and strong frame. She wasn’t tall and probably didn’t have an ounce of fat on her, but the girl had muscles. Men didn’t want a girl who could do more push-ups than them while also running circles around their intelligence with her brilliance.

Vera returned a moment later, took her glass from Eliana, and chugged it.

“I needed that.” She walked to the kitchen and came back with two full bottles, topping her glass off before collapsing onto the couch beside me. “Now, everyone drink. We all need to wake up because falling asleep before nine is not how one does girls’ night, not unless they’re boring, which we are decidedly not.”

“I think we’re kind of boring.” I hid my smile by taking a sip.

Eliana nodded. “Oh, we definitely are.”

“What else do you call three single women in their prime who do nothing but work?”

“We do stuff!” Vera argued. “Look, we’re stuffing right now. Both of you drink, because you’re talking nonsense.” She paused to take a long drink. “And as for the single thing, that’s by choice. We run an app for single women, for Christ’s sake. Besides, men are awful.”

Eliana and I shared a look. It wasn’t that Vera was wrong, but we all knew I was different from them. I didn’t want to be single forever. I’d always loved love. Romance books, rom-coms, and stories of couples beating the odds. Yet, something always held me back. I knew what it was, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t hard to admit.

*Me.* I held myself back.

As the silence stretched between us, Vera stared at me, her eyes narrowed in thought. That was never a good thing. “Cousin mine...”

I finished my glass and reached for the bottle. “What?”

“Eliana and I have been wanting to ask you...”

I glared at my friend. She usually stayed away from Vera’s interference. Eliana only shrugged, letting Vera continue.

“Have you thought any more about Mom’s offer?”

Forget the glass. I set it on the coffee table and drank right from the bottle. The truth was, I’d done little but think about the offer. Aunt Delia just wanted me to be happy, but I knew the kind of man she’d set me up with, and I wasn’t ready for that. I’d make a fool of myself.

I hadn’t realized how long I’d been drinking until I realized both women were staring at me.

Eliana cleared her throat. “Um, you may want to take a breath, Kins.”

My head buzzed, and it felt damn good as my thoughts relaxed, the anxiety floating into the ether. I hugged the bottle to my chest and leaned back into the cushions. “I’m scared,” I whispered before I realized what I was saying.

Despite how close we were, I didn’t always tell them everything. Not like they did. I was a bit more closed off. The only person who got all of me was Sebastian, the man whom I hadn’t spoken to all week despite my efforts to reach him.

At the thought of Sebastian, the corners of my lips twitched up.

Eliana moved to the other side of me on the couch so they could box me in. Neither of them tried to take the wine. They were good friends like that.

“Honey.” Vera pulled her leg up onto the couch and turned to face me. “Why would you be scared? You’re perfect.”

“I asked Aunt D to give me a month before the date, not like that’ll make it easier.”

“Is it the virgin thing?” Eliana asked.

Vera reached across me to swat her. “I didn’t say she was a virgin, just practically one.”

“Gee, thanks.” I took another long drink of the wine. “But you’re right. I feel like one. It’s been so long, I’m not sure I even know what to do anymore.”

Eliana snorted. “Everyone knows what to do. It’s like ingrained in us. The moment you start, your body just knows. Maybe from another life or something.”

Vera rolled her eyes. “That was a weird thing to say.”

“Well, it was better than telling her she’s perfect. Are you trying to date her?”

“Maybe I am.”

Eliana cracked a smile. “When someone is insecure, they don’t want to hear their insecurities are invalid, which is what you’re telling her by saying there’s nothing wrong with her. Of course, there’s stuff wrong. She’s our sweet, virginal Kinsey who can hardly talk to a man she hasn’t known most of her life.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but Vera chimed in before I could, “You’re right. That’s the first thing we need to work on. Kinsey needs to learn how to flirt.”

“Yes!” Eliana pumped a fist in the air. “You get to teach her that. You’re like the queen of flirting. I don’t think you even know how to speak regularly anymore.”

Vera wasn’t offended by that. Instead, she looked proud. “How else will I get a man to change the water jug on the dispenser?”

“We don’t have a water dispenser,” I said, my eyes bouncing from one to the other. Sometimes they talked too fast for me to keep up.

“That was the first misogynistic thing I could think of. In reality, if we had one, I’d make Eliana change it.”

They continued talking between them, and I kept drinking. Soon, my body felt like jelly soaking into the couch. I couldn’t move, but I didn’t want to. Giving up control felt nice for once. Their voices swam, and I stopped paying attention until I heard Vera say, “She’ll need to shave. Everywhere.”

I sat up so quickly, I was surprised I didn’t drop the bottle. That may have been because Eliana swiped it from me. “I shave!”

Vera suppressed a smile. “You’re telling me you haven’t had sex since college, and you’ve kept it all... cleaned up down there?”

“We are not having this conversation.” Eliana groaned, draining the remaining wine from the bottle. I wanted to tell her to stop because it was mine, but I caught sight of the other one and relaxed.

“Shaving your little friend is not something we can teach you though. Oh!” She jumped up, her scheming face on. It was the same look her mother got. “I need a notebook.” Tripping over the ottoman, she stumbled toward the kitchen and rummaged around in a drawer, procuring a small notebook and a purple pen.

She wrote in it as she walked toward us and fell over the ottoman again, this time landing on her butt. “I’m okay.”

I reached down to pick up the notebook. She’d written a title at the top of the page it was open to.

### *The To-Do List*

There were two items written on it already.

1. *Learn to flirt.*

2. *Shave everywhere.*

“W-what are we doing?” My voice slurred, yet for once I wasn’t worried about one of Vera’s harebrained ideas. It was probably the wine speaking.

“You, my bestest cousin, need a crash course in owning the sexy woman you are. We’re sexual beings. It’s completely natural, but you need to be comfortable. So, before you can take dating seriously, we need to get you prepared. Well, not us, because incest and all that.” She winked. “But some of this you can do on your own. Others... you’ll just need to find a willing friend.” Some kind of knowledge sparked in her eyes, but I was too drunk to consider what it could be.

Eliana stood, swaying on her feet, and grabbed the notebook, handing it back to Vera and sitting next to her where she still was on the floor. “She has to get comfortable being naked. There’s nothing sexier than that.” Eliana would know. In college, she once streaked across campus on a dare during a rainstorm.

“Absolutely.” Vera grinned. “That can be four. Before naked comes kissing.”

I slid off the couch to look over Vera’s shoulder at the list. “You guys want to kiss me?”

They looked at each other and burst out laughing. “Absolutely not.” Vera shook her head. “You could use my mom’s blind date as the experiment for all of this or some random guy you pick up. It doesn’t matter. This will just prepare you for when you are ready for something more serious. You won’t second-guess yourself the entire time.”

Vera kept writing.

When she got to seven, I blushed.

*7. Perfect your O face.*

“How...” I stammered. “Guys, come on. This list is ridiculous.”

Eliana bit back a smile. “That one makes a lot of sense because it’s one you can do yourself.”

“And have fun doing it,” Vera added.

“I’ll need all the wine tonight. Just pour it down my throat.” I took a long drink, wondering how I ended up with

such mean friends. Each item on the list was more ridiculous than the one before it.

They reached nine and stopped. I couldn't look at them anymore, yet I couldn't stop thinking my friends were right. I had a lot to learn. Who would want a woman who didn't know what to do after that first kiss? Men were simple creatures. It wasn't hard to guess how to keep them happy.

It was only hard for me to imagine being the one who could.

"We need one more." Vera tapped the pen against her lips.

There was one thing I'd always failed to master that I wanted to, one talent that escaped me, and I'd never understood.

"I know what it is." I guessed I was doing this. Taking a part in their schemes always ended poorly. We had fun until something bad happened. But this time, I couldn't resist them. Tomorrow, once the wine left my system, and the day looked different under a hot Florida sun, maybe I'd regret every word I said... or wrote.

I took the notebook and the pen, writing one final item.

*10. Learn how to make him want more.*



---

## SEBASTIAN

Friday. One of the best words in the English language. It was usually a day I loved, but today, I was feeling off because I hadn't spoken to Kinsey recently. That was about to change. I missed her.

I grabbed her favorite coffee on the way in.

Taking the elevator to her floor first, I found her office slowly coming to life as people arrived for the day. I had a good thirty minutes before I needed to be at my desk, which gave me time to sit with Kinsey and talk. Try to make things normal again. If she wanted to, that was. I wasn't sure.

It was my fault of course. Those texts on her phone threw me for a loop, and jealousy became my best friend, shoving Kinsey to spot number two on my friend roster. But I'd had a lot of time to think about it, and there was no reason for me to get jealous. No logical one at least. Kinsey didn't know about my pathetic crush, so she wouldn't understand why seeing another guy text her would irritate me. Not that she knew why I was being weird. I wasn't about to tell her my secret.

People looked up at me as I passed them, and I told them good morning. When I got to Kinsey's space, I found her at her desk, eyes on the screen, busy working already. Her hair was swept up into a ponytail, and she had on some designer outfit I had no clue about.

"Good morning," I said, causing her to look up at me and smile. So maybe all this silence between us was in my head.

"Hey, how are you?"

“Good. Brought you coffee.” I handed her the cup. “Sorry for being quiet this week.” I really couldn’t apologize for being a jealous asshole. What I wanted to do was ask who the hell this Greyson Amore was, but I kept my mouth shut about that. This was me moving on. Away from the guy texting Kinsey.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not.” I shook my head and propped my ass on her desk. “I don’t like it when I don’t talk to you. Makes me feel... not right.” Not whole was a better term.

“I didn’t like it either.”

“So.” I leaned my arm on her monitor, which in hindsight was stupid because the monitor was thin, and my arm slipped off it. The lid to my coffee popped off from me squeezing the cup, making the coffee splash out and go all over my shirt. My white shirt with navy stripes.

I jumped back, grateful it wasn’t scalding hot. It wasn’t exactly lukewarm, but it could have been worse.

Looking down, I noticed the coffee effectively covered me from my right pec down to my stomach. To the point that my nipple was visible through my shirt. Because of course, it was. I had to spill coffee on laundry day when I had no undershirts left that were clean.

I took a gamble leaving the house this morning dressed like this. It obviously paid off.

Kinsey grabbed tissues from the box on her desk and handed them to me so I could blot at the coffee. It was of no use. The shirt was soaked through. Luckily, I had another one in my desk.

Eliana stepped over and crossed her arms, assessing me. “Nice nipple.”

“I was thinking of having it pierced,” I replied in an even tone.

“Don’t go with a hoop. A barbell would be better.” I loved how she volleyed it right back to me.

“Might be a bit plain. I’ll have to opt for one with gemstones on either end.” I had no idea what I was talking about. I didn’t know shit about nipple bars. Or rings.

“I like where your head is at.” She nodded.

“I’ll only do this one though.” I pointed at my coffee-covered, visible nipple. “I think having them both pierced might be a bit much.”

“You say that now, but the moment someone flicks that barbell with their tongue, you’ll be racing to get the other one done.”

“Good point.” Great, like I needed the image of someone licking my nipple in my head at this exact moment. Not someone. Because the only person I saw when I imagined things like that was Kinsey, and that was a bad road to travel down. One that would only lead to disappointment and heartache.

Eliana nodded and moved on.

When I glanced down, I saw Kinsey’s chin to her chest and her shoulders shaking. When she looked up, there were unshed tears in her eyes, and she was smiling. “I don’t know how you stay so calm when you talk like that.”

I smiled, unable to help it. Her humor with the situation was contagious even if I was the one she was laughing at. “It was either that or completely lose it and laugh at myself. The convo was more fun.”

Her eyes dipped from mine down to my chest then back up again. “Seriously, why don’t you have a shirt on underneath?”

“Laundry day.” I was one of those people who put it off until the last possible minute. I hated doing laundry.

“And you didn’t think to wear a darker button-down with a plain T-shirt underneath?”

“That would have been smarter.” I leaned in close, lowering my voice and at the same time wondering what the hell I was doing. I didn’t miss how Kinsey’s eyes dropped to

my chest again. My nipple to be precise. Made me grateful for those hours I spent in the gym. “Like what you see?”

Her small gasp was barely audible, but I caught it. I couldn't believe I was seriously trying to flirt with Kinsey. To what end, I didn't know. It wasn't like she would suddenly see me as someone other than her best friend. Want more with me. Feel for me what I did for her.

*“Friend zone, party of one?” my inner voice called out in a tone that sounded like a football coach. “Qualifications are being pathetic, always hard on yourself, and rampant daydreaming about the target of your interest.”*

*I raised my hand. “Here!”*

*“Good, I'm glad you're present. We need you to do something else equally as embarrassing if you're going to make it to the zone. Are you looking for love?”*

*“Maybe?”*

*“Do you think you have a shot?”*

*“Not in the slightest.”*

*“That's what we like to hear! We're counting on you. The zone needs a good man of your caliber.”*

I sighed. In my head of course, because this was a conversation I was having with myself.

Kinsey would never look at me differently. So, I leaned back, knowing this was useless, and tried to stand. Only there was coffee on the hard floor that my dress shoe slipped on. My arms windmilled; my eyes went wide. Then I was falling. Flat on my ass.

There was no point to try to save face now. I dropped back onto the floor, my head making a slight thud when it connected with the ground that didn't hurt. At least not my skin. My pride was a different story.

Kinsey peered over at me, upside down. And she was laughing.

A soft clap was heard before Eliana came into sight. “I’ll give you a nine point five for originality, but you’re only getting a four for the landing. The execution could have been better.”

“I guess I’m not making it to the finals.”

“It was close, but you were under the score needed.”

“Damn.”

She winked and left again.

Kinsey crouched down by me. “How’s it going, champ? Ready for round two? The day’s only just begun.”

“Friday has failed me. It’s supposed to be a day of joy knowing I don’t have to work tomorrow, and yet, here I lie. On the floor at your feet.”

“Not a bad place for you.”

“Does this mean I’m forgiven?”

“Did you do anything wrong?”

“Does today count? Because I’m making a list.”

She stood and held out her hand for me. I took it even though I didn’t need her help getting up. It was an excuse to feel her palm against mine. Lame, but I was a man in love with a woman who had eyes only for my nipple.

I slapped my hand over it as I stood, pathetic as the move was. “I’m not getting it pierced.” Jesus, could I be more awkward today?

“I didn’t think you were. Though I wonder if the tongue thing has merit.”

“I’d ask Waylen, but we don’t exactly share personal details with each other.”

Vera popped up from her desk, her eyes wide. “Waylen has his nipples pierced?”

“Among other things I definitely don’t want to think about.”

Her jaw dropped, then she slowly sank back down to her chair.

“Does he have his dick pierced?” Kinsey whispered.

“I’m not sure whether to be worried over your sudden interest in my brother’s dick or to contemplate getting it done myself due to said interest.” Sure, that was what I meant to say. I was left to wonder if Kinsey thought Waylen was attractive.

*“Way to go!” Coach cheered like I’d just scored a touchdown. “We didn’t see this coming. You know how to bring us to the zone.”*

*The crowd chanted, “Friend zone! Friend zone! Friend zone!”*

*“You’ve done good,” Coach commended. “Go sit on the bench. We don’t want to wear you out.”*

A blush rose over Kinsey’s cheeks. “I have never thought of your brother that way. Nor his dick.”

“Good to know.” I wasn’t about to ask what she thought of my dick and if a piercing would be hot. There was only so much embarrassment I could handle for one day. “Now that I’ve provided all of you entertainment, I should get to work.”

“And change your shirt.”

“That too. Good thing I have a spare folded in my drawer. It’ll be a little wrinkled, but it’ll also be clean.”

“Next time you’ll think twice about going without an undershirt.”

“That I will.”

The walk to the elevator was done with a fake smile and a wet shirt. I was about to press the button when I thought better of it. The stairs would be smarter. Fewer people on them. Not many took them all the way to twelve where I was. It was only a couple of flights to Kinsey’s floor. Easily doable.

As I was walking up them, I made sure to concentrate. I didn’t know what kind of voodoo was on me today, but I

wasn't taking any chances falling on or down the stairs. That would hurt a hell of a lot worse than slipping on the floor in Kinsey's office.

I walked quickly to my desk and unlocked the drawers so I could grab a clean shirt. When I stood, my co-worker, Anthony, was there. "What happened to you?" He glanced at my chest. If I were someone else, I might get self-conscious.

"Coffee incident."

"Hell of a place to get hit."

"My aim is impeccable."

He leaned in and sniffed me. "Hazelnut?"

"Thought I'd mix it up."

"At least you'll have an aroma of nuttiness to carry you through the day."

"Then all my goals have been met."

He chuckled and moved over to his desk with his bag slung over his shoulder. Avoiding the elevator hadn't done me any good. He still saw me. Could have been worse. It could always be way worse.

It felt good to slip the clean shirt on after I stripped out of the other one and wiped my chest down with a wet paper towel. I still smelled like a hazelnut. I highly debated running home at lunch and showering but didn't want to deal with traffic. Instead, I smelled like coffee all day.

---

## KINSEY

For a long time, I'd considered anyone who drank alone at home to have a drinking problem. I wasn't naïve. Okay, I sort of was, but I also knew the way I viewed alcohol was wrong. It came from a host of memories.

Mom falling down the stairs and giggling when she hit the bottom despite the bruises her skin went on to form. Dad yelling from his chair to stop making so much noise. The day I was taken from them was the day my life changed. Alcohol had become who they were. They had a problem. They knew it, everyone in their lives knew it. And they'd still chosen to give up their young kid instead of seeking help.

I'd never forgive the alcohol for that. Yet, here I stood on a Friday night with a full glass of the fruity wine I couldn't name that Vera loved so much. It was on my doorstep when I got home from work, along with a package from the two women I would murder.

Telling myself that enjoying a glass of wine or two was perfectly okay, I took a sip. Anxiety made my fingers grip the stem of the glass so tightly, I worried it would break. "This is okay," I whispered. I enjoyed certain wines, wanted to give myself a break. "I am not them." My entire life, I'd worked to separate myself from the people who gave me life, the ones who almost took it away.

Flashing lights entered my mind. The sound of crunching metal, shattering glass. I stumbled back and deep red wine splashed over the edge of the glass right onto my favorite pair



of pajama pants. It was the only sleepwear line my aunt ever designed.

“Shit.” I set the glass on the kitchen counter and reached for the towel that said “Don’t Go Bacon My Heart”—a housewarming gift ages ago from Sebastian. There’d be no getting the wine out of these pants unless I let them soak overnight. With a sigh, I slipped out of them and headed for the laundry room to prep them with stain remover.

When I returned to the kitchen, I downed the rest of the wine and poured another. Nothing seemed to go right lately. The complaints about the recent glitch kept rolling in. Our reviews were a dumpster fire. And Sebastian had been... weird. Even today when he brought me coffee.

Images of that fateful accident I’d never even told him about were replaced by the look in his eyes when Eliana teased him about the nipple. He’d looked... heated, as if whatever was on his mind got him going.

I liked that look, even if it wasn’t directed at me. It made him seem almost feral in a way I’d never witnessed with him. Around me, lately, he’d been careful with his flirting. It was normally second nature to him. I saw the way he talked to other women, the way he made their cheeks flush. Just once, I wanted to experience that kind of moment with a man. A moment that had my skin heating, my legs squeezing together.

It just wasn’t how they saw me. The uptight, too-put-together girl with a tragic past. If men weren’t treating me with kid gloves, it was indifference instead.

My eyes caught on the package I hadn’t yet opened. I knew that whatever Eliana and Vera had sent me was something I had to prepare myself for. It was probably embarrassing, maybe a little ridiculous.

Edging around the corner of the counter, I approached it like it contained a bomb that could blow me to bits. Maybe not the physical me, but it was sure to explode the boundaries I had around myself.

Setting my wine down once again, I grabbed a knife from the block and slit the tape. The flaps sprang open, and there it was.

The Master Brator.

Seriously, that was the name printed across the top of the plastic containing the dildo. I was pretty sure my face looked like a tomato at this point. "I'm going to kill them."

There was a note in the box. I unfolded it, not wanting to even touch the giant fake penis that vibrated at three different speeds and four different patterns.

*Kins,*

*We know you're thinking about throwing this in the trash right now, but just hear us out. You need help, girl. The list... complete it. At least some of it. Let yourself be free. Start with this. We promise you won't regret it.*

*- Vera and Eliana*

I walked to the trash can and stepped on the pedal. The lid flipped open, and I held the note above it. But instead of dropping it in, I caught sight of the list I'd thrown out this morning when I couldn't look at it anymore.

*Let yourself be free.*

Was the Master Brator the key to that? A laugh echoed out of me. That was completely ridiculous. No vibrating penis would make me any less uptight or adept. Yet, I found myself reaching in to remove the list. The edges of the miniature notebook paper were frayed where we'd torn it out, and the

page was wrinkled, but I could still read every word. My new present could help with numbers five and seven.

No. I wouldn't do this. I tried to throw the list away again, but something wouldn't let me, some force inside myself. Were they right? Did I need this?

I wasn't sure what possessed me to do it, but I grabbed one of our app's branded magnets and attached the list to the fridge. "What am I doing?" Taking a deep breath, I set the note on the counter and reached for my wine, taking a long drink.

By now, it had started to hit me. Energy buzzed along my skin. My anxiety lessened as my entire body relaxed from the normal stiff posture.

I removed the plastic package from the box and stabbed a knife into the top of it to try to free the purple dildo. What? Was it cut off from oxygen for too long? Purple seemed such an odd color for the toy.

It took me a few minutes and a cut to my finger to open the plastic. I sucked on my finger to stem the bleeding as I used my other hand to pull out the dildo. It was soft, the outside skin depressing where I grabbed it. It moved with my fingers, almost like it was the real thing.

A laugh bubbled out of me, and I fired off a text to both girls.

Me: I hate you both.

They responded right away.

Eliana: It's pretty great, isn't it?

Vera: You'll love it. I adore mine.

I groaned. No, this wasn't real life.

Me: Don't tell me we have matching dildos...

Vera only sent a winky face in return. Eliana was suspiciously quiet.

Unable to think about that, I dropped the dildo onto the counter and grabbed my phone and wine, wanting to put as much distance between that rubber member and me as I could.

It vibrated against the counter where I dropped it, and I yelped in surprise. “Jesus!” You’d have thought it was a rocket ship trying to take off. No way that wouldn’t completely ruin me. I tentatively reached out and fumbled with it until I managed to shut it off.

My legs felt like jelly as I walked toward the living room and sank onto the couch, not wanting to move until I could forget that seemingly everyone in my life was putting all their effort into my next orgasm.

Oh, God. I drained the rest of my wine.

Was I that pathetic? Sure, it had been a long-ass time since a guy paid enough attention to me to give me the only sex-induced orgasm of my life, but that was okay, right? It wasn’t like I was a hermit who had no life outside her cats.

As if proving my point false, Chewy chose that moment to jump up beside me on the couch. I petted him without thinking about it, knowing I was indeed a cat lady. Vera and Eliana had no interest in love. They’d both been burned, so now singlehood suited them. But I’d had so few people in my life I could rely on. I just wanted a family, a real one.

I wanted to be a better mother than I’d had.

Totally the alcohol talking. I never let myself consider the future, anything past what needed to be accomplished, my endless to-do lists.

Except the newest to-do list had everything to do with my future.

I stared at the fridge from the living room. I couldn’t see the list, but I knew it was there, laughing at how inept I was. The thought of sleeping with some guy only to realize how terrible I was had every part of me tightening, and not in a good way.

My phone buzzed with another text, but this time, it made me smile.

Sebastian: I'm bored.

He wanted me to come over, but there was no way I could leave this apartment right now. I tried to text him back, but my fingers didn't want to cooperate. Choosing the easier option, I tapped his name on my favorites list. He picked up after the first ring.

"There's nothing on TV," was the first thing he said.

I smiled before realizing he couldn't see it. "You have every streaming service known to man. You're just being picky." My words slurred despite how much I tried to control them.

He didn't respond for a long moment. "Are you drunk?"

"No." I sighed. "Fine, maybe. Don't judge me."

He laughed at that. "Kins, there's nothing to judge. But are you okay? You don't usually drink much. Need me to come over?"

"No!" The idea of him coming here while I was still horribly embarrassed by my friends' gift had me sweating. "I mean, that's okay. I'm fine. It's just been a long week."

"If it makes you feel better, I caught up on *The Bachelor*, and he's now sleeping with two of the women. So, we can judge people we don't even know."

He was always good for making me feel better, but this wouldn't go away with talk of random people's sex lives. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Always."

I'd regret this in the morning, but right now, my brain didn't care. "Do you think I'm sex-worthy?"

He coughed in surprise. "What?"

"It's just... I don't know how to be a real woman."

"Trust me, you're plenty woman. What's this about?"

I sighed, leaning over sideways on the couch as exhaustion overcame me. "I won't be any good at sex. Who'd want me?"

“Kins—”

I kept talking, needing to get it out. “I don’t hate being single. That’s the spirit of our app, after all. But I want to fall in love. Just once. Even if it doesn’t last, I want to know what it feels like.” More than anything. My eyes slid shut. “But who would love a girl who can’t even stand to be touched?” Except by him, but I didn’t say that.

Sebastian’s silence spoke volumes. He obviously thought I was right, that I couldn’t get what I wanted because of my boundaries.

Finally, he drew in a long breath and spoke, “Sex isn’t everything, Kinsey.”

“No.” I drifted into sleep. “But it’s a whole hell of a lot.”



---

## SEBASTIAN

Kinsey sounded so... I wasn't sure of the right word for last night. Not only in the sense of her drunken slurring but also how she didn't think anyone could desire her. She had no idea how much I would love to be with her. And that was on me because taking the risk to say what I felt toward her was like facing a mountain I wasn't sure I could climb. I also worried that if those words left my lips, it would change everything between us. Kinsey being my best friend was something I didn't want to lose.

Part of my duties as said best friend was to stop and pick up breakfast for Kinsey. Something to help with the hangover she was sure to have. There was a health food store around the corner from my apartment building that did a hangover smoothie. I never looked too closely as to what was in it, but every time I had one, it helped.

I stopped in there and ordered the smoothie for Kinsey and ordered myself something different. I liked the hangover cure, but only when I was actually hungover. Outside of that, I didn't drink it. But they had plenty of other options I could get.

Two drinks in hand, I went to my car, put them in the cup holders, and drove over to Kinsey's place. I expected her to look a little rough when she answered the door, but she didn't seem to give a shit how she appeared when she let me in. Because the Kinsey I knew would never walk around in a pair of lacy underwear and a T-shirt. One that didn't cover her ass.



It was a struggle to meet her eyes because, holy hell, she was gorgeous. I knew she was, but like this, she was perfect.

“I brought breakfast.” I held up the smoothie for her.

“Thanks,” she muttered, taking it from me in one hand and smoothing down her hair with the other. She turned, walked a couple of steps, and froze. The lacy underwear showed off her long legs and ass I wanted to drop down behind and worship.

I needed an intervention. That was the only way to get rid of this. Someone to make me see that Kinsey would never be anything other than a friend.

“Shit!” she squeaked and rushed off toward her bedroom, shutting the door. What just happened?

“Kins?” I called as I kicked the front door shut behind me. “Are you okay?”

“Be right out!” I heard a little muffled thanks to the closed bedroom door.

The couch was calling my name, so I dropped down on it. Kinsey’s place was immaculate. Everything was where it was supposed to be. Not even a throw pillow was askew. How she managed that after being drunk, I didn’t know. Maybe her bedroom was a mess?

I still couldn’t figure out what made her drink like that. It wasn’t Kinsey. Something must have happened to trigger it.

When she emerged, she was in a pair of cotton shorts and a white T-shirt. She had the smoothie in one hand and went to the kitchen without a word. I stood and followed, wanting to get to the bottom of what was going on with her.

She took a sip of the smoothie and then set it aside so she could put various kitchen cleaners on the counter. Leaning against the doorway, I watched as she went to work scrubbing the counter and sink, which were already clean. I could probably lick the floor in here and be perfectly fine.

“I’m sorry for the mess,” she said, not looking at me. “And how I looked when you got here.” Her voice was small, nothing like how she normally was.

“Kins, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just tired of this place not being clean.”

I stepped over to her, took the cleaner and sponge out of her hands, and set them aside. “Sit with me and eat. Or drink rather. You need something in your stomach.”

She did, albeit reluctantly. We sat at the table and drank our smoothies. Kinsey’s eyes landed on anything but me.

“Did I do something wrong again?” I didn’t think I did. When I left her yesterday, everything was fine. Back to normal.

“What? No, not at all.”

“Then why won’t you look at me?”

“I shouldn’t have drank like I did.”

“Why did you?”

“The reasons don’t matter.”

“They do, but if you don’t want to talk about them, that’s okay.” It would hurt. I always felt like Kinsey and I could tell each other almost anything. But I’d understand if there were things she didn’t want to say.

“I’m not them.” She didn’t need to say the names for me to know whom she was talking about.

“You’re nothing like your parents,” I agreed. “Never have been and never will be.”

“But I got drunk last night.”

“You did.” I couldn’t say that it was all right. It wasn’t if it was bothering her, but I didn’t want to give her shit about it either. That wouldn’t help.

“I’m not doing it again for a while.”

I nodded. “Good plan.”

“Thank you for breakfast.”

“Anytime. I figured you could use something to combat the remaining alcohol in your system.”

Her eyes finally met mine. “Any plans for today?” Ah, the subject change.

“You’re looking at them.” I grinned and leaned back in the chair, trying to lighten the mood.

“You need to get out more.”

“Says the woman who decided to start cleaning her kitchen first thing this morning.”

“Touché.”

She lifted the smoothie and took another sip. A moan slipped past her lips. “How is this so good?” That moan. The look on her face as she fluttered her eyes closed. It about did me in. My dick very much liked everything about it, then I remembered the lace she had on when I got here. It wasn’t helping my hardening length at all.

I shifted my ass in the seat, trying to find a comfortable position that didn’t have my dick pressed to my thigh. I wanted to move it so it wasn’t trapped but doing so would have brought attention to it.

Glancing down, I realized I made a fatal flaw this morning when I picked out my clothes. Basketball shorts. They were my go-to. They also hid absolutely nothing when it came to a guy’s dick standing at attention. I might as well not have them on for all the good they were currently doing me.

I needed to cover myself. But with what? I looked around, trying not to be obvious. Kinsey was thankfully focused on her drink. Then I saw it. A magazine. It was all there was. Reaching over quickly, I snagged it and dropped it onto my lap. Probably with more force than I needed to, but I had to hide the evidence of my arousal before Kinsey could see it.

Shit, I felt like I was in high school, walking around with my books in front of my junk, hoping no one noticed I got hard at every slight movement. Fun times.

Kinsey quirked an eyebrow at me. “What are you doing?”

“Getting comfortable.” I smiled and slouched a little. Drank from my smoothie, doing the worst acting job of giving

a casual, nothing-going-on-here look.

“Okay...”

I finished my smoothie, and we moved to the couch. Kinsey put on a reality show I hadn't seen yet. Something new. I was slipping. I usually knew when this stuff was coming out.

We didn't talk for a while. I wasn't sure what to say. She was in her head, which I understood. She'd told me a lot about her past and drinking. I wondered if it brought up some bad memories. I wanted to comfort her but didn't know how. Didn't know what she'd be receptive to. So, I sat on the opposite end of the couch and watched mindless TV, grateful my dick waved the white flag and went back to being unnoticeable.

Eventually, I got up and took our cups to the kitchen to rinse them out and put them on the counter to recycle. I grabbed a glass from the cabinet and filled it with water. Kinsey would most likely need more to drink. Since she didn't want to talk, this was the least I could do.

But then my eyes caught on a crumpled piece of paper under a magnet. It was a list. One that had my eyes going wide.

*The To-Do List*

Holy shit, what was this?

*Number one: Learn to flirt.*

Was this for Kinsey? Did she want to learn to do this? The woman was stunning. Could probably have any man she wanted. I understood she didn't see herself that way, but a list? She didn't need this.

Then I kept reading.

*Number two: Shave everywhere.*

Like, everywhere, everywhere? Oh, God, I did not need that image in my head right now.

*Number three: Become a better  
kisser.*

I almost dropped the damn glass in my hand. I had to set it on the counter and give the list my full attention.

*Number four: Be comfortable being  
naked.*

Okay, as far as lists go, I could understand this for her. She got down on herself sometimes, and she didn't always seem comfortable in her skin.

*Number five: Don't shy away  
from being touched.*

That went with number four. Something she'd want to do for herself. To make herself not be a captive to memories from long ago.

*Number six: Learn how to put a  
condom on.*

She didn't know? I thought they taught us that in high school. Right? Maybe I was thinking about the extensive porn I watched when I was in my late teens.

*Number seven: Perfect your O  
face.*

And my dick was at full mast. At least it wasn't caught against my leg this time. Because holy hell, I wanted to see Kinsey like that. Blissed out, totally lost in the moment.

*Number eight: Allow someone else to dominate in bed.*

It took everything in me not to grab my dick and squeeze. Not the time or the place. But this list, this damn list, was turning me on more than any other words ever had.

*Number nine: Give someone else an orgasm.*

Okay, where did I sign up for that? All I could think about was *The Hunger Games* when Katniss volunteered to be tribute. The situations were vastly different, but I was here and willing. *Pick me!*

*Number ten: Learn how to make him want more.*

Damn, Kinsey. Didn't she know she already did that? Everything about her made me want her more than I already did. She was the complete package.

This list reminded me that how I saw her and how she saw herself weren't the same. I wished she had the confidence to embrace who she was. She had so much to offer the world. And I saw it. All of her.

"What are you doing?"

Shit! I didn't hear her come into the kitchen.

I grabbed the glass of water and spun, sloshing some over the edge and onto the floor. I tried to be stealthy and wipe it with my foot while my eyes stayed on her. So smooth.

“Water?” I asked in a super-chill voice that wasn’t chill at all.

She’d caught me reading the list. There was nothing else it could be mistaken for. Luckily, my hard-on was gone thanks to the last item on the list. Hooray for small favors. But I was still left with the knowledge of what the list said. It was etched into my brain. And I wanted to be that person for her. The one she completed the list with. But how did I do that when she only saw me as a friend?





---

## KINSEY

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening. Someone kill me right freaking now. My eyes slid from Sebastian to the list I'd never wanted anyone to see. *Then why'd you put it on the refrigerator, dumbass?*

I wasn't sure how to answer my own question. Had I wanted him to find it? To tell me what a ridiculous idea this was?

"I..." My mouth flapped open, nothing else coming out.

A smirk rose on Sebastian's lips, and I wanted to wipe it away. Why did I also find it kind of adorable? He reached out, putting one finger under my jaw and closing my mouth.

I squeezed my eyes shut. "When I look at this kitchen again, you'll be gone."

"Kinsey..."

"This will have all been a gigantic nightmare, and I'll wake up to realize you never learned what a loser I am."

"You're not a loser."

I snorted, still pressing my eyes shut. "You have to say that. You're family." Turning on my heel, I bumped my hip into the corner of the counter, cringing at the pain. With a sigh, I opened my eyes and marched from the kitchen.

Sebastian followed me, and I really wished he'd just leave. "I'm not family."

“Gee, thanks for that.” Just what I needed. My best friend, a guy who’d always been like my brother for most of our friendship, to suddenly back away from our friendship because of a stupid list. My cousin would pay for this. And not only her. Aunt Delia was the one who put the stupid notion into my head that I needed to date, needed to have sex to be a proper woman.

How dumb was that? It was completely false. Not all women—or men, for that matter—had sex high on their priority list. Some didn’t even want it at all. There were asexual men and women along with those who’d suffered from trauma and couldn’t bring themselves to let another person in like that.

I was neither. Just... inexperienced and a bit scared. There was nothing biological or traumatic to the way I shied away from sex. But it didn’t affect my womanhood.

“I’m still a woman.”

I hadn’t realized I’d said that aloud until Sebastian spoke behind me. “What?”

“Sex isn’t life.”

He cleared his throat. “I don’t—”

I whirled to face him, my anger not for him but directed at him, anyway. “I don’t need sex.”

“Okay...”

“My life isn’t any less meaningful if I don’t have sex. This world tries to tell women that we haven’t succeeded unless we’ve found a man, had kids. But let me tell you, buddy, I have kicked this world’s ass without a man by my side. Without little gremlins grabbing at my clothes with sticky fingers. Maybe I don’t want that life. Ever thought of that, people? Not everyone is meant for motherhood or to take care of a man for the rest of her life.”

Sebastian’s hands on my arms shut me up. He squeezed gently, his big palms warming the bare skin of my biceps. “Kinsey, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Who says you need sex to be happy?”

“Didn’t you hear me? Everyone. Vera and Eliana forced that list on me. Aunt Delia wants to set me up on a date, and apparently, my friends think I need to get over my issues and learn how to please a guy to keep him.”

The look he gave me was half pity and half anger. Though, I knew Sebastian. It wasn’t for me. Vera irritated him to no end whenever she tried to break me out of my shell. He claimed she wanted to turn me into another version of her.

“Come here.” He pulled me toward him, and I melted into his arms. His breath warmed the side of my head as he spoke. “You don’t need to prove anything to anyone.”

“But what if I need to prove something to myself?”

He didn’t answer right away, but then I felt it. Something hard pressed into my leg. Hard and long. I froze, a part of me enjoying the fact that I did it to him. Then I remembered exactly whose boner it was.

I shoved him away. “Oh my God. Sebastian!”

“What?” He looked down, his cheeks reddening in that adorable way I’d always loved. “Kins, I just read how you wanted to perfect your orgasm face, and you expect me to keep calm?”

“Don’t say orgasm.” The minute the word left my lips, I cringed. It sounded wrong coming from me. I’d never been able to talk much about sex, to say anything Vera would claim was deliciously dirty.

That irritating smirk returned. “Why can’t I say orgasm?”

“Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“Sebastian.” My skin heated as he stepped closer.

He stopped moving as if he’d hit a wall, and his entire body shuddered as he breathed deeply and closed his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I just pictured you letting someone dominate you in bed.”

“I can’t deal with this.” I turned away from him. “If I wanted someone to make fun of me, I’d go to Vera.” I made it to the bathroom before he could respond and shut the door before yelling out to him, “I’m taking a shower. Go or stay, I don’t care. But when I get out, this conversation is over.”

Except it wasn’t over for me. I stripped and turned on the shower, stepping into it before the water had time to warm. The cold spray hit my warm face, and it felt good. The hangover was gone now, replaced by another feeling I couldn’t quite decipher.

I scrubbed shampoo into my hair, the whole time imagining someone else’s hands massaging my scalp, their body pressed against mine. I wasn’t one to have sex dreams. Really, I didn’t think about sex at all until recently. My hands skated down my body, over my breasts, and I felt calloused palms, the soft scrape of nails.

When I reached the area below my waist, I stopped. I couldn’t do this. It wasn’t me. Pulling my hand away, all images of a companion in the shower faded away, and it was just me. As always.

Just Kinsey.

Alone.

I was fine with it. I loved my life. Sure, I’d grown up wanting to fall in love just like most girls, but it hadn’t happened for me, and I was content. I needed to call Aunt D and tell her thanks but no thanks to the date.

When I stepped out of the shower and toweled off, I realized my fatal mistake. I hadn’t brought a new change of clothes into the bathroom. In a perfect world, there’d be a door straight from here into my bedroom, but this world was far from perfect.

Shit.

There was no way around it. I wrapped the towel as tightly as I could around my body. Wet hair hung down my back, soaking the edges of the towel. “Breathe, Kinsey,” I whispered to myself. Just breathe.

I yanked open the door and paused at the sight before me. Sebastian lay on his back on the couch, a smile curving his lips. Chewy curled up on his stomach. I could hear him purring from here. It was rare for my cat to like anyone except me. He'd known Sebastian since he was born, but this was the first time I saw the two of them snuggling.

It was enough to make me forget I stood there in only a towel, enough to wipe out the ten minutes before the shower from my memory. This was my best friend, the one who'd always tried to get past Chewy's indifference. The boy that traveled across town and climbed through my window at my aunt's after she finally got custody away from my parents when I was a teenager. He'd been there for so much of my life, the good and the bad.

A few awkward moments didn't change that.

When his smiling eyes fell on me and widened, I realized I'd been staring. "That's an interesting outfit."

A squeak escaped my lips as I made a break for my room. At the movement, Chewy lunged off Sebastian, running for me. He leaped into the air, not an unusual move for him, and caught the end of my towel. It slipped before I could recover from my surprise and catch it. Chewy's claws grazed my arm, but I barely noticed the sting of pain as more of me became exposed, and I ran.

The bedroom door slammed shut behind me, and I leaned back against it. This day just kept getting worse.

Yanking open a drawer, I grabbed a pair of my least sexy underwear, so I felt completely hideous, and pulled them on. The problem was, I didn't have any ugly clothes. It was something I prided myself on, my wardrobe. I needed something that made me feel frumpy, definitely not in the mood to jump my friend's bones.

Did people even say that anymore? See! I was so out of touch.

I flipped through dresses in my closet, shoving hangers aside and stopping when I found one. I hadn't worn it since I

went to the funeral of one of my employees' mother. It wasn't ugly necessarily, but it was black, and I hated black. It lacked life.

Slipping the dress over my head, I reached behind me to zip it up.

There was a knock on the bedroom door, but I didn't answer it. "Kins..." Sebastian called. "You left something out here."

I couldn't face him. Yet, I wanted to. Something in me needed to feel again how much he wanted me. I knew it was only biological. A guy got a hard-on for so many reasons, and he'd just read my list. Yet, it intrigued me. In all our years of friendship, I'd seen him sprout a few, but I'd never felt it, never had it happen because of me.

Taking in a deep breath, I pulled open the door, coming face to face with a still smirking Sebastian.

"Why do you do that?" I blurted.

"Do what?"

"The whole sexy smirk thing."

His smile widened. "Why, Kinsey Hart, I do believe that's the first time you've ever admitted you're attracted to me."

"I'm not."

"You think I'm sexy."

"No." I crossed my arms. "I think you're a nerd, but I keep you around so I don't get bored."

His gaze followed the movements of my arms. "Going to a funeral?" The way his eyes slid down my dress had me struggling to not press my legs together. This dress was not doing its job.

"I happen to adore black."

"Liar." He lifted my discarded towel. "Found this out here."

I snatched it from him and threw it behind me into the room. “That cat and I are going to have a serious talk. Sebastian...” I couldn’t breathe as he moved closer to me. My breasts brushed his chest.

“What?”

“This isn’t...” I lifted my eyes to his, wondering if they betrayed the truth. I didn’t want him to go.

“Everything about this is so wrong, Kins. It’s bad.” He leaned in to whisper directly into my ear. “But sometimes, we need a little bad.”

“What do you mean?”

He pulled back. There was no longer a smirk on his face, no smile in his eyes as they bored a hole right through me. “I have an idea.”





---

## SEBASTIAN

“I have an idea.” Stupid. That was what this was. Yet, I couldn’t stop the words from leaving my lips.

It was a slippery slope I was on. One that had the power to send me careening down it to break every part of me when I got to the bottom. Or in this case, number ten. The end of the list.

“Speak,” she said.

“Okay, hear me out. What if you and I work on your list?” Her lips parted like she was about to say something, but I held up my hand. “You’re not hearing me out.” I smirked. Because now that I knew she found it sexy, I would do it more. Anything to get that kind of attention from Kinsey, and I was in. “You’re comfortable with me. Maybe not in the sense of the things on the list, but wouldn’t it be better to do them with me than with a stranger? Someone who doesn’t know you at all and might not stop if you ask them to? I don’t want that for you. I’ll worry.” I’d also be insanely jealous, but I kept that thought to myself.

“But...”

“Think about it, Kins. Do you want someone you don’t know not only seeing you naked, but touching you, getting you off, *dominating* you?” I knew she didn’t. She wouldn’t let just anyone pin her to the bed and make her let go and feel.

“No. But this will change everything between us.”

I shook my head. “We won’t let it. What we do on that list has no bearing on our friendship. We’ll keep everything

separate. And if we feel like things are getting out of control, that feelings are getting involved, we can put a stop to it.” My feelings were already part of this, but since I never said those words to her before, I couldn’t now.

She looked out the window, lost in thought. She worried the bottom lip between her teeth. And I waited because as much as I didn’t want to push me being this person on her, I also didn’t want her to do something she truly didn’t want to. I’d never be that man with her. Never force her into anything. I’d laid my proposal out there. It was up to her to agree or not.

I could add more to it though. “I won’t tell anyone, Kins.”

Her eyes met mine. “I didn’t think you would.”

“I wanted to make sure you knew. Whatever happens between us stays that way. It’s no one’s business what we do.”

“If our friendship starts to decline, we stop, right?”

“Absolutely.” I stepped closer and took her hand in mine. It felt right there. Our palms touching. Our bodies close. I was so royally screwed. “I’d never jeopardize our friendship.” Yet, I had a feeling that was exactly what I was doing.

Kinsey surprised me when she pressed forward and wrapped her arms around me. Thankfully, I wasn’t sporting wood any longer, so I didn’t embarrass myself by her being so close. My arms went around her. I held her tight.

For as strong and independent as Kinsey was, she was vulnerable too. And she let me see that side of her. Another guy could take advantage of that. No way would I let that happen. So, while I knew this would end in heartbreak for me, I couldn’t leave it to someone else. Broken heart or not, nothing mattered more than her well-being.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes.” Another lie. If I was going down with the ship, I would do it with the thing on fire.

Pulling back, she took a step away, then another. “I want to say yes. You make good points, but I need to think about it. That list, I didn’t think anything would come of it, but the

more I look at it, the more I wonder if it would be worth it. But you and me, I don't want to lose what we have."

*There was that damn crowd chanting in my head again.*

*"Friend zone! Friend zone! Friend zone!"*

*Shut the hell up!*

I was tired of being in the friend zone. I didn't seriously date anyone. Didn't do more than hook up because no one could compare to Kinsey. The woman who was unattainable in that sense. But maybe not so much anymore.

*"You're getting a bit ahead of yourself," Coach said in my mind. "I know you like this girl, but I can't say this is a good idea. Though maybe it will solidify your ranking in the zone. She could push you away, never look at you the same again. Another point for the team."*

Lovely. Just what I needed. I hadn't thought about that. And this inner voice of mine needed to take a damn hike.

What if, when all was said and done, Kinsey looked differently at me? I mean, seeing someone orgasm changed shit. So would a bunch of other things on that list.

But there were only ten. I could handle them.

*"No, you can't." Damn make-believe coach.*

*"How do I fire you?"*

*"Ah, my boy, you can't do that either."*

Great.

"You won't lose me, Kins," I said, trying to get my head back on track.

"I need to think about it." She leveled me with a glare. "Alone."

I raised my hands. "I know when I'm not wanted." And I smirked. Because why the hell not? "Do something fun today."

She huffed out a breath but couldn't hide her smile. "I thought I told you to leave."

Opening the front door, I had one foot out it. “You love me.”

“Goodbye!”

I laughed as I shut it. At least I planted the seed and got her to think about what I suggested. That was all I could do at this point. And hope she said yes.

The moment my ass hit the seat in my car, my phone rang. I swore my mom had a sixth sense about when I was free. I had nothing planned for the day.

“Hi, Mom,” I answered.

“Oh, good. You didn’t send me to voicemail.”

I rolled my eyes even though she couldn’t see me. “When do I do that?”

“Every time I call and you don’t answer.”

“There’s a difference between me seeing the phone ring and declining the call and me not being available to answer.”

“So you say.”

“I do.”

“Are you busy?”

“It’s Saturday morning.” I didn’t want to tell her I was free, but I also couldn’t lie to my mom. She’d know. She always did.

“Your father is out back with a rototiller he rented, and I’m afraid he’ll lose a foot. Can you come over? Talk him out of this?”

“Me? Why don’t you call Way? I don’t know shit about gardening.”

“He’s old and feeble, Seb. I don’t want him hurting himself. Also, Waylen doesn’t answer when I call.” Or he was busy, but I kept that to myself.

“Dad’s fifty-five. He works out four times a week, and he eats well. He’s not feeble. Or old.”

“Are you coming over or not?”

I sighed, knowing I wouldn't win. "I'll be there in twenty."

It wouldn't take that long to get there. Maybe fifteen minutes, but I needed five to sit in my car with the air conditioning on to give myself a breather. I was going from potentially ruining my friendship with Kinsey to my parents' house where my dad was doing God knew what in the yard. They didn't have a garden. Sure, they had flowers planted around the house, but an actual garden where they went out and tended it? Nope.

The clock moved on my dashboard. I didn't put the car into gear until I had exactly fifteen minutes to get there. I would see my parents for dinner tomorrow night, anyway. This was an extra visit, though I'd always help them if I could. I loved them.

The drive was easy, no traffic. They lived outside the city in a residential neighborhood. The houses looked the same except for small differences like the paint, landscape, location of the garage, or front door. But they were all two stories with the roofs peaking over the garage and the front door. They loved it. That was what mattered.

I pulled in the driveway to see the garage door open. My dad's pickup was in the driveway, while my mom's sedan was in the garage. There was a mess on the floor where his truck usually parked. They had a big garage. One I envied since I didn't have any such thing where I rented. I got the joy of a very hot steering wheel, a seatbelt buckle that could literally burn my skin if it touched it on a hot summer day, and leather seats my legs stuck to when I wore shorts. I did put one of those visors over the windshield, but it only did so much.

My mom came through the garage when she saw me pull up. I opened my door and stepped out.

"Do you see this mess?" she asked as she gestured around the garage floor. Her dark blonde hair was cut short in a way that was stylish. She said she didn't like hair on her neck, insulating the heat in, so she cut it off and had kept it that way since.

"It's a garage," I told her. "It's supposed to be messy."

“It is not. Your father has lost his mind. We don’t need a garden.”

“What does he want to plant?”

She propped her hands on her hips as I walked toward her. Her white shorts were pressed, and her blush-pink blouse was tucked into them. My mom always looked nice. Not in the way Kinsey’s aunt did, always high fashion, but she was put together and presentable all the time. “He was watching that DIY channel, and they were doing remodels. One of them added a vegetable garden to the backyard. Now he wants one.”

“So, he rented a rototiller?”

“Yes, even though I told him to make a raised garden. It would be easier. Plus, he wouldn’t have to bend down all the time to tend to it. You know how his back gets.”

“Again. He’s fifty-five, not ninety. His back is fine.”

I walked around the side of the house to the backyard. Sure enough, there was my dad with a rototiller, churning up the dirt. I stood just off to the side and waited for him to notice me. The moment he did, a smile lit his face. He shut the machine off.

“Seb, what are you doing here?”

“What do you think?”

“I won’t chop off my foot, Liz!” he called toward the direction of the house.

She didn’t appear or say anything back. No, she left this to me.

I looked my dad over. He had sweat beading on his face, his clothes were dirty. My brothers and I got our brown hair and hazel eyes from him. “Why don’t you and I go to the store and return that?” I pointed to the tiller. “Then we can get some lumber and build a raised garden together.”

His eyes widened. I had him. I wasn’t the handy one. That was my carpenter brother Waylen. I was the tech one, but I could make a box, right? Plus, my dad was good with his hands. He could build one without my help. Hell, I’d probably

slow him down, but at least this way he wasn't tilling up the whole yard.

"You want to do that?" he asked.

"Sure. I've got nothing else to do today. But let's get it done now before it gets any hotter. Oh, and maybe we should build as much as we can in the garage where the fans are."

"Sounds good. Let's do it."

And that was how I ended up riding with my dad to return the tiller and spending the day building something with my hands. I didn't even nail my finger to the wood, but I did hammer my thumb once. It was also a great distraction from Kinsey and that list of hers.





---

## KINSEY

“We’re here to save the day, oh cousin of mine,” Vera sang as she slammed into my apartment.

Great, just what I needed. After Sebastian left, I moped around for the rest of the weekend, wondering how things got so weird. I ignored his calls, his texts, until this morning when he wanted to pick me up for work. Thankfully, I had a good excuse to avoid him now. I wasn’t going into the office. I wasn’t quite sure he believed me, but he was nice enough not to press.

Eliana dropped onto my couch with a sigh. “Do we have to adult today?”

Vera and I shared a look. Out of the three of us, Eliana loved her job the most. This app was her baby, her own creation. My problems faded to the back of my mind as I focused on her. “You okay?”

I took the coffee carrier from Vera and handed one to Eliana. She didn’t take a sip, instead just picking at the coffee collar around the hot cup. Something hadn’t been quite right with her over the last few weeks. The anger tendencies we knew her for had almost disappeared since the night of the app malfunction. That was our first clue. It was like she was too tired, too depressed to even get mad.

Lowering myself beside her, I nudged her shoulder. “Talk to us, Ana.”

Her shoulders sagged, and she took a long drink of what I knew must have been a cafe mocha. It was her favorite, and

both Vera and I knew it was the way to her heart. Except, this time, it didn't seem to do the trick.

Vera handed me my black coffee. It wasn't my normal drink, but this morning, I needed the sharpness, the caffeine. Plus, if I asked for what I normally got, what Sebastian liked to pick up for me on Monday mornings, I'd only think of him.

"Are you meeting with Greyson this morning?" Eliana asked, still not looking at me.

"It's been on the calendar for a week. You know I am. As soon as you two get out of my apartment, I'm heading north to Cape Kismet. He offered to come to our offices, but I needed an excuse to get out of town, even if it's only for a few hours."

"My mom still bugging you about the blind date?" Vera asked.

She was, but that wasn't what had me avoiding human contact for days. "It's fine. We're talking about Eliana right now. Tell us what's wrong."

Eliana sighed. "It's all my fault. The reason you have to see our lawyer. It'll cost us if anyone tries to sue, but that's not all. These women who counted on our help button to work for them... we still don't know if anything happened to them."

We'd scoured messages on the app, searching keywords that could give us clues into any problems it caused. We'd even looked at police reports for assaults. Was anyone hurt because they couldn't get help through the app?

I reached for Eliana's free hand. "It'll be okay."

She shook her head.

"Look, Ana," Vera started. "It happened. There was an error in the code—of which you weren't the only writer, by the way—but we can't change it now. There's no point in moping around. All we can do is save our app and make sure it doesn't happen again."

It hadn't seemed to affect usage of the app. Our membership was up after an initial loss. But fewer women

were using the help button. We hoped that was because they didn't need it, not because they didn't trust it.

Vera continued. "Plus, they say no press is bad press. We're having women sign up in droves, so quickly we're struggling to keep up with vetting processes. I need to get on hiring some new people."

Eliana glared at her. "Really, Vera? You think this was a good thing?"

Vera opened her mouth to speak, but I saw the irritation in her eyes and shook my head. I knew my cousin hadn't meant it like that, but there was no reasoning with Eliana when she got like this. She'd have to snap herself out of it.

I wrapped an arm around her back and leaned my chin on her shoulder. "We love you, Ana. Even if you are a giant screwup."

"Speaking of screwup..." Vera hid a grin by taking a sip. "Why did Mr. Perfect Nerd himself text me this morning and ask me to bring you coffee and make sure you were okay?"

"He did not." I set the coffee on the table in front of me. "You're lying."

She held her phone out for me to see, but Eliana snatched it, suddenly perking up. "Juicy. What did you do to him, honey? Sebastian is like a puppy vying for your attention. Don't tell me you kicked him."

"Don't call him a puppy." And he didn't want my attention. We were friends, comfortable with each other because of our long history. That was why he made me the offer that left me so unnerved, an offer he no doubt regretted once he really thought about it. He wanted to help me, but that kind of help was not something I could accept... not from him.

Both women stared at me, waiting for an explanation. I leaned back, staring at the ceiling to avoid their gazes. "It's all your fault. Both of you. You did this to me."

They shared a confused look. "What did we..." Vera stopped. "Oh my God, the list. He saw it."

I finally lifted my head. They were both grinning as if Eliana's previous depression hadn't happened. "He wants to help me with it."

Vera's arms shot up in the air like she'd scored a touchdown. She cursed when hot coffee splashed onto her hand, but it didn't dim her smile.

"Oh, this is gold." Eliana still had Vera's phone. "Can I ask him if he wants to help me too?" She was joking, but there was something about her statement I hated.

"Ohhh, someone didn't like that." Vera bit her lip, studying me. "Jealous, cuz? I knew it. Eliana, pay up."

Eliana rolled her eyes. "Not until they kiss." She turned to me. "Have you?"

I shook my head. "You've been betting on me?"

"Only on when you'd finally realize hot nerds are in. If he looked at me the way he looks at you, I'd have jumped him in the elevator long ago."

"The elevator?"

"You know how they're always somehow getting stuck riding elevators together in *Grey's Anatomy*? Swoon."

"Elevator kink. Got it. But he doesn't look at me any certain way." I stood, checking the time on my phone. "It was just an offer from a friend because, let's face it, I need some serious help. It doesn't matter though because I'm going to say no."

Both of them tried to protest, but I cut them off as I opened the door. "If we don't want to lose our app, I should probably meet with our lawyer now."

Vera jumped off the stool. "We'll get going." She stopped at the door. "Tell that lawyer of ours he's still sexy."

Eliana huffed out a laugh. "Be sure to tell his wife she thinks that too."

By the time I made it to the silence of my Honda, my nerves were fried. All weekend, I'd cleaned until I almost

collapsed. Every inch of my apartment now sparkled. It was nicer than when I'd moved in. It kept my mind off that one fateful conversation.

I tried to push it from my mind as I headed out onto the road. I didn't drive much because Sebastian took me everywhere, but I knew the way to Cape Kismet by heart. It was about an hour north. The small town was idyllic in the way nothing was anymore. If I could move anywhere, I wasn't sure I'd choose someplace else.

With the most adorable bookshop I'd ever seen, friendly people, and tacos to die for, it was heaven. Not to mention my favorite beaches that somehow had resisted Florida's urge to line the coast with bulky chain resorts.

When I made it to Greyson's office, a smiling face greeted me. "Kinsey." Sadie stood from behind her desk. I was pretty sure she knew every client's name, but it still made me feel welcome. "It's good to see you." She was Greyson's assistant but also his wife.

"Hey, Sadie." I had to pretend like my personal problems didn't exist. Today was about business. "I have an appointment with Grey. I may be a bit early."

"That's no problem. He's just in his office talking to his sister right now. She's leaving in a minute."

We could hear raised voices coming from behind the closed door. "Greyson Amore, I swear, if you don't get your act together, I'll... tell Cruz's mom." I didn't know who Cruz was, but moms were always a threat. At least in my experience.

The door opened. "Just go, Ellie. I do have a job to do, you know."

She practically growled as she walked by him. "Bye, Sadie. Tell your husband he's a dumb butt."

Sadie bit back a smile as Ellie left. "She won't curse."

All I could do was stare after her. That was Ellie Amore. I'd recognize her anywhere, even with the pregnant belly. She wrote some of my favorite books. I'd heard she lived here, but

I hadn't put it together. I turned to Grey. "Ellie Amore is your sister?"

He shrugged. "When she'll claim me. She's mad at me right now because her husband and I are apparently babying her."

"Doesn't the doctor want her to take it easy?" Sadie asked.

"That's what I said! She told me if I kept trying to keep her from living her life, she'll tell her mother-in-law. Who happens to be my favorite person." He kissed Sadie's head. "Other than my beautiful wife."

"Nice save." She shoved him away. "Go. Kinsey doesn't want to hear about your family squabbles."

"Yes." His face sobered. "I'm sorry. Please, come in."

I entered his warm office. It was all dark woods and live plants, a good place for a stressful meeting. He gestured to a chair, and I took a seat. He sat across from me.

"So, Kinsey, we're getting calls about the app's error. I've had some talks with investors who are scared about coming lawsuits. I assured them we won't let anything get far enough to reach the press."

"You're telling me we're being sued?" This was what I'd been worried about, why Greyson moved up our meeting.

He hesitated for a moment before nodding. "But only by one user. We expected more. This was a young woman in her early twenties. She tried to use the help feature while on a date when she'd suspected her drink had been spiked."

"Oh, wow." My stomach sank. That was terrible. I couldn't imagine the fear she'd felt. "What happened to her?"

"She claims she got out of there on her own but only after he assaulted her."

I buried my face in my hands. Now I knew how Eliana felt. This was our fault. This woman felt safe going out, knowing we had her back. Only, we didn't.

“Kinsey, there is no proof of her claims, but I suggest we don’t call them false.”

He was right. Women needed to be believed, not belittled. Even if it hadn’t happened to her, there was most likely someone out there who had been hurt. “Absolutely not. We move forward as if she is a survivor.”

He nodded. “I talked to her lawyer, and I think a reasonable settlement can be reached. She just wants to be heard, believed.”

“How much?”

“We’ll start with one hundred thousand, and they’ll most likely negotiate up.”

One hundred thousand. The app could absorb that hit if it meant a step toward making things right. “Okay, do it. Talk to them. Get them to settle and assure the investors we’re taking care of it.” We were one of Greyson’s biggest clients, one of his only corporate clients at this point. He handled a lot of local cases, but I had faith he could do this. He’d been with us since the beginning, and he wanted us to succeed in our goals.

When our meeting ended, I drove home in silence. No music, no phone calls. Just me and my thoughts. They were jumbled as they rotated between the trouble our app was in and the trouble I was in with Sebastian.

There might not be an easy solution for either.

But nothing had ever been easy in my life. If I lost my business, I’d be okay. But Sebastian... losing him would mean losing a part of myself. And that, I wouldn’t survive.





---

## SEBASTIAN

Baby steps. That's what I would do. Since Kinsey was trying to master the art of ignoring me, ignoring our conversation about her list, I would try something new. I would attempt to flirt with her. Sure, I'd tried in the past and sucked like a fish out of water when they tried to breathe but couldn't. That was me. I was a fish. Unable to breathe... err... flirt. And when it came to flirting with Kinsey, I failed. That was a stupid analogy.

I was upping my game today. I ran out at lunch and went to her favorite restaurant to get takeout. Kinsey wasn't one to take long lunch breaks. When she was at work, she gave it her all. Sometimes I had to remind her to take breaks. All that screen time wasn't good for her eyes, anyway. I should know. It bothered the hell out of mine too.

So maybe I went a little overboard with the food. I could have gotten her the grilled chicken Caesar salad which she loved, but there was something she enjoyed more. The burgers. Big, juicy, perfectly cooked cheeseburgers. They also put cheese inside it. Every bite was gooey deliciousness. I got myself one too. Add in a couple of sides of sweet potato fries, sodas, and we had a great lunch. Now to hope she could take a break and sit in one of the conference rooms with me because the last thing I wanted was Eliana or Vera watching me make an ass out of myself when I flirted with Kinsey.

It wasn't that I sucked at flirting. There was something in the Denver genes. We didn't have trouble getting dates. Except apparently when it came to the object of our affections, my

affection. Hookups, I was solid there. I had no trouble finding someone to dance with in the club. With Kinsey, I felt like the ground was shaking, and I didn't know whether I should duck and cover or lean into the tremor.

In the elevator, I waited for the doors to close so I could head upstairs when a hand shot between them at the last second. Eliana stepped through with a bag of food of her own.

"You're not feeding Kinsey, are you?" I asked. It was common for one of them to grab lunch for all three.

She smirked and looked at me like she had a secret. Did she know I offered to help Kinsey with the list? I groaned. "You know, don't you?"

"Know what?"

"Fine, play dumb. But I'm feeding her today."

"Sure you are." She winked.

"Jesus, the innuendo is strong with you."

"I'm a master."

"Master pain in my ass."

"Oooh, burn." She rolled her eyes.

"Can this elevator move any faster?"

"What's the matter? Can't take the heat?"

"I'm waiting for this to devolve into something along the lines of 'I know you are but what am I?'"

She scoffed. "You could be so lucky."

We finally made it to the tenth floor. I was grateful. I had to get out of this metal box with Eliana and her eyes on me that knew too much.

Two feet inside their office and Vera was there with a smile. "Hi, Sebastian."

I groaned again. I wondered how many knew about my offer to help Kinsey with the list.

"Zip it," I replied.

“Well, that’s not very nice.”

“Neither is you knowing my personal business.”

Vera leaned in close. “When your personal business involves our Kinsey, it’s very much our concern. Now be a good boy and start working on that list.”

I wanted to growl at her, but I didn’t. Seemed a bit alpha male, and I’d proven time and time again that wasn’t me. My brother Waylen, maybe. I bet he could growl, and women would love it.

Kinsey was sitting at her desk typing away when I approached. “Thanks, Ana. Set it down. I’ll eat in a bit.”

“If you don’t want to have lunch with me, just say so.”

She turned, eyes wide, shocked I was the one standing here and not Eliana. “Hey, I didn’t expect you.”

“If you want me to grab Eliana, I can.” Now it was my turn to smirk. Eliana wasn’t the only one who could do it.

“No, not at all.”

“Do you have time to eat? I don’t want to pull up a chair here.”

“Sure, let’s go into one of the rooms.” She checked the calendars quickly to make sure there was an open room that hadn’t been reserved for a meeting, and we went inside.

This one had a low table and cushions on the floor. I wished my office did this. It was much more comfortable than those stuffy executive rooms with the mahogany tables and wheeled office chairs that no one liked sitting in.

Kinsey shut the door, so it was quiet inside. No one could hear us, but with the clear glass facing the office space, they could still see us. At least they couldn’t make fun of me if my epic flirting skills epically failed.

I pulled out our meals and set Kinsey’s in front of her.

“Is this what I think it is?” she asked.

“Yup.” I grinned.

“Yes. I can use this today. I didn’t have time for more than a smoothie this morning.”

“Always running around, huh?” No one could say Kinsey or any of the other owners of the app slacked off. They busted their asses to make this business the best they could.

“You can say that again. I had to go to Cape Kismet on Monday and meet with Grey. Took most of my day. I’m glad to be back in the office now.” That name...

“Grey?”

“Greyson Amore, our attorney.” She cocked her head. “Is something wrong?”

I was grateful I hadn’t taken a bite yet. I might have choked on it when the relief washed over me. “He’s your attorney?”

“That’s what I said. Seriously, what’s going on?”

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “Nothing at all.” I couldn’t tell her how I was beyond delighted that Greyson was her attorney and not someone she was seeing. Though if that were the case, wouldn’t she have done the list with him?

She didn’t offer up more information, and I was fine with that. Kinsey would talk to me about things when she was ready. Besides, I was happy with this newfound knowledge. Plus, I was here to flirt. And probably fail at it, but that was yet to come.

On her first bite of the burger, Kinsey moaned. “So damn good.”

“Mmm, I love that sound.” Did I seriously just say that out loud? Any other woman, I’d be good. Flirting like a champ. In front of Kinsey, I was the absolute worst.

She paused mid-chew, then finished and swallowed. “What?”

I shrugged, trying to play it cool. “You’re hot, Kins. And when you moan like that...” I left the sentence open ended, going for the casual flirt. Was that a thing?

Instead of replying, she took another bite of her burger, this time sans moan, and watched me over the bun. I ate mine, a bit self-conscious, hoping I didn't have ketchup on the corner of my mouth. We ate like that until our burgers were half gone. I put mine down and took a drink, wiping my mouth.

Kinsey was never that woman who didn't like to eat in front of a guy. If she wanted something, she ate it. She wasn't out to be someone else. I loved that about her. How genuine she was.

She hadn't said anything, and there was this weird tension in the room. I needed to change things up. An idea sprang to mind.

Leaning forward slightly, I said, "My name's Microsoft. Mind if I crash at your apartment tonight?"

Kinsey did this weird snort-laugh-inhale-choke thing. I wasn't sure if I needed to get up and help her, but she was okay. When she finally breathed a gulp of air in, she was smiling. "Did you seriously just say that to me?"

I grinned. "I did. It got you to laugh."

"It was awful and so nerdy."

"Well, in that case, I have more. If you were the words in a book, you'd be fine print." I winked.

"Oh my God, that was terrible." She laughed again.

"Wow, do you have a magical ability or something? Because when I'm near you, everything else disappears." I waved my hand over my head in an arc for effect.

"That's bad too."

"One more." I pulled out my wallet and took a card from inside. "I'm so glad I have my library card because I'm checking you out."

Kinsey cracked up and, damn, I loved the sound of it.

I put my card and wallet away. "I have skills."

She wiped at her eyes. “Not the kind that will get you anywhere.”

I clutched my chest. “Ouch, you wound me.”

“Who knew Sebastian Denver could be so freaking smooth?” She made sure to roll her eyes.

I was hoping she’d send some cheesy lines back my way but no such luck. Bringing up the list right now didn’t seem right though I couldn’t forget it. It was permanently stuck in my head.

We ate the rest of our meal, joking and laughing while we did so. It was so easy being with her like this. If only that would translate into us being more. Because I didn’t know how to close the gap from friend to lover. Not that it was what we’d become if we did the items on the list. That would just be to help her out. Not lovers. Although I wouldn’t be opposed to that.

Great, now I was thinking about having Kinsey as more. More than friends. More than the list. If she didn’t want that, I wouldn’t push. And obviously, she was avoiding talking about what I’d seen on her fridge.

With lunch cleaned up, I said goodbye to her and walked toward the stairs so I could go back to work.

Vera was leaning against the reception desk as I was leaving. “How’d you do, Casanova?”

“Kinsey: one; Sebastian: zero.”

Eliana appeared out of nowhere with her hand out. Vera reached into her pocket, pulled out a five-dollar bill, and handed it to her.

“Oh, I see how it is,” I said and crossed my arms. “This is funny to you.”

They both got serious fast. It was Vera who spoke. “We like to have fun, yes. But this thing with Kinsey...” She glanced back to make sure Kinsey wasn’t nearby or anyone else. “It’s not a joke. She needs something. Needs someone.”

And we both think it's a great idea if it's you. You'd never intentionally hurt her or do anything she doesn't want."

"You're right. I wouldn't."

"But the thought of someone else helping her out..." She grinned. Damn her.

"I'm jealous. You know it. I know it. Kinsey doesn't seem to realize it."

Vera shrugged. "Or she doesn't want to. You have to get yourself out of the friend zone." Gee, wonder where I'd heard that before.

"Easier said than done."

"Keep trying. We'll do the same. Kinsey needs to see you as more than her geeky best friend."

Just to be a smart-ass, I lifted my shirt to show off my abs. "I'm not all geek."

Eliana glanced down and muttered, "No, you are not."

"On that note, I have to work today."

"I mean it, Bastian," Vera said. "Don't give up."

I nodded but didn't say anything else. There were too many ifs and whens and hows to figure out. One thing I knew how to do, and that was my job. So, for the rest of the afternoon, I got lost in that and kept Kinsey out of my thoughts. Too bad the second I left for the day, she returned with all the questions surrounding her and the list.





---

## KINSEY

“This is the day that never ends.” Vera pulled a chair over to my desk and collapsed into it.

I didn’t look up from the spreadsheets on my screen. It was budget day, and I had to plan for the next few months’ marketing budget. I wanted every penny accounted for.

Vera peered around my screen. “Ew, gross. Numbers. Take them away. Do it now.”

That brought a laugh out of me. She’d never understood my fascination with numbers or Eliana’s love of code. All three of us were so different, but it worked for the business. At least my accounting degree came in handy. “Is there something you wanted?”

“You and Eliana are the last ones working. Something is so wrong with that.” She sighed with all the drama I knew her for. “I thought when we ran our own company, we’d get to work less.”

“That’s not how it works.” I shook my head with a laugh and hit enter on the final formula before meeting her gaze. “I guess I can quit for the day. Want to grab dinner?”

“Can’t. I have a date.”

I lifted one eyebrow. Vera was an open book, never keeping anything from me, even when I desperately wanted her to. “How come I haven’t heard about this person?”

She shrugged. “You have. She’s about four feet tall with an adorable smile.” A grin curved her lips. “I promised Mel we’d

do a movie night, just us—not like her mom would join us anyway.”

I knew it frustrated Vera that Abby dumped Melody whenever she could, and there was also hurt in her voice. I laid my hand on hers. “That kid is lucky to have you for an aunt.” As someone whose parents practically made me raise myself, I knew a bit of what Melody was going through.

“I know.” She leaned back in the chair. “I just wish... I don’t know what I wish. That my sister wasn’t such a bad mom to a kid I loved? That I could muster up a full sentence to say to Abby at all. I’ve never had much patience for people unless it had to do with business.”

Wasn’t that the truth? I bit my lip to keep from laughing, and she shoved me.

A heavy laptop bag thunked onto my desk as Eliana joined us. We had plenty of computers here, but she never went anywhere without her own. “I am so damned tired, and it’s all your fault.”

“Mine?” My brow furrowed.

“Yes, yours. You had a stupid idea that we should create an app. It’ll be fun, you said. We can do it together. I need a vacation.”

Vera and I shared a smile. Eliana was always tired, whether she was working on the app or not. At least, that was the excuse we assigned to her for the grumpiness.

“So,” I started. “Guess that means you’re not up for dinner?”

She shook her head. “Sorry, babe. I’m going to take a long bath and probably fall asleep in the water. If I drown, tell everyone I went doing what I loved most. Sleeping.” She shouldered her bag. “If you need company so badly, call Sebastian.” With a wink, she headed toward the door.

Vera stifled a laugh. “She’s right, you know. You should call him. I bet he’d... entertain you.”

Giving my cousin a long glare, I sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“It’s not. A guy you trust wants to help you get past this sex block you have. I’ll bet he’s generous too.”

“Vera.”

“Probably spends a lot of time downtown.”

“Stop.”

She stood. “Think about it. That’s all I’m saying. It’s perfectly fine not to have a sex life, Kins. But if you want one, you need someone to help. He’s offering.”

Once she left, I sat in the empty office, preparing to go home to the empty apartment. I’d never been lonely on my own, but tonight was different. Tonight, I wanted someone there.

I pulled out my phone and stared at a missed call from Sebastian. There’d been a lot of such calls, but before today’s lunch, I hadn’t talked to him since he made his offer. The thought of him seeing me in a new light, of him suddenly becoming something other than just a friend... well, it scared the hell out of me.

Because he was my favorite person. What if I was no longer his after he saw just how far I had to go? Would he pity me? Judge me?

No, that was wrong. The man I knew wouldn’t think poorly of me. I could probably murder his brothers, and he’d testify on my behalf at my trial. Most people never got a friend like that, and I couldn’t lose it.

I packed up my purse and switched the lights off before locking the office and heading for the elevator. When the doors opened, I froze, unable to step inside. There he was. The man I could hardly look at. The one who fed me, took care of me.

A hint of a smile played on his lips. “Kinsey.” His tongue caressed my name like it was precious. Like *I* was precious.

“Hey.” I gave him an awkward nod and stepped in. He shifted closer.

“You smell good,” he said.

A nervous giggle popped out of me. “I call that eau de long day of work.” Why was I so nervous? He was the one who rode up to my floor just so we could take the elevator down together. Yet, he didn’t look embarrassed by that.

His fingertips brushed the hair away from my face, trailing the curve of my neck and sending a bolt of energy down my spine. That was new.

I shifted away from him, and his hand dropped.

Clearing my throat, I asked, “What are you up to tonight?”

He shrugged. “Not much.”

It was on the tip of my tongue to ask him to come over. We could order takeout and turn on a reality show like things were normal. Yet, I kept the words inside, and when the elevator opened on the ground floor, I hurried away from him, half-expecting him to chase after me. When he didn’t, I wasn’t sure if I was relieved or disappointed.

“Get a grip on yourself, Kinsey,” I whispered, climbing into my car and feeling lazy for not having walked to work like normal today.

It was dark when I got home, and Chewy greeted me at the door, his bell signaling my arrival. “Hi, baby.” I reached down to heave him into my arms and dropped my purse. Kicking off my shoes, I walked straight for my bedroom, not stopping until I reached the edge of my bed. I set Chewy down, and he immediately curled up, warm and inviting.

I fell onto the bed next to him, and he lifted his head in agitation as the mattress dipped.

“Sorry, Chew.” Rolling onto my side, I reached for the small foam basketball on the bedside table. I kept a hoop attached to the opposite wall because it helped me think. There had been a time when basketball was my way of life. In college, I lived and breathed it, helping my team to an

undefeated season. Now, I had a small hoop on my bedroom wall and a basketball I could squish between my fingers. How times changed.

Lying on my back, I lifted one arm and launched it. The ball flew in a perfect arc before swishing through the net. “I still have it.” I dug my hand into Chewy’s long hair and shook him in excitement. He let out a low growl.

Well, at least I was impressed with myself.

With a sigh, I sat up, ready to get the ball to shoot again. I needed to train Chewy to do that. I snorted at the thought of training him to do anything.

But instead of going for the ball, my eyes caught on my open closet door and the box on the top shelf I had yet to explore. I’d opened it, sure, but nothing further.

Could I...

Absolutely not. “I suppose you want some chow to chew, Chewy?”

He did not look amused at my joke. Yet, nice cat mom that I was, I fed him anyway. Next, I went to the fridge and searched for something edible. I hadn’t gone grocery shopping this week, so my choices were leftover Chinese food or the sushi Aunt Delia brought me. She was trying to learn to make it herself, a hobby outside the fashion world her therapist said she needed.

Yet, she hadn’t quite mastered the art.

“Definitely not.” I shut the door without pulling anything out, but that brought me face-to-face with the stupid list that started all this current drama. If it hadn’t been for my family and those ten line items, things would be normal with Sebastian. I wouldn’t have a vibrator in my closet.

I’d be the same old Kinsey.

Was that a good thing, or was it just sad?

I snatched the list off the refrigerator and crumpled it in my fist, then froze. What if Vera and Eliana were right? What if I needed this?

Setting the list on the counter, I spread it flat. It was wrinkled now and ripped in places, but each of the ten steps was clearly visible. I realized Sebastian had already begun. How had I not seen it before?

*1. Learn to flirt.*

That was what today was about with the awful pickup lines. He'd wanted me to join in, to have fun practicing my flirting on him, and all I'd done was laugh at him.

That box in my closet called to me, telling me there were things on this list I could accomplish without having to resort to using my best friend.

Could I do it?

I walked into my bedroom with the steps of someone who was terrified of what might await her there. Chewy was busy cleaning himself, but I picked him up and set him outside the door, shutting it before he could sneak back in.

Reaching up into my closet, I pulled the box down and opened it. The fake penis stared up at me, almost accusingly. Was this wrong? Could it be wrong to do something for ourselves?

I wrapped my hand around the silicone base and pulled out the folded piece of paper underneath. Instructions. Thank the great Star Wars Lord.

Walking to my vanity, I set the vibrator down and opened the instructions, reading every word, my cheeks flaming as it described how to use it. There were multiple speeds, many pulsing patterns. I followed the directions on how to clean it and went back into my room.

"You can do this." I stared at myself in the mirror. "Just go for it, Kinsey." I had to stop talking to myself.

Chewy scratched at the door, but I ignored him. This was not something I wanted an audience for.

My thumb pressed down on the power button, and the entire thing shook like it was preparing to take off. Or get me

off. A snort-laugh came out of me. This was ridiculous. Why was I such a weirdo?

This wouldn't work in my clothes. I stripped from the waist down.

"Just for a minute," I told myself. Then I was done.

Not taking my eyes from the mirror, I lowered my hand until the vibrations touched my skin, making me jump. I tried to relax into the sensation, to let it wash over me, but it wasn't easy.

"This is so awkward." It must have been the mirror.

I moved to the bed, lying on my back and spreading my legs. This time, when the sensation hit me, my back arched. "Oh." *Oh.*

My eyes slid shut as I pressed harder, my free hand gripping the sheets. I didn't have much to compare it to, but was this what sex was supposed to feel like? No man had ever done to me what a little silicone toy was doing.

My chest heaved as it grew more intense.

"*Relax,*" a voice whispered into my ear. "*I'll take care of you.*"

My eyes snapped open, but no one was there. I'd recognize that voice anywhere. "Sebastian," I panted, imagining the way he'd touch me, how his lips would feel when they met mine.

My breathing grew ragged as I pictured him moving over me, doing as he promised.

"No," I practically yelled. He was Sebastian. I couldn't.

Yanking the vibrator away, I sat up. My entire body buzzed with energy, begging me to complete what I'd started, wanting Sebastian to be the one to do it.

Crawling off the bed, I tossed the toy in the trash. "Piece of shit." Sure, it felt damn good, but it also put those images into my head.

Images that couldn't become a reality.

My phone buzzed from the pocket of my pants. I pulled it free, seeing Sebastian's name. I should have ignored it, but I couldn't. Not right now.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Kins." His voice purred over me, even more perfect than I'd imagined.

I looked down and realized I still wasn't wearing pants. Something seemed very wrong about that, so I quickly yanked them on, not bothering with underwear. "What's up?" It took all my effort to keep my voice from shaking.

"You seemed weird when we left work. I'm making sure you're okay."

Why did he have to be such a good friend? I sighed. "I'm fine. It was just a long day."

"You'd tell me if something else was bothering you?" He paused. His next words were quieter. "Like my offer?"

Yes, I wanted to say. His offer bothered me a lot. Especially when I was trying to complete part of the list on my own. "No, all good."

"I meant it. I want to help you."

"I know you do, but it's not that simple."

"It can be as simple as we want it to be. Just think about it."

I scrubbed a hand through my hair. "Sure."

Why couldn't I say no? Give him the answer I needed to.

After tonight, I wondered if what I needed was at odds with what I truly wanted.





---

## SEBASTIAN

Everything was weird, and I didn't know what to make of it. That list of Kinsey's was screwing with my head big time, and I wasn't even the one who made it. It was the second day in a row I ran into Kinsey on my way out of the building. And the second day in a row where it was awkward between us.

Not knowing what to do with myself, and not in the mood to go to a club, especially not with Kinsey on my mind, I decided to head over to see my parents. No matter what day of the week it was, my mom cooked a big meal in hopes that either I or my brothers would show up to join them.

When I pulled into the driveway, I decided to send a quick text to Kinsey.

Me: Want to join me for dinner at my parents'? It's exciting, I know. But free food, so yay!

Kinsey: Thanks, but can't. Maybe next time.

I groaned, dropped my head back, and closed my eyes. It wasn't the first time I invited her here. Did I already ruin things with her by trying to flirt? Trying to do things we'd never done before?

A knock on my window had my eyes flying open and me jumping out of my skin. "Jesus!" I turned, and Waylen was staring at me. I shut my car off and got out. "What the hell?"

"Mom asked me to come check on you," he said in his usual gruff voice.

“You could have done that without scaring me.”

“And you could have gotten your ass in the house and not made me come out here.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled.

Like Shea, Waylen and I didn’t get along with each other. We were all so different, and those differences created a gap between us the size of the Grand Canyon.

I followed Waylen’s broad back into the house. To others, he was intimidating due to his size, his full beard, and his hair in a buzz cut. Not to me or Shea. We didn’t care how big he was or how much of a dick he could be. He was just our brother.

We entered through the front door and went to the kitchen where my mom was busy plating dinner. I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and washed my hands.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” she said with a smile.

“Figured I’d surprise you.”

“If I had known, I could have worked later,” Waylen said as he grabbed a bowl of green beans and brought them to the dining room.

“You know I like all my boys here,” Mom replied.

I helped carry things to the table, and before long, we were sitting down to a feast fit for a king. Roasted chicken, salad with a colorful variety of vegetables in it, rosemary red potatoes, asparagus, fresh rolls, and the green beans. I also saw an apple pie in the kitchen. She always outdid herself.

Waylen shoveled in food so he didn’t have to talk. That was always his way. Sharing as little of himself as possible. I did it too sometimes, but maybe tonight I should say more. I was so damn tired of trying to figure things out on my own. Usually, I talked to Kinsey but couldn’t now since she was the reason for my confusion. Could I talk to the three family members in the room about it? At least Kinsey had Vera and Eliana to talk to. I envied her for that.

“What’s going on, Seb?” Dad asked. “You don’t normally drop by without a guilt trip or a direct request from your mom.”

“Hey!” Mom smacked him on the arm. “I don’t guilt trip them.”

My dad raised an eyebrow. “Liz, you’re the queen of guilt trips. If you had it your way, they’d all still be living under our roof so you could make sure they’re eating properly every day.”

“You make me sound ridiculous. I love my boys. I wouldn’t want them living here. I’m enjoying my freedom.” She turned to Waylen and me. “But you boys know if you ever need to come home, you can. I don’t want you to think the door is shut to you. I’m just saying that having a crafting room is something I like.” Her crafting room also had a queen size bed in it... just in case.

I had to resist rolling my eyes. If one of us did need to move back in, that crafting room would be packed up in a hot second to make space for us. “We know, Mom.”

Some might think she smothered us even at our ages. But my brothers and I never saw it that way. Yes, it got to be a bit much sometimes, but we knew we were loved. That they’d always be there for us. Anything we needed.

“Seb,” my dad prompted. I almost forgot he asked me a question.

I sighed and put my fork down. “I have feelings for Kinsey.” There. I ripped the bandage off. It didn’t hurt as badly as I thought it would. Confessing that aloud to someone other than myself was a big deal for me.

Glancing up, I saw Waylen had his fork paused halfway to his mouth as he looked at me with wide eyes. My dad just blinked a few times. But my mom, she always knew how to break through any kind of tension.

“We know.” That was all she said.

“You know?” I asked.

Waylen rolled his eyes. “You’re not that dense, Seb. You’re the smartest one out of us.”

Now it was my turn to blink. Did... Did Waylen just compliment me? “What the hell is happening right now?” I felt like I was in *The Twilight Zone*. Was Rod Serling about to show up?

“You’re so dramatic.”

“Me? You just complimented me for the first time ever, and I’m the dramatic one?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve complimented you before.”

“Slapping me on the back when I graduated college and saying ‘Well done’ doesn’t count as a compliment.”

“Whatever,” he grumbled. I knew I was right. He knew it too. This shit was weird.

“Seb,” my mom said, bringing my focus back to her. “Anyone who has eyes can see that you have feelings for Kinsey.” Fan-fucking-tastic.

“Except apparently her, because she doesn’t have a clue.”

“That’s because her eyes aren’t open to it yet. You have to give her hints.”

“Get out of the friend zone,” my brother added.

*Friend zone! Friend zone! Friend zone!*

No way. We weren’t doing this.

“I’m not in the friend zone,” I countered.

Waylen almost smiled. It was this half smirk, quirk of one side of his lips thing. It was odd. He wasn’t a happy-go-lucky type of guy. Hell, Shea wasn’t either. I was probably the one with the brightest personality, and that wasn’t saying much. Shea smiled and said the right things. Always did when he was working. But it wasn’t a genuine smile. Those came out for my parents. Sometimes me and Waylen. But Waylen, he wasn’t the smiling type. I wondered what it took to truly make him happy.

“Did something happen?” my dad asked. It made sense. Had it been someone saying this to me, I’d be curious about what triggered the confession. But I couldn’t tell them about the list. Not only did I not want to talk about sex in front of my family, but I also couldn’t betray Kinsey’s trust like that.

“Just been thinking about it more,” was my answer. “Thinking about *her* more. I used to love going out, having a great time dancing and drinking, but it all feels so empty. It’s fun for a night. Morning comes—and hello, clarity.”

Waylen grunted. I wasn’t sure what that meant. Was he agreeing with me? Thinking I needed to get out of the club phase? I didn’t bother asking.

“It’s normal, Seb. When your mother and I first met, I was out there, having fun.”

I groaned. I didn’t want to hear this story again about my dad screwing his way through Tampa. No. Just... no. Okay, so he wasn’t a player or anything, but he wasn’t celibate either.

“Anyway,” he said with a bit of force, since I had no doubt he knew what I was thinking. “I’m simply saying that there’s nothing wrong with having a good time. But there’s also nothing wrong with finding someone and wanting to settle down.”

“Except Kinsey doesn’t see me that way.”

“Because you never told her how you feel.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“You’ll never know unless you leap.”

I shook my head. “It could ruin our friendship.”

“Or it could make it better.” This circle we were talking in made my head spin.

I picked up my fork and started eating again. I confessed I had feelings for Kinsey. That was enough for now. I didn’t need to tell them to keep it between us. They’d never tell Kinsey. Whatever was said between our family was kept there. We weren’t like Vegas, because that place was wild, and the Denvers weren’t. We were more like a vault at a respectable

bank with low-interest rates and a high cashback offering on purchases.

We ate in silence for a bit before my dad and Waylen started talking about the raised garden we built out back. And Waylen complimented me... again. It was so damn weird. That garden turned out good though, so this time, I smiled and said thank you. My dad and I took our time, measured everything, and built it as if we'd been doing it for years. For Waylen to compliment us, it meant we did something very right.

My dad filled the garden in with soil and had already planted things. I wasn't sure what time of year was best to plant what. I left that up to him. I had done my duty and helped build it.

After having pie, Waylen and I stayed to help clean up while our parents relaxed out back. If my mom made dinner, she never cleaned up. It was a hard and fast rule. She shouldn't do all the work. When my brothers or I weren't there, my dad did the dishes. He even had dish gloves he wore while doing them.

We said goodbye and thanks for dinner. Waylen and I walked out at the same time. Me to my Hyundai and Waylen to his Ford F-250 super-duty crew cab. I only knew that was what it was called because Waylen told me after he bought it when I said it was nice that it had four doors. I didn't know shit about cars and trucks and didn't really care. But Waylen did, so I took a slight interest. Only in his. Because, again, trucks. At least he didn't have one of those nut sacks hanging from the back of it.

I was about to get into my car when Waylen called my name.

“Yeah?” I turned and faced him, ass half inside.

“Just talk to her.”

“I'll ruin things.”

“You will if you think like that.” I had to remember he didn't know the whole story. He didn't know about the list.

That was a huge factor in this. But Waylen was trying, and I appreciated it.

“Thank you,” I told him instead of responding to his statement.

He grunted and got into his truck. I guessed that was the end of the brotherly advice.

Waylen was seven years older than me. He was born when my parents were only twenty. He had more life experience than me. Ran his own business. Did things on his own terms. As far as relationships, Waylen was no better than me. Single, and had been for years.

I got into my car and groaned. Again. Dropped my head back and closed my eyes. Again. I was no better off than when I'd arrived. Well, maybe I was. I had a full stomach. Still no answers about what to do where Kinsey was concerned. No lighter for having confessed my feelings for her. That was about right.





---

## KINSEY

Was I the only person who didn't get it? Honestly, I didn't even know what I didn't know. Make sense of that. Everyone around me just seemed so... content. Like they knew exactly how to go about their days without screwing up their entire lives. They were experts in living, and I was just an observer, desperately needing someone to show me how to be a normal human being.

I was probably wrong about them. Everyone had their own issues. I wasn't even sure mental stability existed, but sometimes, social anxiety left me feeling on my own. Especially now that I didn't have Sebastian showing up every time I needed him. I'd never even had to tell him, he was just there.

And I took that for granted.

"Ms. Hart, did you hear me?" The girl sitting in front of me looked no older than I had been when I decided I wanted to go into business with my two best girlfriends. Twenty-two, maybe. I guess I'd know if I looked at her resume; I should generate some modicum of excitement that I was hiring an assistant.

Vera and Eliana had been on me for months to do it, but with our legal issues, it was now more pressing than ever. I needed the help. "I'm so sorry." I peeked down at the paper in front of me. "Charlotte." I forced a smile. "Forgive me, I'm a bit in my head today."

“Always,” Vera called from where she leaned against the wall. I hadn’t realized she was listening in.

Charlotte laughed, a sweet sound. “That’s okay. This is just for a marketing assistant position. I only need to know how you like your coffee and how to sweet-talk your advertisers, right?”

“Hired.” Vera grinned. “I like this girl.”

I narrowed my eyes, determined to make this a real interview, and not hire the first girl who seemed like she could find the coffee maker. “There’s more to it.” I scanned her resume. It was pretty light as she was a recent college graduate, but she’d done a couple of internships. “Why us? Don’t you want a job that pays more with a degree?”

She shrugged. “To be completely honest, this company kind of saved my life.”

“Do tell.” Vera took an empty chair at the long table.

Even I was interested now.

Charlotte looked down at her hands. “I was out on a date with this guy I met on an app. He seemed nice online, but he was... rough. Attractive as hell, don’t get me wrong. His face matched his picture. How often does that happen? But the way he spoke to me sent off red flag after red flag. Eventually, when it was time to call for the check, he gripped my wrist and told me I was going home with him. I managed to hit the help button in the app, and there happened to be an app user eating dinner with her brother in the same restaurant. She got the alert, and her brother pretended to be my jealous boyfriend.”

She lifted her eyes. “I don’t know what would have happened. Anyone who creates something like that is a woman I want to work for.”

I tried to hold back the tears threatening to spill over my cheeks. For weeks now, we’d dealt with complaints. The lawsuits were being settled, and there were fewer than we expected, but the blow to our reputation had been hard to take. Yet, sitting here in front of me was someone who was living proof we hadn’t completely screwed up everything.

I nodded, wiping my eyes. Standing, I looked down at her. “You can start tomorrow.”

Vera followed me back into the busy open offices, waiting until I reached my cubicle to speak. “You okay?”

“Yes. Fine.” I wasn’t, but a part of me blamed Vera and Eliana for this mess with Sebastian. They were the ones who put it into my head that I needed practice in the bedroom, that whoever I dated would be disappointed with me.

Maybe they were, but I wasn’t sure I cared anymore.

Vera waited for me to keep talking, and when I didn’t, she sighed. “Sebastian and you still... thinking things over?”

Was I? There were times when I thought I’d decided it was absolutely a bad idea to go there with Sebastian. But others... Maybe he was the person I needed. For this. Only for this. I just had to keep telling myself that.

The offices were crowded today with few people deciding to work from home. We were set up to allow hybrid, but our employees loved to be together, to collaborate in person. We probably got less work done when we were all in the office, but it created a family I wouldn’t give up for the world.

Right now, though, it was too much.

“I need to take off early.” I grabbed my purse from under the desk and slid it over my shoulder.

“Hot date?” Vera asked. It was a joke, but I was tired of that type of fun at my expense.

“Just need to get out of here.” There was work to be done, but that was usually the case. Eliana was always yelling at me to delegate more, not like she took her own advice. Maybe now was the time.

“Nevaeh?” I called.

Her head popped up over the divider. “Yeah, boss?”

“There’s a list of ideas for social media posts on my computer. Expand on that and write the copy yourself.”

Her eyes widened, and her smile grew. “Sure thing.”

I gave instructions to a few others before heading for the door. Eliana tried to stop me to talk, but I shook my head and kept going. The small elevator was suffocating, and I could hardly breathe until I reached the fresh air. I drew in a breath and pulled out my phone. There was one person who always had the answers for me.

I got in my car and made my way into the heart of downtown. I passed Amalie Arena and kept going. Tampa was never an easy city to navigate because of the bay. It wasn't laid out on a grid, which made the streets meander in odd curves.

I parked outside my aunt's building. She had the entire top floor to herself. Part of it was an apartment and the other section was her studio where she designed the popular clothes.

Walking up, I punched in the security code for the elevator to take me up, but when the golden doors slid open, the place was teeming with people. Not just any people. They were naked. Well, not entirely. Most of them had some sort of undergarments on.

I sighed. Par for the course with Delia.

A tall, bronzed man walked by me as if he hadn't noticed me standing there at all. His shoulder hit mine, and I stumbled. Strong hands caught me, and when I looked up, all I saw was chest. And nipples. Right in front of my face.

My mouth went dry, and I couldn't speak.

He righted me and bent at the neck to peer into my face. "You good?"

I nodded mutely.

His lips twitched. I'd been around models most of my life thanks to my aunt's career. If there was one thing that held true for most of them, they knew how good they looked.

Straightening and not wanting to give him ogling pleasure, I forced a passive expression onto my face. "Can you tell me where Delia is?"

An older lady rushed toward me, and relief flooded my veins. "Kinsey, dear. Did she know you were coming today?"

“No. I should have called.” Grace had worked for my aunt for as long as I could remember. She was a seamstress. The best. “Fitting day?”

“You know it. I’ve seen enough skin today to last me a lifetime.”

“Must be a big show.” Aunt Delia liked to do her fittings at once while preparing for a fashion show.

“Does she do any other kind?” She put a hand on my back. “Come, I’ll help you navigate the bodies and get to her ladyship.”

“I appreciate it.” I avoided the curious gazes of the male pincushions. That’s what they were today. The fashion industry didn’t treat their models like real people half the time. I’d seen that all too often.

“There she is.” Aunt Delia clapped her hands together, a giant smile on her face. “Kyle told me you were here somewhere.”

“Kyle?”

She pointed to the model I’d bumped into on my way in. My cheeks reddened.

Delia stood from her crouch and turned her finger to get the model to spin. She wore a pale pink dress that rose on one side to a silver brooch. It was stunning.

“Perfect.” She stuck a pin in her mouth, considering the woman. “Okay, make sure not to bump the pins as you remove the dress. Grace can give you a hand.” The pin muffled her voice.

Grace led the woman to another part of the room as Delia removed the pin from her mouth and picked up some she’d dropped. I leaned down to help her. “I’m happy to see you, Kins, but you never just stop by. That’s my move.”

She turned to put the pins on a cart behind her.

“I…” We were interrupted by a toned man in black boxer briefs that left little to the imagination. My insides clenched. Damn, maybe everyone was right. I needed to get laid.

“Do you think I’m pathetic?”

Delia turned, her mouth dropping open. “Oh, baby girl, no.” She stepped forward to wrap her arms around me. I stiffened before letting her. “You have always been exceptional.”

“Then why does everyone think I need to change? That I can’t be happy unless you’re setting me up or I’m letting my best friend screw my brains out.”

She pulled back with a wince.

“Sorry.” I held in a laugh. Delia was open with us about many things, but she was still basically my mom so I had to watch how I said things. “I just mean—”

“I know what you mean.” She gestured to a sofa nearby and shooed away the two models sitting there.

“Be honest, how many bare butts have been on this today?”

“Just sit down.”

I did as she bade, relaxing back into the cushions. “I want to be normal, D.”

She sighed. “What do you think is normal?”

I didn’t have an answer for that.

“Honey, we all have our paths to tread. I wanted to set you up not because I want you to change, but because I want you to experience all parts of life. If you decide to never fall in love, as long as you’re happy, that’s still a wonderful life. But how can you make any choices when you haven’t let yourself see what those choices could be?”

Nothing she said was wrong. I hadn’t dated since college. Being around new people made me into a different person, one filled with fear. “What if I’m not any good at it?”

“At what, dear?”

“Everything.”

“I’m ready.” A woman stepped in front of the couch, bouncing on her toes with the kind of energy I wasn’t even sure I’d had as a kid. “I heard I get to wear the red one.”

Delia stood. “You sure do, kid.” She turned back to look down at me. “I should get back to work, or some of these guys will be here late. Look, Kins, I can’t begin to know what all this is truly about. I don’t think it’s the impending blind date. There’s something else going on. You don’t have to tell me, but you can’t keep holding yourself back. You are one of my favorite people in this world, and I want everyone else to get to see what I do.”

She smiled. “Even if you don’t ever date, do whatever you need to do to break yourself out of this protective bubble. Let the world in.” She leaned down and pressed a kiss to my head. “Love you.”

“I love you too.” I watched her walk back to her cart of pins with the young model and sighed.

She was right, as always. But the solution might be the one thing that could both help me and destroy me.





---

## SEBASTIAN

There had been no word from Kinsey since I sent her that text asking if she wanted to come for dinner with my parents. Not a call or a text. Now it was Tuesday, and I was getting twitchy.

Here was the thing. I wasn't obsessed with her. I had a crush on her, yes. But she was my best friend and not talking to her sucked. That damn list had come between us, and we weren't even acting on it. I felt like I had nothing to lose at this point by actually completing the items on said list. It still had to be her choice though.

Work had been busy. One of the people on our team left for another job, and we'd been interviewing candidates all week to fill the role. They couldn't hire someone soon enough. Granted, our team was a good size, but having to pick up a little of the slack from that empty position meant I was more tired than normal. Add in that I wasn't sleeping great and, yeah, I was near my wit's end.

I was typing up my recommendation for which candidate I thought we should go with when Anthony came over and propped his ass on the edge of my desk.

"What's with you?" he asked. "You're all mopey."

"Mopey? I'm busy. Which is something you should be, not over here invading my personal space."

"Come out with us tonight for a drink. You look like you need it."

I looked up at him and noticed he was sincere even though I was being a dick. Anthony was a good guy. He didn't

deserve my shit attitude. “Who’s going?”

He rattled off the names of some of our co-workers. Tuesday nights, a group went out to blow off steam. I went every once in a while. It was laid back, bitching about work, laughing. I could use that tonight.

“Okay, count me in.”

“I’ll even buy you a drink.”

“I won’t turn that down.” I smiled.

He left me alone to get back to work after telling me the time and place. They didn’t always go to the same one. This bar was right up the road. I wouldn’t get drunk, just blow off steam.

Especially when my boss sent out an email saying that we were changing the chat software we used. He wanted to go with the one his brother-in-law worked for. Why the hell did he bother asking for any of our opinions if he would do what he wanted, anyway? I knew for a fact others had told him this wasn’t a good idea. That there was nothing wrong with the one we had. But sure. Make things unstable by switching software. That made sense.

I heard a couple of the guys near me grumble when they saw the email. It was just a job. I had to keep reminding myself of that. It was something to pay the bills and nothing more. I didn’t own the company. I wasn’t even in management.

The rest of the day went by quickly. I was glad there were no emergencies, nothing I had to rush to fix. A little after five, I shut down my computer and grabbed my stuff. As the day wore on, that drink sounded better and better.

I still hadn’t heard from Kinsey. If we didn’t talk soon, I’d need to try to coax her over to my place for a night of binging crap TV and eating something we probably shouldn’t but would anyway. None of my work friends understood my relationship with her. They also didn’t have any women they were close to outside of their relatives or spouses. It had been brought up to me more than once that they couldn’t understand

how things had always remained platonic between us. It was easy to mask my feelings and say we liked our relationship the way it was.

But that was before the freaking list. Now I couldn't think about her without thinking about that.

For a fleeting moment over the weekend, it had crossed my mind that she might be taking care of that list with someone else. But this was Kinsey. She wouldn't be comfortable doing it with anyone else. She wasn't apparently willing to do it with me either. I'd bet that list still sat crumpled on her fridge under the magnet.

I waited at my desk until the mass exodus from work had ended. I didn't feel like being jammed into the elevator like a pack of sardines to travel downstairs, and I was too tired for that many flights of stairs. Inside the elevator, I made the journey down. When the doors opened on Kinsey's floor, she stepped in and didn't notice me. She had her head down. Her eyes on her phone.

I waited to see if she'd realize I was here. It was a stupid thing to do. I should say hi. But I was being childish. I missed her, and it felt like it wasn't mutual.

She eventually looked up. "Sebastian?"

I turned to her. "Oh, so you do remember my name?"

She smiled. "Knock it off. I've been busy."

"Even over the weekend?"

"The lawsuits are wearing on me." I knew she couldn't talk about the details. Now I felt like shit for thinking she was ignoring me. She was probably working harder than normal, and the guilt must have been eating at her for the help button having been down like it was.

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?"

"No, Grey is a great lawyer. It's getting handled. On the bright side, I hired an assistant."

"It's about time. You need more help. Maybe you can relax a little."

She rolled her eyes. “Sure.”

Another reason why I didn’t want to own a business. I liked that when I left for the day, I was done. The only time I wasn’t was when I was on call. We had a rotation on the team. Every two weeks, I had a night that was mine to take if there were any emergencies. And we took turns on holidays and weekends.

The elevator chimed as we picked up a few more people on the way down. Kinsey focused on her phone again. When we got to the lobby, we walked side by side.

I paused, wanting this weirdness between us to go away but not knowing how to get rid of it.

“Listen,” she said. “I haven’t been the best friend lately, and I apologize for that.”

I shook my head. “It’s on both of us. I miss you.” I was sure to give her my best puppy dog eyes.

Groaning, she slung her arm around my waist and gave me a side hug. “I miss you too, ya jerk.”

Tension I hadn’t realized I was carrying around slowly bled out of me, and I could relax. Hopefully, things could go back to the way they were with us. Not that the list would leave my mind, but I wanted my friend back and this weird space between us gone.

I saw Anthony and a few of the others standing in the parking lot, talking. He waved to me. Kinsey noticed.

“I should get going,” I told her. “I said I’d get drinks with them.”

She looked to them and back to me. “Yeah, no worries.”

“Do you want to come?” It wasn’t Kinsey’s thing. I didn’t want to exclude her either.

“No, but thanks for the invite. I need to head over to Delia’s and pick some things up.”

“Okay, well, don’t have too much fun.”

“Right, staring at half-naked models is so boring.” She chuckled.

I always forgot that Delia had shirtless men over there. And that Kinsey saw them. All the time. I felt like an idiot. Why the hell would she want to do that list with me when she could have her pick of cover model men?

Instead of solidifying that sad puppy look, I forced a smile and said, “Have a good night.”

She looked like she wanted to say something, but then her phone chimed and drew her attention to it. She smiled and gave me a little wave before heading off.

I walked to my car, wanting to kick my own ass. I was never getting out of the friend zone.

“Ready, asshole?” Anthony asked when I got near them.

“Yup. Show me the alcohol.”

“That’s the spirit!”

We each got in our cars and went to the bar. I could have left mine here and rode with one of them, but I didn’t know how much they would drink and if they would Uber home. I only planned to have one or two max. Not enough to get drunk or even buzzed. Just to take the edge off the mood I was in.

The bar was about half full of business types. They took up some of the tables, and the bar area was mostly empty when I stepped inside. I was one of those types in my slacks and button-down. This was the early evening crowd. None of the people with us tonight would end up staying all night, and they were responsible when they drank. It was one of the reasons I never minded going out with them.

We bullshitted about work. Bitched about our boss, Lee, who thankfully wasn’t with us tonight. All in all, it was just what I needed. By the time I was stuffed full of wings and a beer, I was getting tired and wanted to chill in front of an episode of some seriously bad TV and call it a night.

I went up to the bar to settle my tab. A woman there had caught my eye more than once tonight. She had long legs,

curves, and a bright smile. She was definitely interested, yet I couldn't get my ass to move to talk to her. Now I was standing near her.

She leaned her elbow on the bar and faced me. "Married?"

I laughed. "No. Hopelessly in love with my best friend." It didn't hurt telling a stranger this. And honestly, I had nothing to lose.

"Ah, been there." She grimaced. "Think you have a shot?"

"Now where would the fun in that be?"

"Romance sucks." She grabbed her drink and took a sip. "Want to do something together? I know you won't catch feelings for me, so it's a safe bet for a hookup and never seeing each other again type of situation."

"I appreciate it, but I don't think I'd be very good company." Or be able to get it up at this point without some damn good porn or me thinking about Kinsey. Because ever since I saw that list, no one else would do.

She shrugged. "Can't blame a girl for trying."

The bartender came over so I could pay. I asked him to add a drink for her and gave him my card. "Maybe someone else in here will take you home."

She looked around. "Nah, I think I'm good."

I smiled. Any other time, pre-Kinsey's to-do list, I wouldn't have hesitated to go home with her. She had a great personality. No strings. It was ideal. But I still couldn't do it. "Get home safe."

She smiled back. "You too."

The first thing I did when I got home was shower. I smelled like the bar. It wasn't appealing. The second was throw on a pair of boxer briefs. The third was down some water. And the fourth was lie in bed and watch mindless shit on TV. I didn't have the woman I wanted beside me, but I was more relaxed than before thanks to a night out.





---

## KINSEY

“Kinsey?”

I felt like it wasn't the first time I'd heard my name, but I didn't look up, didn't tear my focus away from the email from Grey telling me that he had met with more of the women yesterday to get a sense of what they wanted. Money. That was it.

Money was something we could provide.

He said he'd be able to keep it out of the press, other than what was already out there. No court. No losing the business because of a stupid glitch.

“Boss?” That voice again.

“For fuck's sake, Kins.” Vera shoved a mug my way. “Your very sweet assistant has been trying to get your attention since the destruction of Pompeii.”

I lifted my gaze to find Charlotte staring at me. My assistant. How weird was that? “Oh, I'm sorry.”

Vera sighed. “You're just as bad as Eliana when she's knuckle deep in code.”

I rubbed my eyes, realizing how tired I was. I wasn't sure when the last time I got a good night's sleep was. Between the lawsuit and Sebastian... there was a lot on my mind. “I'm sorry, Charlotte.”

“Oh, you can call me Charlie, boss.” She gave me a cheeky grin. There was something sweet but also impish about her.

“Then stop with the boss business.”

Vera shook her head. “Kinsey hates being called the boss. Please keep doing it.”

Charlotte offered her a salute.

I took a sip of the coffee and moaned. “That is the best coffee I’ve ever had.” Seriously, it was.

“Finally, we have someone around here who knows how to make it properly.” Vera ruffled my hair. “Charlie, you’ll find that your boss tries to do everyone’s jobs in the office, including making the coffee. And that’s like the only thing on earth she’s terrible at.”

Not true. I could think of many other things. I didn’t say that though. Talking about one’s sex life was a no-no in a professional setting, something Vera and Eliana didn’t always understand. Me? I didn’t like talking about it at all. “Well, I can let go of the coffee making if it’ll be this good.” I shot Charlotte a wink.

“That’s not all you’re letting go of.” Vera sifted through a stack of files on my desk. I’d had it on my list for ages to sort through our advertising partners and write up reports on the ones we no longer worked with. I wanted a database of everything we did, and why we made each of our decisions.

I smacked Vera’s hand away. “Leave those alone.”

“Not a chance. Everything Charlotte needs for the project is in the files. I’ve already explained it to her. You, Kinsey, darling, should not be spending your time on grunt work. That’s for the grunts. No offense, Charlie.”

Charlotte only smiled. “I can grunt with the best of them. Leave it to me.”

“Both of you, please stop saying grunt.” I got the feeling Charlotte was too much like my dear cousin.

They shared a laugh. I rolled my eyes as I stood. “V, go get Eliana. The three of us need a quick meeting.”

Vera lifted one brow. “Oh, juicy.”

I didn't get a chance to tell her it wasn't that kind of meeting where we hid away from the rest of the team so we could talk about their most recent... experiences. With men, occasionally with women.

I had no juice. Nothing juice-worthy to tell them. Things with Sebastian were still at a stalemate. All I could think about were Aunt Delia's words about me doing whatever I needed to so I could break out of my shell. She'd said it didn't have to be a man, a relationship, yet I wanted to know. Was I missing something? Was there a part of me that just didn't work?

I had to find out.

I paced the length of the meeting room, waiting for my business partners so I could tell them Grey's newest update, but my mind wasn't on business at all.

Sebastian's face when he found the list.

The way he'd stared at me when I kicked him out.

That look in the elevator.

I put a hand on the wall to steady myself, drawing in a deep breath as a tear tracked down my cheek.

Vera and Eliana were laughing about something when they walked in. The sound cut off when they saw me, and both women rushed forward.

"Are you okay, Kins?" Eliana asked.

Vera studied me with those scrutinizing eyes of hers. "She's obviously not. What happened?"

"Who do we need to kill?" Eliana's face went dark.

Vera nodded in agreement. "I keep a crowbar in my trunk. Just give us a name."

The idea of the two of them going after someone who hurt me was ridiculous. Vera and her big mouth. Eliana with her muscular frame, muscles she'd never use to harm anyone. A laugh burst out of me. "A crowbar, guys, really?"

Vera shrugged. "We use what we have on hand. A heel might work."

Eliana opened her mouth to chime in, but I cut her off.

“I have to go.”

They both called after me as I rushed from the conference room. Charlotte looked up as I breezed past her desk, but I was out the door before she could say a word. The elevator took ages to come. I stared up at the shining metal doors, at the reflection of the girl I saw there. Who was she?

Maybe it was time I found out.

Once inside the elevator, I wiped my face to remove all evidence of my indecision. This might be one giant mistake, but it was one I had to make.

Sebastian’s office was busy with midweek activities. It wasn’t all that different from mine. Everyone had plenty of energy for most of the morning before it started to wane. I weaved my way through desks, ignoring the curious looks. I didn’t come up here often. Sebastian normally came down to my floor for coffee together.

Just another thing he did for me that I didn’t return. And I was about to ask the biggest favor of all. Maybe I was a terrible friend—or just a desperate one.

I stopped when I reached his desk, but he wasn’t there. Scanning the surrounding office, I didn’t see his familiar smile, the shine of his eyes.

“Kinsey?”

I sighed at the sound of that voice. Lee. Sebastian’s boss. He wasn’t a bad guy, but he tried to talk to me on each of the rare times I came up here. He never went too far, but even the flirting made me uncomfortable. I put on the professional face I used with my advertisers and turned.

“Lee.” I forced a smile. “Nice to see you.”

His returning smile was much more genuine than mine. “You’re looking for Sebastian, I take it?”

I nodded, not sure what else to say. Talking to people wasn’t my forte. It was why Vera normally went with me to most of our marketing meetings.

He perched on the corner of Sebastian's desk. Too close. I took a step back. "He went to grab a bagel from the cart outside."

"Oh, well, tell him—"

"How are you doing?" He folded his hands in his lap. "I heard about the issues with the app."

"I-I'm good. Great. I should probably—"

"I'm glad to hear it." His smile widened, and he leaned toward me. "Sebastian has been worried about you, but I know you can handle it. You're different, Kinsey. Not like other women."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Vera's voice popped into my head. We all hated when men said this, but she couldn't keep her mouth shut when it came up. *You know that's not a compliment, right? Saying someone is not like other women as if it's a good thing is putting down their entire sex. I'd rather be exactly like other women. Strong. Beautiful. Able to kick your ass. We birth babies, bitch. What do you do?*

Before I could stop it, her favorite response spilled out of my mouth. "Well, you're just like other men."

His smile dimmed, and for a moment, I thought it was because of me, my words, but then I felt the presence behind me.

"Sebastian." Lee hopped off his desk. "I was just keeping the lovely Kinsey company."

A featherlight touch came to the base of my spine, and my entire body relaxed. I hadn't realized how much my anxiety had risen talking to Lee.

"Next time," Sebastian growled, "don't." He gently grabbed my arm. "She has to leave now."

I didn't protest as he pulled me from the office with one strong hand. The other clutched his bagel so hard, it would probably crumble the moment he released it.

When we reached the elevator, I tugged on his hand to make him stop. "Sebastian."

He froze, his back to me.

“I wasn’t flirting with him.” I wasn’t sure why I felt the need to explain or why I kept going, but I needed him to know. “He hit on me. I didn’t—”

My words cut off as Sebastian dropped his mangled bagel and turned to me, pushing me back against the cold stone wall faster than I could blink. “I know that.” His voice was low, tight like he was trying very hard not to lose control. “Lee isn’t a bad guy, just a flirt, and you...” He pressed his forehead to mine and closed his eyes. “I know how uncomfortable that makes you. I can’t stand seeing you look so helpless.”

I placed a hand on each side of his face, letting the tips of my fingers scratch over his stubble. Why didn’t touching him make me shy away like it did with most people in my life? “I’m not, you know. Helpless. I know it can seem like it, but you don’t have to protect me from everything.” Only from himself. We’d been this close before thousands of times, but there was something different about it now, something charged.

“I do know.” His eyes fluttered open, locking onto mine.

His chest bumped against mine, and I rose against him, needing him closer, wanting him so much, I could barely think.

“Let’s do it,” I breathed.

“What?” Confusion creased his brow, and it was so adorable, I wanted to kiss him right then. If I were someone else, maybe I would have.

There was no going back after this. No chickening out. “The list. I want to go through it with you.”

His eyes widened. “Now?”

“No.” Shoving him away, I laughed.

He caught me around the waist before I could get too far and pulled me back against him. “I haven’t thought of anything else since I saw it.”

His words sent a bolt of pure adrenaline into my heart.  
“This is a really bad idea.”

“Probably.”

“It could ruin our friendship.”

He stared at me for a long moment before nudging my head to the side with his nose and bringing his lips to my ear.  
“You’ll always be my best friend. This won’t change that. Let me help you. I want to show you what your body can do.”

“W-what do you mean?”

“Oh, you have no idea.” His lips dragged across my cheek, the touch barely there, until he kissed the edge of my mouth, not quite my lips. I wanted more. I wanted *him*.

“How do we do this?” I wasn’t sure what to ask, how to act. My entire life was suddenly putty in his hands.

“You and me.” He tilted my chin up so our eyes met.  
“Friday night. I know you’ll overthink it, analyze it to death. Remember, Kins, you’re in control. You can always say no, always back out. As long as you want to continue, I won’t stop until you’ve crossed off every last item.”

“Why? We’re just friends, you don’t owe me anything. Why are you willing to do this?”

“We’re not just friends. You’re my best friend. And I don’t want you to do it with anyone else.”





---

## SEBASTIAN

I wasn't nervous. Not at all. This wasn't a big deal. I wasn't about to tackle the list with my best friend in the whole wide world. Okay, not the whole list, but at least one item on it. What was the worst that could happen?

I could lose my best friend.

We could seriously suck at doing anything sexual together, which would ruin the fantasy I had in my head of us.

She could be turned off and make that disgusted face with her nose scrunched up, which I still thought was pretty damn cute.

Shit, I was making my own list, but it wasn't a good one.

Get out of my head. That was what I needed to do. All this overthinking wouldn't get me anywhere. I had to brush my teeth, get my wallet, phone, and keys, then drive to Kinsey's. I already brushed my teeth once, but I didn't want her to have anything less than a good experience when we kissed. Because that's what was next on the list.

Flirting had been an epic fail. And I would not help her out with shaving... anywhere. My luck I would accidentally nick something and no... just no. So, kissing it was.

It wasn't like I was a bad kisser. I'd been told numerous times my tongue had skills, and not only using it on my partner's mouth. I wasn't a manwhore either. I just knew how to do things.

But Kinsey and I wouldn't do anything below the waist tonight. At least, I didn't think so. Not when she wanted to master kissing first.

I still didn't think she needed to get better at it. I mean, how bad could she be? It was Kinsey, after all. She was everything wrapped up in one amazing woman.

With my teeth brushed again and my breath minty fresh, I grabbed what I needed, locked the door behind me, and headed down to my car. By the time I pulled up to Kinsey's, my hands were sweaty and shaking a little.

This felt huge. It was, and it wasn't. I was making more of it than I needed to. Kinsey said she wanted to do this and, damn, I did too. It would take all my restraint to keep my hands to myself and simply kiss her.

I only had to knock once before Kinsey opened the door. Her smile was too big, and she kept fidgeting with the hem of her shirt, not seeming to know what to do with her hands. I had to do something to relax us both.

Leaning in, I smacked a great big kiss on her lips. No tongue. No lingering. An ice breaker.

Kinsey gasped against me.

I grinned. "Hi."

She was breathy when she said, "Hi."

Instead of standing in the doorway and making this worse, I walked into her apartment like I usually did and dropped my keys and phone on the table, then sat on the couch. If we were going to enjoy this, the nerves had to simmer.

"What are you watching?" The TV was on with the volume turned down.

Kinsey shut her front door and came over to sit next to me. "It's nothing. I was scrolling for something to put on, to set the mood, but couldn't find anything."

I could work with this. "There are some pretty steamy movies out there."

“You know I don’t have a lot of time to watch movies. I wouldn’t know what to put on.”

“Okay, how about this? We shut the TV off and put on music? I don’t want you to be nervous, Kins.” Who the hell was I kidding? I was the one sweating here.

“Sounds good.” She grabbed the remote to shut the TV off while I found music on my phone and turned the volume up so we could hear it without it being too loud. Kinsey went to the kitchen and came back with two glasses of water. She drank half of hers before turning to face me. “How do we do this?”

“We’re on the kissing portion of the list, correct?”

“Did you memorize it?”

“Ummm...” I scratched the back of my neck.

“You remember what’s on it.” She dropped her head back on the couch and closed her eyes.

“Kins, full disclosure. There was a list on your fridge with sex stuff on it. If you thought that wouldn’t etch into my mind, you don’t know me as well as you claim. Besides, it was short. Easy to remember.”

“No way you could forget it,” she grumbled.

“If I had a list on my fridge that said things like ‘Get a blowjob in a club’ or ‘Have sex somewhere I could get caught,’ you wouldn’t remember that?”

Her eyes snapped open, and she sat up so fast, I was surprised she didn’t get whiplash. “You want those things?”

“I mean, I wouldn’t turn down the opportunity if it arises, but I won’t seek it out. My point is, you’d remember reading that if I wrote it down and tacked it up for all to see.”

“You’re right. I would. Let’s circle back to having sex in public.”

“That’s not what I said. I said, with a chance of getting caught. There’s a difference. And no, we won’t discuss that because tonight isn’t about me. It’s about you. And we need to up your kissing game.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“Now, one rule. If you say stop, I stop. I will never pressure you into anything. But if you want to go further, we can. You lead this.”

“Further?” I saw her throat work with a swallow.

“We don’t have to. I’m simply putting it out there. Sound good?”

Another nod.

I would have to start us off. I didn’t think Kinsey would make the first move. Once we kissed, I’d let her take over.

Inching toward her, I paused when I was a breath away. We both had a bent leg up on the couch cushion, so we were angled to face each other.

“I’ve wanted to do this for so long,” I whispered, wanting to grab the words back as soon as they left my lips. I couldn’t. I was in this now. About to kiss the woman I wanted more than anyone in the world.

The first brush of our lips sent sparks racing down my spine. The second had me pressing forward until our mouths were firmly touching. Then she parted her lips. I took that as an invitation to taste her. My tongue hesitantly touched hers. She tilted her head, but it was too much, and I tried to correct us so we could be right where we needed to, but then she moved again and... ugh, what the hell?

I finally took her cheeks in my hands, holding her gently, and tilted her head just right. Our lips met again and this time, when I went to explore her mouth, I felt her tongue tasting mine.

I moaned at the contact. It was one thing for me to seek her out. It was another for her to actively do the same to me. My body was on fire.

The kiss deepened. Her hands came up to wrap around my wrists where I still held her. She slid her delicate fingers down my arms, up to my shoulders, down the front of my shirt, over my chest until she fisted the material there.

Kinsey leaned forward, and I moaned again. I took her advancement as a sign and pulled her onto my lap. She easily straddled me. Her body pressed tight to me.

Holy fuck, I'd wanted this for so long. To feel her against me. It was hot even with clothes on. I couldn't imagine what it would be like if we were naked. I'd probably incinerate on contact.

Wasn't that the next thing on the list? Kinsey being comfortable being naked around someone?

Talk about premature ejaculation. I'd probably come on the spot if I saw her bare before me, eyes only for me.

A thought hit me. One I tried to bury deep in my mind. Kinsey wasn't doing this because she wanted me. She was doing this because she wanted to improve her skills so she could date and have sex with other people who weren't named Sebastian Denver and weren't currently sitting on her couch with their hands cupping her ass.

No, I wouldn't ruin this with my runaway thoughts. I had Kinsey in my arms, devouring me with her mouth. I would enjoy this moment. I'd have time to overanalyze things later when I was alone, most likely with my hand wrapped around my dick because I was so hard, I was about to burst out of my shorts.

Shit, she had to feel me. She was pressed *right there*.

She moved her hips as if testing the waters. My hands slid from her ass up her back and down again. This time, I teased under her shirt to find her skin as silky soft as I knew it would be.

Kinsey threaded her fingers into my hair; her nails raked over my scalp, causing me to shiver in the best way. How had I gone so long without this? Knowing how we were together, I couldn't imagine going back to not having her like this. Yet, that was what had to happen. Kinsey and I weren't a couple. We weren't dating.

She broke the kiss and dropped her forehead to mine. "Wow."

“Yeah,” I whispered. My hands were still caressing her skin. I didn’t want to let go of her.

“I didn’t know a kiss could be like that. So all-consuming.”

“It isn’t with everyone.” I wanted to say how it was with the right person but putting those words out there might scare her off. The only reason she didn’t run before when I confessed how long I’d been waiting to kiss her was that I moved and finally claimed her lips.

If only it were that. If only I was saying that Kinsey was finally mine.

In my dreams.

That was where it had to reside.

Not in the realm of reality.

Kinsey initiated the next kiss. She wasn’t hesitant, trying to find her groove. She dove right in and took what she wanted. It was hers for the taking. When she tried to get even closer, I moved us so I was lying on my back, and she was over top of me. Nervous Kinsey was gone and in her place was a woman who knew exactly what she desired. Right now, that was me.

I smiled against her lips.

She didn’t miss it and pulled back to look down at me. “What?”

“I’m really happy with how this is going.”

Chuckling, she said, “Yeah, I can feel just how happy.”

“All for you, baby.”

Kinsey’s eyes widened. I took it too far. This was only supposed to be kissing and here I was pushing my dick up so she could feel what she did to me. Ruining this wasn’t part of the plan.

I tugged on the front of her shirt to pull her back down and took possession of her lips. We easily slid back into a rhythm.

God, this felt so perfect. Why couldn't we be more? Why couldn't this be a regular Friday night for us where we spent the evening in and did wicked things to each other on her couch?

My mission evolved. Not only was I determined to help Kinsey with her list, but I was also steadfast in showing her just how right we were for each other. How this wasn't a fluke. There was something tangible here.





---

## KINSEY

I was kissing Sebastian.

*Sebastian!*

God, when was the last time I had someone's lips on mine? Years. It had been years. How pathetic was that? I was practically coming just from a kiss and a little... pressure from his lap. I had to keep myself from taking it further, from grinding down hard.

The list. This was about my list and preparing me for the world of dating. I had to be comfortable with myself, get out of my head.

Stop thinking so damn much.

“Kins?” Sebastian whispered against my lips.

“Yeah?”

“I don't think you need to get any better at this.”

I smiled against his mouth, diving in for more. The longer we kissed, the less strange it felt to have the boy I'd known half of my life sticking his tongue into my mouth. And what a tongue it was.

“I think we can cross one item off.”

His words sent a jolt of nerves through me. The quicker we crossed items on the list off, the sooner we'd move on to more intimate settings. Though, was there anything truly more intimate than a kiss? A kiss with the person you trusted most in this world? Sebastian wouldn't do anything I wasn't ready

for. He wouldn't shame me or make me embarrassed by my lack of experience.

Why wasn't this weird?

It should have been weird, right?

Sebastian pushed a strand of hair out of my face. "You're thinking too much."

"I am not." I totally was.

He smirked like he knew me better than I knew myself. I shifted off him and sat beside him on the couch. "I was kind of hoping this would be too strange to continue."

A laugh burst out of him. "You're so predictable, Kins."

"Hey." I elbowed him in the side. "I am not."

He turned so his face hovered in front of mine. "All you're doing is trying to come up with reasons why we should stop."

"I—"

He cut me off with a kiss, then pulled away quickly. "But you can't find any."

"There are plenty of—"

"Nope."

"But what if—"

"It won't ruin us."

"And I—"

"Just stop. There's only one thing that matters." His face grew serious. "Do you want to do this?"

Did I? I thought back on that kiss, how it felt to press against him, the way it brought some deeper part of me to the surface. A part that wasn't constantly wondering if I was inadequate, if I couldn't possibly live up to the people around me.

I rose to meet him, answering him with a slow kiss. "I'm not backing out. I want—"

My words cut off when a familiar sound came from my phone. I'd left it on the table by the door, but that was an alert I'd recognize anywhere. I had the sound created just for our app, after all.

"Sebastian, get off me." I pushed at his chest. "Come on, move faster, big guy."

Sebastian jumped to his feet to get out of my way. "What's wrong? Did I do something?"

I ignored him as I ran for my phone. The app used a phone's location services to alert the nearest users if another pressed the help button. I unlocked my screen, and the alert appeared immediately. "We need to get to Joe's."

"Um..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, but—"

"Just come on. We don't have time." I shoved my feet into my shoes, grabbed my keys, and ran out the door, not bothering to lock it.

Sebastian caught up with me at the elevator.

Joe's was a bar only a block down from my building. It didn't exactly have the best reputation because of the way it attracted the business elite. I'd found the more money a man had, the more he felt entitled to. And that included a woman's body.

The place was packed by the time we got there. Men in suits, women in thousand-dollar dresses that had no place being worn to a bar. It may have been called Joe's, but this was no average place. It only served top-shelf liquor and microbrews that cost way too much money. I hated places like this or bars in general.

My eyes scanned the tables, looking for anyone who appeared to be in trouble. The greatest flaw with the app was that it could only pinpoint the distressed user to a broad location. I knew she was in here, but not exactly where in here.

"We're looking for a woman who appears to be trapped or in trouble." I didn't look at Sebastian, my eyes still on the surrounding patrons. "I'll check the bathroom. Will you talk to the bartender?"

He nodded, heading toward the bar. That was what Sebastian was good at, talking to people, charming them. I looked back when I reached the swinging door marked ladies and saw a woman had already sidled up to him.

Trying to focus on the task at hand, I gritted my teeth and pushed through the door. The bathroom was full of women reapplying their makeup and washing their hands. Chatter came from the few at the sinks, but none appeared to be in trouble. I waited until the stalls emptied, but there were no tears, no signs.

Shouting came from the bar, and I rushed out to find Sebastian near the front door, blocking a tall man with an Armani suit and bright blond hair from leaving. He had a small woman tucked under his arm, but I couldn't see her face. Yet, there was something so familiar about her I sped up.

"The woman said no." Sebastian crossed his arms, his face menacing. "I suggest you let her go."

A soft sob came from the woman, and I recognized it immediately. "Ana?"

Eliana snapped her head up at the sound of my voice.

"We're just leaving." The man stood to his full height, a good few inches taller than Sebastian. His voice was smooth, a cocky air to it.

Eliana, my bestie with an enormous temper and insane focus, now looked nothing like herself.

"Like hell you are." Sebastian stepped forward. I knew the look on his face. He was very close to losing his composure completely.

That was when I saw it. Bruising on Eliana's upper arm. It looked like someone grabbed her... hard.

She still hadn't said a word.

Sebastian inched forward again, but I reached his side and put a hand on his chest. "Let me." Facing the man now, I could see what a beautiful face he had to lure women with. "I believe tears mean my friend doesn't want to go home with you."

“She doesn’t know what she wants.”

My anger boiled right under the surface of my words. “Oh, right. I forgot.” I stepped forward. “She’s only a woman. And in that tight dress of hers, she obviously wants you. Why else would she wear it, right? Certainly not for herself. No, clothes are for a man’s pleasure.”

“Don’t—”

“No, *you* don’t. This woman—or any woman—is not here to make you feel better about your soul-sucking job or the fact you’re so toxic, no woman wants to stick around. So, I suggest you let her go right now.”

“Who do you think you are?”

“I’m her friend, asshole.” A friend who worked for years to develop an app that could help women, and here we were using it. I was sure once I got Eliana away from this creep, I’d be proud.

He tried to shove me out of the way, and before I could consider what I was doing, my fist flew through the air, connecting with his cheekbone. Pain exploded in my hand, and I bit back a cry.

The man fell away from Eliana, letting her go before collapsing to the ground. Oh gosh, did I do that? I shared a stunned look with my friend before I realized I wasn’t the only one who’d gone for the punch when he shoved me.

Sebastian stood at my side, shaking out his fist.

Eliana jumped at me, wrapping me in a tight hug. It wasn’t until the guy was out of the way that I saw three other women watching us. One of them held up their phone. “We got the alert too but looks like you have it handled.”

I nodded, and they stepped over the douchebag and headed out the door. We left the guy on the floor as Sebastian led us into the night.

“I’m taking her to my place.” I gave him a shy smile. “You can head home.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yeah.” He backed away, still looking at me. I mouthed the words ‘thank you.’

Eliana didn’t speak until we were inside my apartment, where she collapsed onto the couch. “I’m such an idiot.”

“I think this calls for wine.” I headed for the kitchen and the single chilled bottle of wine I had left. I needed to do some shopping.

Not bothering with wine glasses, I went back out and handed the open bottle to Eliana. She took a long drink.

“You’re not an idiot.” I grabbed the blanket from the back of the couch to drape over her and then burrowed in at her side. She passed me the wine.

“He seemed so nice when I talked to him online.” She sighed. “They all do.”

Eliana was very into the world of online dating, but it led her to a lot of jerks. “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

“Me too. Thanks to the app. He wouldn’t let me leave without him.” She rubbed the bruise on her arm. “I would have called you, but I couldn’t manage it without him seeing. The app was easier. I’m just glad you answered it.” She leaned her head on my shoulder and reached for the wine.

“Are you okay? Like, really okay?”

“I think so. I may just need a dating break. If it hadn’t been for you and Bastian—” She sat up. “Wait, what were you doing with him so late tonight?”

“That’s not important.” I wasn’t ready to tell them yet.

“I’d say it’s very important.”

I snatched the wine and took a gulp. “No, right now is about you.”

“I don’t want to talk about me. That guy was a jerk, end of story.”

“But it’s not the end of the story.” I couldn’t help thinking about the women the app failed on the night it didn’t work. Sure, they’d get settlements, Grey made sure of that, but how

scared must they have been when no one came to help? Women protecting women. That was what I wanted to create, that kind of culture.

And I'd failed them.

Eliana sighed. "We can't change what happened."

"How do you know what I'm thinking about?"

"Because it's been on my mind since I hit that button." She shrugged. "What we can do is be proud of everyone else we've helped. This world isn't safe for women, but if our app makes it just a little safer, we've done something good."

Something good. Maybe she was right.

We finished off the bottle of wine, and Eliana fell asleep. I tucked her in on the couch and headed for my room, stripping off my clothes as I did. When I dressed in pajamas and settled in bed, I unlocked my phone to find a string of messages from Sebastian.

Sebastian: Tonight was fun.

Sebastian: Well, the first part.

Sebastian: I didn't mean what happened to Eliana was fun.

Sebastian: You know that, right?

Sebastian: Ignore my rambling. How's your hand?

I stared at the bruise forming on my knuckles. I'd completely forgotten about it, but now I realized how much it hurt. I texted Sebastian.

Me: Does it always hurt this much? Punching someone?

He responded instantly.

Sebastian: Ice it.

I was too lazy to get out of bed.

Me: Bastian?

Sebastian: Yeah?

I paused for a long moment, trying to find the right words to tell him how much it meant to me that he was helping me, but I couldn't.

Me: Thank you.





---

## SEBASTIAN

Last night went from epically good to epically bad. I couldn't believe it was Eliana who needed help at Joe's. But the second I latched my eyes onto hers and saw the desperation there when she noticed me, I knew it was her the alert came from.

Then I saw the bruise forming on her arm.

Then I saw red.

That fucker laid his hand on her. I didn't want to cause any more distress for her, so as I approached their table, the guy went to the bar to talk to someone. I quickly ushered Eliana toward the door, but I wasn't fast enough. The guy noticed and barreled toward us. He was bigger than me, sure, but I had brothers. An older one whom I used to fight with. I could hold my own against that douchebag last night, at least for a bit.

Kinsey appeared with grim determination on her face. She wanted to take over. I wasn't thrilled about her getting in the guy's face, but I knew Kinsey wouldn't let me push her behind me like Eliana did. I had Kinsey's back. And the moment she punched him, and he still stood there, I stepped up to hit him.

I flexed my hand where it sat on my lap. My knuckles were slightly swollen, and a bruise had formed. Nothing was broken or damaged, though. I knew how to throw a punch the right way.

Grabbing my phone, I sent Kinsey a quick text.

Me: How's the hand, slugger?

She didn't respond right away, so I went to the kitchen to make something to eat for dinner. I didn't have plans tonight. However, an idea was forming in my mind. Last night had sucked. There were no two ways about it. Maybe I could lift Kinsey's spirits a little and get her mind off what could have happened to her friend. Maybe we could check another item off her list. Only if she wanted to. I wouldn't push her into it.

My phone vibrated with an incoming text when I sat on the couch, a plate on my lap. Kinsey had sent me a photo of her hand. It didn't look too bad. More like mine did, which meant Kinsey also punched the correct way.

Me: Not too shabby.

Kinsey: What you're saying is I should find a boxing gym and take up professional fighting?

Me: It wouldn't be a bad idea for you and the others to take a self-defense class.

Kinsey: I was kidding, but that's smart. We should do that.

Me: I could join you. Learn a few new moves myself.

Kinsey: You didn't seem to have any trouble laying that guy out last night.

Me: I am good for some things.

Kinsey: That you are.

Me: How's Eliana?

Kinsey: Better. I dropped her off at home this morning and told her to call if she needs anything. She's tougher than she looks. I think she was surprised last night by what was happening.

Me: And that asshole saw her as weak and someone he could control.

Kinsey: Makes me remember why I don't date.

That wasn't what I wanted to hear. Kinsey deserved to be happy and in love.

Me: So... about that list.

Kinsey: What about it?

Me: I was thinking of coming over tonight. If you don't have any plans that is.

The little dots danced, then stopped. Danced. Stopped.

Kinsey: I'd like that.

Me: See you in a bit.

I ate my dinner with a smile on my face. So far, we hadn't ruined our friendship. That was a plus. And I was slowly feeling like maybe, just maybe, it could be more. If she wanted that. If she saw me.

That voice was back in my head. Reminding me I wasn't meant to have a relationship with Kinsey.

*"This isn't about you getting your happily ever after. Your head isn't in the game," Coach said.*

*"I don't want any part of this... game."*

*"Too bad. You're in it now. Just remember your place."*

*The crowd was back too. "Friend zone!"*

*I growled. "Go to hell."*

I was done letting my friend zone thoughts sabotage my life. If I only had this time to prove to Kinsey we could be more, I damn well would make the best of the situation I could. Kinsey was comfortable with me. Last night showed it. Now to get her to see me as more than someone to practice her skills on.

And since I knew Kinsey as well as I did, I had to do more to make her feel like it was the same me, her best friend, but also notice how much more to me there was. To *us*. Because us being together felt so damn perfect.

Kinsey and I were meant for greater things together. I felt it down to my very soul. The way we kissed last night, I wasn't the only one turned on. Kinsey felt it too. Her eyes were hooded; her body melted against mine. She was just as affected as I was.

There was a lot about it that was serious. It wasn't the only thing though. Kinsey was used to our easy relationship. The one neither of us ever had to work hard at since it felt so natural to be friends. That meant the next item on the list had to have a lighter aspect to it. I knew just what needed to happen.

Tonight, we would get naked, and she would be comfortable doing it in front of me. I was the last person who would judge her. I would worship every inch of her if given the chance.

After I ate and cleaned up, I went into my bathroom and took a shower. I didn't do much today besides go to the pool to swim, but still. This was Kinsey. She deserved me at my best. When I was done and dry, I threw on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, then got in the car to drive to the local florist.

The little bell above the door chimed when I opened it. There was an older woman behind the counter with gray hair and a warm smile. The store was otherwise empty. She was arranging something on the counter. There were flowers spread out and a pair of shears.

“What can I help you with?”

I scratched the back of my neck. I hadn't thought this through. “I'm not sure what I want.”

“Okay, tell me about the person you're buying flowers for.”

“She's my best friend, and we're... I'm not sure what's going on, but I want her to see me as more. I'm going over to

her place tonight and want to bring something to make her smile and let her know how much I care about her.”

The woman nodded. “No red roses then. You’re not there yet.”

“No, we’re not.”

She came out from behind the counter and went over to a display case with beautiful bouquets behind closed doors. Opening the door, she reached in and pulled out a bouquet. “I think these will do nicely. These are Persian Buttercups. They’re a gorgeous flower, especially in this blush color. One of my favorites. We get orders for these for weddings sometimes but also for other occasions when love or romance is symbolized. I like to think of them as a flirty flower. They symbolize charm and attractiveness.”

I glanced down at the pink flowers and thought they were beautiful. They weren’t the typical rose I saw so much. Well, in my limited romantic knowledge. These seemed to fit Kinsey better. There was greenery spread around them, and they were bundled in a nice wrapper. “I’ll take them.”

“Perfect.” The woman smiled and rang me up.

I thanked her and left, getting back into my car. Before I knew it, I was at Kinsey’s. Time to put my plan into motion. The lot was dark, no one would notice what I was about to do.

Quickly, I stripped out of my clothes until there wasn’t a thing on me and reached into the backseat to grab my black trench coat. It was one I wore to the office when it rained. Tonight, it would cover my bare ass and hopefully surprise Kinsey when I opened it up and showed her just how comfortable being naked could be.

I tied the belt and grabbed the flowers. Luckily, no one was in the elevator on my way up. It was bad enough I was wearing this coat with flip-flops in the hot Florida night. Add in the bouquet, and it was an odd sight.

For a minute, earlier, I thought about using my bathrobe, but my luck, someone would think I was a creeper, and I’d end up arrested once they saw I had nothing on underneath. The

trench added a certain professional quality to my nudity. A more upstanding type of nakedness.

By the time I got to her door, my hands were shaking. I hoped this wouldn't become an every-time occurrence when we were ticking things off her list. I hated being this nervous. Especially since I wasn't shy about my body. I was proud of what I had to offer. I worked hard for it. Sure, I wasn't model perfect like my brother, but I had plenty to see.

Then I remembered how Kinsey saw hot, naked models all the time when she was at Delia's. Would I measure up to the visions in her mind? I was nothing like those men. Sure, I had defined muscles, but no one was slapping my abs on the cover of a magazine.

I groaned and leaned my head on her door with a quiet *thunk*. This was insane. What was I doing? My body wasn't jaw dropping or drool-worthy.

The door opened so fast, I started falling forward before hands came to my forearms and I was able to steady myself.

“Sebastian?”

There was Kinsey. Gorgeous Kinsey right in front of me, looking at me like she had no idea what was going on. “Hi.” I gave her a hesitant smile.

“I heard something hit my door and didn't know if it was a knock or what. Then you fell into the room when I opened it.”

“There's a peephole for a reason.”

She reached up and ruffled my hair. “Something was blocking it.”

“Sorry.”

“Don't be, but you can explain what you're wearing. I thought it was a clear night.”

Well, this was going downhill fast. I had this whole plan and not thirty seconds in the door, I was blowing it.

I took a step back and put the bouquet between us. “I got these for you.”

She looked down, then up. “You did?”

“Yes, why does that seem so surprising?”

“It’s been a while since I’ve gotten flowers.”

“You deserve them.”

She took them from my hand and brought them close to her chest. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, are you going to invite me all the way in, or are we going to talk with the door open?”

“Right.” She moved so I could come in more than I did when I fell forward, and Kinsey shut and locked the door behind me. “What’s with the outfit?”

“Ah, that brings me to my reason for being here. Your list.” I reached down and undid the belt, then pulled the coat open and propped my hands on my hips with the coat behind them. “Tonight, we get naked.” I grinned.

If I showed even an ounce of being uncomfortable, it would make it worse for Kinsey. So here I was. Letting it all hang out. And I meant everything. At least my dick wasn’t hard because I shed the coat a moment later. That whole embarrassing myself when I almost face-planted a minute ago stopped any of my blood from heading south.

Kinsey’s eyes slowly traced down from my face to my chest and even further. So much for my dick not being hard. Her gaze was on me for seconds, and he already wanted to join the party.





---

## KINSEY

Holy mother of God. Why did that man ever wear clothes? I couldn't stop staring at Sebastian. At *all* of Sebastian. It wasn't the first time he'd been naked in front of me. There was that time in ninth grade when he and his brothers went skinny dipping at the beach while I sat on the sand, trying not to watch. Even then, I'd known he was beautiful.

In college, there was the night I walked into his dorm room when he was indisposed with a woman. That was the last time I ever entered his place without knocking.

I'd seen it all then, but it wasn't for me. Somehow, this was different. Now, he wanted me to look. Sebastian. *My* Sebastian.

My eyes roamed the contours of his abs; abs I had no idea how he got working in an IT job. He'd always been a nerd. One big-hearted, adorable nerd.

But there was nothing adorable about the heated way he looked at me now.

"It's okay," he said. "This is part of the deal. You can look all you want."

I knew my face had to be redder than a tomato, and I couldn't seem to move a single muscle. My eyes didn't blink. My chest barely rose with shallow breaths. His sculpted arms hung at his sides, not reaching for me and not pushing me away. He didn't prod me, didn't push me faster than I was willing to go.

I'd known what this night was meant to be, what item on the list we had to cross off. Yet, knowing was so very different from seeing.

"This is bonkers," I breathed, cringing at my choice of words. Could I be any more of a dork?

His perfect lips twitched into a smile. Lips I'd tasted, tested. Lips I'd never forget the feel of. My gaze zeroed in on them. "You're laughing at me."

He gave his head the tiniest shake. "You can come closer." The low rumble of his voice sent a shiver down my back.

"I..." Had to do this. It was my list, wasn't it? Tentatively, I inched forward until I was close enough to raise one hand to his bare arm. Goosebumps erupted along his skin, and the tiny hairs brushed against my fingertips.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed. "Don't stop." I wasn't sure if it was a plea or him simply giving me permission, but I let it embolden me.

With the lightest touch, I slid my hand along his bicep, up over the curve of his shoulder. "When do you find time to work out?"

His breath shook on its way out. "Whenever I can. I swim, mostly. Not as often as I'd like though. Like you and basketball."

He was right. As much as I loved the game, as much time as I'd spent on various teams growing up, becoming an adult had meant less and less time for it. Now, it was rare I made it to the court. "You mean..." Everything about him was natural. Somehow, that was even sexier.

"Partially genetics, I guess."

"You mean perfect genetics."

At my words, it was almost like he stopped breathing entirely. I wanted to kiss him, to tell him just how perfect he was, in a way that had nothing to do with his looks. The fact that he was even here standing in front of me, working through this ridiculous list.

I played with the hair at the top of his chest. “You’re a good friend, Sebastian.”

“Please don’t say that when your hands are on me.”

Growing bolder with the way his body quivered under my touch, I continued my journey down his chest, feeling the muscles contract and shake. No man had ever let me explore them before, had ever let me find the spots on their body that made them exhale in pleasure when I brushed my hand over them.

Yet, Sebastian didn’t stop me.

When I reached the V that led to the part of his body that terrified me, my hand froze. I couldn’t go lower, going to that point with any man, let alone Sebastian. Each time I’d had sex—eons ago—the lights were off, the covers were on. It was a quick in and out a few times. No exploring, no enjoying each other’s bodies. I wasn’t sure I even knew how.

Sebastian’s hands landed on my shoulders, and I looked up at him, peering into those hazel eyes. The way he looked at me set my insides on fire.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

I nodded.

He edged closer, sliding his hands under the collar of my shirt to feel my heated skin. “Tell me if you want me to stop.”

I was so out of my element, something I wasn’t used to. On the basketball court, I knew exactly what to do, could see many moves ahead and guess what the other team was thinking. In the office, no one had a better grasp of our app and what it needed than me. I prided myself on hard work and always becoming the best.

Except now, there had been no game plan to study, no code that could fix the errors inside me.

“Kinsey?” Sebastian whispered, his hands skating down to the hem of my oversized gray shirt.

“Yeah?”

“I lost you there for a second.”

“No, I’m okay.” At least, I was trying to be.

He studied me for a moment before lifting the bottom of my shirt. The back of his hands grazed my stomach. I’d worn a T-shirt and leggings, figuring it would be easier. It was only Sebastian, after all. But now I wished I’d had the lacy underthings Vera was always buying and not the plain, white bra. Not the cotton underpants.

When Sebastian pulled the shirt over my head and dropped it to the floor, the world was a different place. I wasn’t naked, but I’d never felt more exposed.

Sebastian reached for me, but I stepped back. My breathing sped up and then nearly stopped entirely. “This... I...” I wasn’t sure what I wanted to say, only that I needed space.

I scrambled back, my legs hitting the arm of the couch. I wasn’t prepared for the impact and went tumbling onto the couch, bouncing off the cushion and crashing into the floor. My shoulder ached where it had hit the coffee table, but the pain brought me back to the reality of the situation.

“Kins!” Sebastian ran toward me. “Are you alive? Do I need to make funeral arrangements, or should I make plans to climb Mount Everest to spread your ashes?”

There was my best friend. I was hurt, and he made jokes. Though, if I was laughing, I couldn’t be that hurt. His switch from naked man in my apartment to nerdy best friend made me smile. “You’d never make it even a tenth of the way up the mountain. Just throw me in the bay.”

He grinned down at me and extended a hand. When I took it, he pulled me up. Close. Too close. Yet, this time, I didn’t back away. I couldn’t. But when my lips connected with his so suddenly, I almost ended up right back on the floor again.

“Don’t run from me,” he breathed against my lips. “Never me.” His hands skimmed my bare sides, and I hummed at the explosion of warmth across my skin.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I admitted.

“That’s why I’m here.” He stepped away, tugging on my hand. “Come.” He pulled me into my bedroom, something I wasn’t ready for, but instead of going to the bed, he led me to the floor-length mirror beside my dresser.

“What—”

“Kins, do you trust me?”

“More than anyone.”

He nodded. “There is nothing to be ashamed of without your clothes on, and I’ll prove it to you.” He turned me to face the mirror. “Every body is different. Every body is beautiful.”

“Easy to say when you look like that.”

“I have my insecurities too, but if you project confidence, that’s all anyone will see.” He removed his hand from my back. “I want you to see it, to see yourself. I won’t touch you. You didn’t put this item on your list because you want a guy to tell you what he sees. It’s all about your vision of yourself. Once you love that, you can feel comfortable no matter what you wear... or don’t wear.” He nodded toward the mirror, his voice dropping. “Take your clothes off, Kinsey.”

There was no denying him when he spoke like that. It made me want to obey him, to kiss him. To believe in him. Slowly, I shed my leggings, leaving me in only a bra and panties. If I’d known this was happening tonight, maybe I’d have gone for a better shave.

He must have sensed my hesitation because his lips came to my ear. “What do you see?”

“I don’t know.”

I knew my looks weren’t from anything I’d done. It was simply a matter of genetics. My haircut cost more than I’d like to admit. The lack of a tan living in Florida was only a testament to how much I worked.

“Keep going.”

There was no stopping now. When I unhooked my bra and let it drop, Sebastian’s intake of breath emboldened me. I slipped out of my panties, and suddenly, there was nothing

hiding me from his gaze. I tried to cover myself with my hands, but he caught them in his, preventing me from doing so.

“What do you see?” he asked again, this time with a slight tremble in his voice.

“I guess... me?”

“Exactly. Kinsey, this is you. Own it. Love it.” He slowly spun me around to face him, his eyes dipping lower. “Please don’t hide who you are.”

My first urge was to try to cover myself again, but once that passed, once I let him look at me, I realized how natural it was to stand here in front of my best friend without a stitch of clothing on.

I might not get out of the next few items on the list intact, but tonight, now, he was right. I shouldn’t be embarrassed by my body. It kept me alive, performed so many miraculous functions. And soon, it would be under his power.

Not tonight.

“I promised I wouldn’t touch you.” He released my hands and rounded the bed. “I meant it. But I am going to look at you.” He climbed on top of the covers and lay back, hands folded behind his head.

I crawled onto the other side of the bed and lay next to him. He turned onto his side facing me, and I could feel his gaze. When I looked sideways, my eyes connected with his. Was there another man on this earth like him? He had me naked in bed, and he didn’t reach for me, didn’t pressure me.

I turned onto my side so our stomachs were almost flush with a small gap between them. Our chests rose and fell in sync as we trapped each other in our eyes, neither letting the other go.

Something charged the air, and I realized I never wanted this moment to end. Maybe this was all wrong because I was figuring out that I’d never forget his touch, the way his breath felt whispering across my neck as he spoke in that low way of his.

How was it I never realized just who my best friend was in all these years?

I'd never realized he was someone I could fall for.

"Thank you," I whispered, not wanting to break the moment.

"For what?"

"Everything. All of this. I'm glad we're friends."

Friends. Yes. I had to remember that.





---

## SEBASTIAN

So... work was fun. Except that it wasn't because I couldn't keep my thoughts off Kinsey and the time we spent together over the weekend.

We were both naked in front of each other, and holy shit, she was stunning. Not just on the outside but on the inside too. I always knew that. And I knew she would be beautiful without her clothes on.

Then she thanked me, and it felt like a bucket of cold water being dumped over me. I should have expected it. We were friends, nothing more. Yet it still stung. Two words. They changed the mood. Made it more clinical and not at all romantic like I was thinking of it as.

I sighed and stared at the list of open tickets on my screen. People had IT issues they needed fixed. Tickets came into the team I was on for things we supported, and we divided up the work. It was usually easier things that didn't take me long to do. Most days, I hated doing them. But today, I needed busywork. Things to keep my mind off Kinsey, if that was at all possible.

I had to convince her we were more. I had to show her *I* was more.

Dammit, I was supposed to be working.

Kinsey and I covered being naked and also touching. The next item on the list was for her to learn how to put a condom on. I checked the time and noticed it was almost noon. Screw

it, I was going shopping. Maybe if I had a plan in place for the next time I'd see Kinsey, I could focus on something else.

I got in my car and drove fifteen minutes to the drugstore that wasn't around the corner from work. The last thing I needed were the people I worked with, or Kinsey and her friends, seeing me buy condoms.

Down the aisle the condoms were in, I browsed the brands and picked out the one I preferred. Then I bought some lube because I had no doubt this whole thing would make me hard as hell, and I'd need to take care of that later. My current tube of lube was almost empty, and I didn't want to use lotion or shower gel or anything else.

After checking out and climbing back into my car, I realized something. We needed to try putting condoms on something that wasn't me. If Kinsey wrapped her hand around me, applying condoms, I'd blow. I hadn't been with anyone since a bit before we started working through her list. My hand was a poor substitute for the touch of another.

Off to the grocery store I went. It was lunchtime, so it was busier than normal with people picking up something to eat. Especially in the produce aisle where there were pre-made salads and a soup bar.

Amidst all of that, there was me, staring at vegetables, wondering which one of them was the most phallic-shaped. Was it the cucumber which didn't have much of a curve—not every guy did—but it had some decent girth?

Carrots were too small and too pointed. I wasn't knocking anyone. Not everyone was packing down below, but if Kinsey were to try to put on a condom, a carrot wouldn't do. Zucchini could work. I grabbed one of those and put it in the basket next to the cucumber.

I walked by the butternut squash and shook my head. Way too big. Then I remembered an important one I was forgetting.

“Bananas!” People around me stopped to stare at my odd outburst. “Sorry, just gotta practice putting a condom on some fruit. Nothing to see here.” I quickly ducked away and went to

the fruit section where I grabbed a bunch of bananas and didn't look back.

I was standing in line, waiting for one of the self-checkout areas to be available, when a guy came up alongside me and handed me an eggplant. Shit, I forgot about that one.

“Uh, thanks?” I said.

He clapped me on the shoulder. “Don't worry, buddy. You'll find someone soon so you can put all that practice to good use.” Then he walked away.

“It's not for me! I know how to put on condoms! I'm very, *very* well practiced with people, not fruit!” I didn't want him thinking I was a virgin, not that it would be a problem if I was, but I wasn't. I had to set the record straight. Although this made me sound like a whore, so that wasn't much better.

The petite older lady in front of me glared, then shook her head before walking away with her bag of groceries.

“Sorry, ma'am.”

I had to get out of here before they put a picture of me on the wall and reminded people if they ever saw me to call the cops or alert management. Thankfully, I didn't normally shop in this store.

The store employee who oversaw the self-checkout area narrowed her eyes at me as I walked past like I was a pervert or something. I wasn't the only one in the history of humans to buy food for this purpose. I was probably the only one locally who announced it like I did though.

I made it back to work quickly with my bag of food and put my head down to take care of the support tickets for the rest of the day. My mind was off condoms and on the thing that paid my salary. Also, I didn't get so excited thinking about Kinsey and condoms anymore. The grocery store experience had cured me of that. At least for now. It would probably change with her in front of me.

A little before five, I texted Kinsey and asked if she wanted to come over tonight. I didn't tell her why. If I brought up condoms and food, she might say no. Instead, I said I was

picking up a pizza, and we would have a fun night in. Fun for whom, I wasn't sure. I was still embarrassed about earlier.

Kinsey replied that she was in. I let out a breath. I was seeing her again. Nothing got ruined this past weekend. Every time we worked on something on her list, I worried that would be the end of our friendship. That things would shift and not for the better. But it was still Kinsey and me. Best friends. At least for now, until she saw the phallic-shaped food I'd bought.

At home, I put the pizza on the dining table with the bag of food and went to get changed into a pair of jeans. They would help hide any hardness I might get down south. I grabbed a T-shirt with Mjölfnir on it and called it good. If Thor's hammer couldn't save me, I didn't know what could.

I had just enough time to spread the food out around the pizza box and put condoms in between each piece. It was a weird work of art that would hopefully make Kinsey laugh when she saw it.

A knock on the door pulled me away from my table of sex and pizza. I opened the door, and there was Kinsey on the other side in a pair of pajama shorts and an oversized T-shirt.

She looked me up and down. "Why are you in jeans? I thought this was a night in?"

"It is. It's laundry day, so this was what I had left." The lie slid somewhat easily off my tongue. I never liked lying to her, but this was an innocent one. Plus, it saved me from having to tell her the real reason I was in denim.

She shrugged and came in, stopping when she saw the table. "Uhhh... what's this?"

"It's condom night at Sebastian's!" I made sure to smile to hopefully take some of the seriousness out of it.

"You're weird."

I sighed. "No. I mean I am weird, but this is on your list. Remember?"

"Right. The list." I got to see a cute blush rise over her cheeks.

“We’re going to have a feast of pizza, then we’re going to have some fun with fruit. And vegetables.”

“Okay. It’s just condoms. No big deal.”

“None at all. They’re for function. They’ll keep you from getting pregnant and also prevent STDs.”

“I do remember health class in high school.”

“Right, sorry.”

*Embarrassment, party of one!*

We ate way too much pizza while watching TV, then made our way to the table. Time for some fun.

“All right,” I said. “How about we start small and work our way up? You’ll probably encounter dicks of various sizes, so this will prepare you.” I swallowed. Hard. Because I didn’t want to think about her putting a condom on anyone but me.

One by one, we went through each piece of food until they were all successfully covered in latex. I walked Kinsey through the steps while she got the hang of it and didn’t need me coaching her any longer.

She smiled. “I did it.”

“You did. You’re ready to move up to the big leagues. Think you can handle it?”

Kinsey licked her lips and dropped her gaze to my crotch. Oh, no. That wasn’t what I meant. Yet, she thought it was and if I told her no, I’d look like an idiot.

She wanted to practice on me. It was only natural. I was the real deal, not an eggplant.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yeah, absolutely.” I was so not.

This meant I had to perform under pressure. I had to get hard, which normally wasn’t an issue in front of Kinsey, but tonight was different. She wouldn’t be looking at me like she wanted me. She would see me as a test subject. Someone to practice condom application on.

Fuck my life.

“So, I need to be hard for this,” I told her. “I could get ready out here or in the bedroom. I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“H-Here is fine.”

“Okay.”

We were doing this. I would take my dick out, jack it until it was hard, then Kinsey would put a condom on me.

I went over to the couch because if I was going to do this, I should be sitting down. Once her hand wrapped around me, my knees would likely buckle. I unbuttoned my pants, pulled them down past my ass, along with my boxer briefs, and sat my bare ass on the couch. I didn’t want my jeans tucked under my balls.

Then I stroked myself. With my eyes closed. While I thought of porn and not the fact that I felt the couch dip as Kinsey sat next to me while I stroked myself.

My hand was rough thanks to me not grabbing the lube. I wasn’t about to get up and squirt some on my hand. I was in this now.

Once I got my dick all the way hard, I opened my eyes to find Kinsey staring right at it. Mouth open a little. I didn’t even think when I moved my thumb to collect a bit of precum from the tip of my dick. She seemed to like it though. A little gasp left her. Shit, now I was hard as steel.

“Ready?” I asked in a rough voice.

“Y-Yeah.”

She opened the little foil packet and pulled the condom out. Her hands shook as she slowly put it on my tip. That slight touch, and I was ready to come. I gripped my base, trying to hold it back. No need to embarrass myself further tonight.

Kinsey slid the condom down bit by bit. Every moment felt amazing and also like pure torture. But Kinsey was a natural. She did it perfectly. And I was a mess of a man who, if

I didn't get off the couch soon, would come right into that condom.





---

## KINSEY

I stared at the to-do list on my computer. No, not that list. The one that had to do with my actual job. I was a list maker, a task getter doner, if those were actual words. My brain was a scrambled mess, and I was supposed to be drafting a letter to our investors on the state of the company and our marketing plans for the next quarter.

Great. Our state was great. That was all I had. Since our big PR nightmare, our membership had grown by a lot. What was that they said about press? No press is bad press? Turns out that whoever they were was right.

I tapped my pencil on the desk and read through the list again. When did my job get so demanding? Had it always been this way, and I was too sucked into it to notice? For so long, I'd had nothing but my job. I still didn't, but it felt like I did, like something was changing inside of me.

I was opening up, becoming braver, bolder. Something I'd always wanted to be.

“What’s wrong with her?” Vera whispered.

“I don’t know, but she’s been staring at her computer for twenty minutes.” Eliana was one to talk. When she dove into coding, no one could get her attention.

“Do you think it has something to do with the app? Are we in trouble again?”

“Ladies.” Charlotte to the rescue. “Can I help you with something? Kinsey is very busy today, and she has a meeting soon.”

I glanced over my shoulder to catch them looking at each other.

“Are you gatekeeping our friend?” Eliana crossed her arms. “Who gave you the authority—”

Vera put a hand on her arm. “What our dear coder friend, who doesn’t know how to talk to people outside her computer, meant to say is that we’re worried about her. Have you noticed any changes recently?”

I waited to hear what Charlotte would say. We didn’t know each other well yet, but so far, she’d done a good job. How she dealt with my nosy friends would go a long way to earning my trust. They needed a firm hand but also respect.

Charlotte sighed. “She’s okay, I think. Something has been distracting her, but I don’t get the feeling it’s a bad thing. She seems... happily preoccupied.”

“Happy?” I could picture Vera raising an eyebrow. “First of all, Kinsey never lets anything distract her from her work. Second of all, she’s not the type to let anyone know when she’s actually happy.”

“Can we talk to her?” Eliana asked, her temper calmer now.

“Kinsey,” Charlotte called. “Do you have a few minutes?”

I had to pretend like I hadn’t heard their entire conversation. I started typing a gibberish email to look busy. “Only a few.” Clicking out of my email, I leaned back in my chair as the two women who knew me best rounded my desk.

Vera perched herself on the corner of it, getting comfortable as she looked down at me. Eliana stood beside her.

“What aren’t you telling us?” Vera asked bluntly.

“Nothing.” I looked away from them. “Why do you think there’s a secret? There’s no secret.”

“You’ve always been a terrible liar.” Eliana laughed.

I had, and I knew it. I couldn’t look at them.

“Okay,” Vera started. “We’ll guess.” She paused, thinking. “You finally discovered the virtue of not working on the weekends.”

“No.” Eliana pursed her lips. “We both know Kinsey brings her work home with her. That’s not it.”

“You met a man.”

I pressed my lips together and shook my head. It technically wasn’t a lie. I’d already known Sebastian.

Eliana studied me, her eyes widening. “You finally got laid, didn’t you? That’s it. The epic dry spell is over.”

Her voice was too loud, and I looked around to find others watching us. My face heated.

“Oh, wow.” Vera was grinning now. “That’s it, isn’t it?”

“No, will you two keep your voices down? I’ll tell you.” It was the only way to keep this between the three of us, making them stop shouting guesses. There were disadvantages to an open office.

Eliana inched closer, and Vera leaned in. I’d put this off for as long as I could because of how pathetic I looked, but they were my family. Plus, they already knew about the list. Heck, they wrote it.

“I haven’t gotten laid... yet.”

“What do you mean by ‘yet’?” Vera looked ready to explode with anticipation.

“There’s been some kissing. Um... we... um... did the naked thing. I learned how to put a c-condom on.” I was sure my face grew redder with each word.

Eliana’s jaw dropped open. “You’re doing the list. Kinsey, that was a drunken joke. Just us having some fun.”

“I know, but even after all that wine, you were right. I need to open myself up, stop thinking so much. And it’s working.”

Vera jumped off the desk to wrap me in a hug. “You know we never thought there was anything wrong with you, right? That list was stupid, and any guy would be lucky to have you.”

Eliana nodded in agreement. “But now that this is happening... who’s the guy?”

I should have known that would be one of their questions. Yet, a part of me had wanted to keep what was happening with Sebastian a secret. There were no secrets from these two. Never had been. I dropped my voice. “Sebastian.”

Vera pulled back, her grin widening. “What was that, Kins? I didn’t hear you.”

I sighed. “Sebastian might be helping me out.”

“You and Sebastian?” Eliana yelled before wincing. “Oops... sorry.”

The entire office looked at us now. Some with surprise, but most with knowing looks, as if they’d expected this someday.

“Great.” I rubbed my temples. “All our employees now think I’m sleeping with Sebastian.”

“Well, you will be eventually, right?” Vera bit back a laugh.

I’d tried not to think about that part of the list because all my insecurities rose to the surface. What if I wasn’t good? What if Sebastian regretted everything? How could I sleep with my best friend and ever look him in the eye again?

“Uh-oh, V.” Eliana raised a brow. “We’re about to have a freak-out.”

I was used to handling their emotional outbursts, but I’d gotten so good at keeping mine contained, never letting anyone know how I truly felt. “No, I’m okay.”

It was as if I could sense his presence the moment he walked into the office with a drink carrier full of coffees. My eyes gravitated toward his tall frame, his easy smile.

“Oh, she is so not okay.” Vera laughed.

Sebastian caught sight of us, and his smile widened. “Ladies.”

“Sebastian.” Vera could hardly contain her laughter.

“Now we know why Kinsey likes you so much.” Eliana grabbed one of the coffees and then paused. “These are for us, right?”

“Figured you all could use a midweek pick-me-up.”

Vera sighed as she sipped a coffee he handed her. “I’d bone you just for this if you weren’t already taken by my cousin. Three shots of espresso in this?”

“Nothing but the best for Vera Hart.”

She patted his shoulder on her way by. “You’re a good one, nerd boy.”

Eliana followed her, turning once to give me a thumbs-up.

As if he didn’t notice the awkwardness, Sebastian set the final two coffees on my desk. “I got Charlotte a latte.”

“You know my assistant’s coffee order?”

He shrugged as if it wasn’t a big deal. He also brought Vera and Eliana exactly what they wanted. Had I just never noticed what kind of man was right in front of me?

“Why is everyone staring at me?” Sebastian whispered.

“Oh.” I sipped my drink. “It’s nothing.”

“Kins...”

“They sort of think we’re sleeping together.”

His brow furrowed. “Well, I guess they won’t be wrong soon enough.”

“It wasn’t my fault. Vera and Eliana got it out of me, and you know how they can be. Does it bother you that people know?”

“Honestly, I don’t care.” He thought for a moment. “But I know it probably bothers you, so I wish it could be different. I don’t want this to make you uncomfortable.”

“The whole thing is uncomfortable.” I caught myself. “I didn’t mean that. I swear. It’s just... I realized today we’re going to have to have...” I could hardly say it. “Sex,” I whispered.

A laugh boomed out of him. “This is a discussion I want to have until the end of my days, but I only have a short break, and my boss will be on my ass if I’m not back soon.”

“I’ll walk you out.” I needed a moment away from this suffocating office. We didn’t speak as we wound around desks to the door or as we waited for the elevator. When it dinged and opened, Sebastian stood in the doorway so it wouldn’t close and looked at me. “This weekend. You and me?”

I nodded, biting my lip.

“Come here.” He held a hand out, and I put mine in it, letting him pull me into an all-encompassing hug. He’d always felt good, comforting, safe. Now, there was something else there. I drew in a breath, inhaling him.

“Everything is going to be okay,” he whispered into my hair. “Do you want to stop this?”

I shook my head against him.

“Then I’ll take care of you, I promise. We’re in this together, Kins. Just the two of us.”

I pulled back to look up at him, and he smiled down at me.

Before I registered what my body was doing, I rose on my toes to press my lips to his. He froze for a moment before kissing me back.

By the time my brain finally caught up with my body, the damage was done. I pushed away from him and turned on my heel. “I need to get back to work.” I practically ran from him, not stopping until I was safely seated back at my desk.

I kissed him. Outside of list activities. That was what couples did, and we were not a couple. I rested my forehead on my keyboard, wishing I could take it back. He was already doing so much for me; he didn’t need this too.

Why did I do it? Everything about him was warm and safe. I swore he could win an Olympic medal in hugging. That didn’t mean there was more to it, more to us.

Did it?

I'd never seen Sebastian in that way before, but now I couldn't stop.

Vera floated back toward my desk. "If you don't marry that man, I will."

I looked up at her, and I wasn't sure what she saw in my expression that made her smirk fall.

"Kins, what's wrong?"

"I am so screwed."





---

## SEBASTIAN

It was guilt night at the Denver household. I hadn't been to see my parents recently. Mom called me today to ask if I could come over and look at her computer. Something wasn't working. She threw out terms I didn't even think were real. It was a way to get me to their house. Whatever. I'd go. It wasn't like I had plans with Kinsey tonight.

Then that kiss she gave me filtered back into my mind. One that had nothing to do with the list and everything to do with Kinsey getting swept up in a moment with me and feeling like doing it. I was completely fine with that. She could kiss me whenever she wanted to.

But I couldn't think about it now that I had to be on point at my parents' house. And look at that. There was a Mercedes in their driveway. Guess I wasn't the only Denver child getting guilted into coming over.

I hadn't spoken to Shea in a while. It wasn't like the two of us texted often. He did his thing. I did mine. And sometimes we met over dinner with Mom and Dad, or at the pool apparently.

The moment I walked through the door, the scent of something delicious hit me. I wasn't sure what it was, but I followed that smell until I got to the kitchen and found my mom putting dishes away like they already had dinner. What the hell?

"Oh, good, you're here," she said when she saw me. "Your dad and I have plans tonight, but my computer is on the table,

and there are leftovers in the fridge. Shea already grabbed some.”

I looked toward the dining table where he lifted a hand to me in a half wave. He was alone with nothing but my mom’s old Dell to keep him company. It was like I walked into an alternate universe. Mom always made us sit and have dinner with her and Dad.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“You know my friend Louisa?”

“Um, sure?”

“Well, she just had her knee replaced and got home from the rehabilitation center this morning. I told her we’d stop by and bring her some food. She can’t cook, and her husband isn’t any good in the kitchen, so I made a few casseroles her husband can easily heat up.” She glanced down at her wrist like there was an invisible watch only she could see. “Right, I have to go. You and Shea have fun.” She patted me on the cheek before picking up a stack of food, handing it to my dad, and bustling out the door.

My dad just shrugged and followed after her.

I stood there stunned for a moment, then went over to Shea. “What just happened?”

“You think I know? She told me Dad’s friend, Ross, needed help repairing his deck tonight, so they had to go.”

“That woman is a master manipulator.”

He snorted. “Not really. She can’t even keep her stories straight. Food’s good though. Plus, you have to look at her computer.”

“If there’s actually anything wrong with it.”

“True.” He took another bite of food.

I went to the kitchen and heated up a plate, then joined Shea at the table. We sat in silence as I booted up Mom’s laptop and looked it over. I didn’t rush, making sure everything worked. It did. There was nothing wrong with it.

But the last thing I wanted was to be dragged over here again for another non-existent computer problem.

“So, this was a setup then,” I said.

“Seems like it.”

“And you just happened to not be traveling.”

“Nope. No plans for a while. I’m trying to slow down.” That was new. Shea never slowed down. He went from city to city, shoot to shoot, getting the perfect photos of him, and making a ton of money while doing it.

“Really?”

“Is it so hard to believe? I move around nonstop. I’m constantly watching what I eat, how much I exercise. Making sure my hair, my nails, my skin are all perfect. I’m exhausted. I’m so tired of living for everyone else and not for myself. I have no freedom, Seb. None.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

He shook his head. “You wouldn’t. I never talk about it. We hardly ever speak to one another.”

“We really are shitty brothers. I’m just as guilty as you are. I don’t talk much about myself. I don’t ask how you or Way are. Fuck, we’re awful.”

“We are, but it’s nothing that can’t be remedied.”

“You think?”

“We have the house to ourselves, eating a meal Mom made. Let’s talk.”

“I bet that’s why she did this. She must have known something was up with both of us and thought we should speak to each other.”

Shea chuckled. “I wouldn’t put it past her.”

“I share, you share?”

“Works for me.”

Maybe this was just what I needed. Someone who didn’t know Kinsey as well as I did and could give an unbiased point

of view. Some direction about what I was doing and whether I was screwing things up or not.

“You know Kinsey, right?”

“Yeah, she grew up with us.”

“Okay, well, she’s still my best friend. But there’s been nothing more between us.”

“And you want there to be.”

“I’ve had feelings for her for a long time, but I never thought she felt the same. Then I...” Shit, how much did I want to tell him? Did I trust him? I didn’t want to break Kinsey’s trust, but I wanted to talk about this.

“Seb, I know we aren’t very close, but you have to know I’d never repeat anything you tell me. I swear.”

I nodded, then launched into the list Kinsey had and how many things on it we ticked off. I didn’t get into details about what specifically was on the list, only that it was sexual in nature.

“That sounds like fun,” he said. “But I could see how lines could become crossed, and you’d feel like you don’t know where you stand.”

“Right. I want more with her. I want what we’re doing to be real. I wasn’t sure whether she felt something for me or not, but then she kissed me. At work. Not in the comfort of our apartments. Not when it was just the two of us. Almost like it was second nature for her to do so.”

“And that made things even more confusing.”

“It did. I love her, Shea. Not in an ‘I’m so in love with her’ teenage kind of way. This is soul deep, ‘I would do anything for her’ kind of love. And it scares the hell out of me because this list is making it real. I’m scared that by the end of it, I’ll be in so deep I’ll never be the same and our friendship will be forever ruined because of it.”

He watched me, seeming to think things over for a bit. “I think you already are in over your head, Seb, but I don’t necessarily think it’s a bad thing. Listen, you love Kinsey.

Maybe this list was what you two needed so you could find your way to each other, how you were always meant to be. She's obviously comfortable with you. She feels safe to experiment with whatever. If it were me, I'd keep going with the flow. There's no going back. Just ride it out at this point and hope, in the end, it's all worth it."

"What if I lose her?"

"Then she was never really yours to begin with."

I pushed my empty plate away, folded my arms on the table, and dropped my head onto them. Then I groaned. Loudly. Because I didn't want to lose her. Everything Shea said made sense. We were past the point of no return. Either we sank, or we swam. What we were doing was working. So far, at least.

I heard Shea push his chair back and walk over to me. He laid his hand on my arm. I peered up at him but didn't bother to lift my head.

"You're going to be fine, Seb. And if it goes in the opposite direction, all you have to do is call me. I'll always be here for you."

"Even if you're halfway around the world?"

"Even then. But I told you I'm going to slow down. I know it won't be a full stop since I have contracts. When they run out..." He shrugged and sat beside me.

"You wanna share some more?"

"Yeah." He smiled. "What do you want to know?"

"Any love interest?"

"No, everyone I date seems to be after me for my money or fame. All shallow reasons. Nothing I can build a solid foundation on. I want someone who won't just be my lover but also my best friend. Someone I can spend my life with."

"Kind of like me and Kinsey."

"Just like that, but minus the drama and indecisiveness. I can't handle that right now."

“Why is this so hard?”

He sighed and leaned back in the chair. “I learned long ago that anything worth having I have to fight for. The easy shit, the stuff I could do without, is what gets handed to me.”

“What about me and you?”

“I feel like an asshole for never being here.”

“You’re not alone. I’m always here and don’t bother to see you when you’re in town. Hell, Way’s here, and I hardly talk to him.”

Shea got up and took our dishes into the kitchen. I followed. He washed, I dried. And we kept talking about all kinds of things. Some stuff that was bothering us. Other things that meant nothing, but it was fun to joke around with him.

I realized how much I missed my brothers. Not just Shea, though Waylen was a prickly asshole on the best of days. I had to do better. We all did. If everything else went to shit in our lives, we were left with our family. The people who, no matter how much we might not talk or hadn’t gotten along in the past, would be there for each other. Waylen could call me today with something he needed, and I might think it was strange that he was reaching out to me, but I’d still drive over there and help in any way I could.

“We’re not going to tell Mom we had this talk, are we?”  
Shea asked.

“Hell no, or else she’s going to try this with us and Way. Can you imagine? He’d look like a deer in headlights, inching his way toward the door and his freedom.”

Shea laughed. “This kind of thing wouldn’t work with him.”

“I’m surprised it worked with us.”

“Mom knew what she was doing.”

“Doesn’t she always?”

He looked around the living room where we were sitting now with the TV off. “Do you think she has a crystal ball

around here or something?”

I snorted. “Doubtful. Remember when I had that magic eight ball, and she told me I was inviting dark spirits into the house?”

He started laughing. “Then I got tarot cards for my birthday, and she couldn’t get them out of here fast enough. Thought the devil himself would show up.”

“Yet she’s the least religious woman out there.”

“Halloween’s different though.”

“Oh, yeah.” I nodded. “Just as long as we don’t have a magic eight ball or a tarot card.”

Shea tapped his chin. “It does give me an idea for a costume.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “She’d kick you out of the house so fast.”

“Good. Then I won’t have to endure the party.”

“You’re not leaving me there to deal with it.”

“Nah, I couldn’t do that to you.”

Damn, it felt good to get along with him.





---

## KINSEY

Why was I such a wreck?

I walked past the pile of work I'd brought home with me, turned, and paced by it again. Maybe Vera and Eliana were right. I was addicted to my job. Or maybe they were very, very wrong, and I only used it as a distraction from everything that scared me in life.

Marketing didn't scare me. Investors and lawyers and clients only gave me energy. In the office, I knew what I was capable of. And I was damn good at my job. Yet, the moment I stopped working and had to step into the real world, all that confidence fled like Sebastian when he saw a shark.

That gave me pause as I chuckled. I once tried to convince him to learn to scuba dive with me, and he didn't even hesitate before telling me he wouldn't go diving if it was the only thing that would save my life. It had been a joke, of course. He'd have done it if I truly wanted him to. Instead, I convinced Vera to learn with me through a program at the Florida aquarium, and then the two of us dove in the shark tank with a friend of hers who worked there.

A smile twitched on my lips. Okay, so I wasn't scared of everything in life. Animals I could do. People, not so much.

I flopped onto the couch next to my laptop that served as the metaphorical work pile, imagining a time when people carried giant stacks of papers with them. Sebastian would have hated that. He thought everything should be done through a computer to stop the wastefulness that was paper. Plus, he just

loved the sound a computer made when it booted up, the warmth on his lap as he imagined how much power existed in such a small device.

Nerd.

I leaned my head back and sighed. Had I always thought of him in every aspect of my life? When I went to the farmer's market, the first booth I looked for each month was the woman selling edible cookie dough that Sebastian couldn't resist.

Today, when I stopped for coffee, I almost ordered one for him without thinking, without remembering that I'd kissed him out of the blue, and he probably now thought I was getting too attached.

But this was supposed to be the weekend. The night. I didn't know what to do with myself or if I should call him to remind him we'd made plans. Plans I still wasn't sure I was ready for.

Except I was. So ready. I couldn't remember wanting anyone more than Sebastian. Closing my eyes, I imagined his arms around me, his voice telling me to relax, that there was nothing to be afraid of. I'd tell him he was wrong.

There was everything.

Chewy tried to jump into my lap, but I wasn't in the mood for him to make bread on my bladder. Pushing myself off the couch, I left him on the cushion and paced to the kitchen, where the crumpled list sat on the counter. I'd managed to cross off more items than I ever expected, but there was another I could do right now. At least I could prepare myself to see Sebastian and work on the list at the same time.

First, I grabbed my cell and dialed the person I had to blame for this one.

"Hey, babe," Vera answered. "Can I call you back?"

No. She couldn't. "Everywhere?" I asked. "Like everywhere everywhere?"

"What do you mean... oh! Hold on." There was rustling and then: "Mom, can you finish dinner? Kinsey needs me, and

it's life or death.”

I rolled my eyes as Aunt Delia yelled in the background, “I hope by that she means a man!”

“Did you tell her?” I hissed.

“Oh, of course not. Okay, maybe a little of it, but not the whole story. I'm stepping outside, so keep your panties on while I escape Queen Nosiness.” She paused for a moment. “Okay, I'm out of earshot. So... we're shaving tonight?”

“Don't say that. We're not doing this together.”

“I don't know, I could use a good shave. You never know who is going to venture downtown.”

“V.” I sighed.

“Are you blushing right now, Kinsey Hart?” She laughed. “You're so easy. Okay, getting serious.”

“If that's possible,” I grumbled.

“Is tonight the night?”

“I think so. I don't know. Maybe. We made vague plans, and it's next on the list other than—”

“Shaving.”

“Yeah.” I scrubbed a hand over my face.

“Well, there are many ways you can do this. I get waxed. They can do these cute little hearts, and it's—”

“V!”

“Right, okay. That's not helpful. Just stop overthinking it. Take a razor, be extremely careful, and shave as much or as little as you want. I know what we put on the list, but the truth is, guys care a lot less than we do. They just want to get in no matter how much bush they have to wade through.”

“Vera! Jesus. Shit. I should have called Eliana.”

“Maybe.” She paused. “You going to be okay, Kins? You don't have to do this, you know.”

“I don't mind shaving.”

“Not that. I mean all of it. You can stop. The list was a joke. We never meant to make you feel like your inexperience reflected your worth. You’re perfect, cuzzy, and I’m not the only one who thinks so. Sebastian—”

“I want to.” I cut her off before she could say something that would make me even more nervous. “I think I need to do this.” With him. For me. I wanted to see if these new feelings, this awareness, meant something.

I could practically hear her smiling. “Well, I’ll want details.”

“Not on your life.” We were both laughing when I hung up the phone.

In the end, I didn’t shave everywhere. That wasn’t me. It was one item on the list that would remain undone. I did clean up down there though.

Normally, I’d wait for him to call me or show up, but why did I have to do that? Once I dressed in a pair of designer jeans and a silk top, I threw my hair into a bun and grabbed my keys before smacking a kiss on Chewy’s head, irritating him, and heading out the door. This time, I was the one dictating what I needed.

By the time I reached his place, it was dark outside. A full moon hung in the nearly starless sky. It wasn’t truly starless. I knew that. The magnificence was hidden by the Tampa lights. There was a metaphor in that, but before I could figure it out, Sebastian opened his door. Shirtless. He was damp as if he’d just gotten out of the shower.

“Kinsey?” To his credit, he sounded more pleased than surprised. He held his cell in one hand. “I was about to call you.”

“Too late. I’m here.” Duh. I cringed.

He only grinned and pushed the door open wider. “Let me grab a shirt.”

That was a shame, but also probably a good idea. I wasn’t ready yet, and a shirtless Sebastian was a dangerous Sebastian. He returned a minute later, pulling a light heather-blue T-shirt

over his head. It looked soft, and I suddenly fought the urge to touch it. What was wrong with me?

“Want some tea?” he asked.

“Tea?” I lifted a brow.

Sebastian stopped, turning to me. “Yes. Tea. When I kiss you tonight, I don’t want there to be anything to blame but us. When I kiss you, it will be our decision.”

So, no wine then. I wasn’t sure if I was relieved or disappointed. The boldness that got me here disappeared as Sebastian set a kettle to boil and retrieved two mugs with tea bags and honey. When steam erupted from the teapot, he poured water over the bags and handed me a cup.

I laughed the moment I saw it. “Alpha dog? Really?” The mug had those two words in giant red letters. Sebastian was so not an alpha. He could have some alpha tendencies, but there was a sweetness to him.

He shrugged, seemingly not embarrassed. “When you know, you know.”

“Dork.” I bumped his shoulder before setting my hot mug on the counter. “So, um...” Words fled me. Did I just bring it up? The next item on the list. He had to know what it was, right? We’d always talked about serious things, and I could count on him for deep discussions.

As much as I loved Vera and Eliana, when it came to sex talk, they’d make jokes and break out the wine.

“So, tonight,” we both said at the same time before laughing nervously.

“You first.” He gestured to me, leaning against the counter and giving me his full attention.

I distracted myself by taking a sip of scalding-hot tea. “Shit, I think I burned my tongue.”

“It’s hot, genius.” He turned away from me to get to the freezer, his back shaking in laughter. I expected him to hand me an ice cube. When he faced me again, he held it between

two fingers, but instead of handing it to me, he popped it into his mouth with a grin. “How badly does it hurt?”

God, why was this so hot? “Bad. I think my tongue is going to fall right out of my mouth.” Did I mention how much I sucked at sexy talk? “Pretend I didn’t say that.”

“No way. I need to save the girl.” He drew me toward him, pressing his lips to mine softly. The ice cube pressed against my lips before he pushed it into my mouth with his tongue. The burn soothed, but it only created a greater ache in me.

I sighed, my body melting right along with the ice. “If I’d known you kissed like this, I’d have written the list long ago.”

He chuckled against my lips, kissing me again. “We have wasted too much time not doing this.”

I squeaked as he picked me up by the waist and set me on the counter next to our still-full mugs of tea. “Not doing what?” I asked.

The next kiss stole the breath from my lungs until I gasped for air. “That answer your question?”

Yet, if we’d jumped into this years ago, who knew if we’d still be in each other’s lives? Most relationships didn’t last. At least, not romantic ones.

“Where did you go just now?” He leaned back. “I lost you.”

I jumped off the counter, sliding past him to grab my mug and have a moment to think. “It’s nothing. Just... If it wasn’t for the list...”

“The list isn’t what made me want to kiss you.”

Yet, it was what made me want to kiss him, and I hated that truth. I hadn’t seen Sebastian, not really. I’d loved him as my best friend, but it was like a part of me had been completely shut off from the world. A part he’d opened more with every kiss.

I sat on his too-comfortable couch and sipped the tea—more carefully this time. “I... what if we’re still making a giant mistake? We haven’t gone too far yet.”

He sat beside me. “Is that what you think?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know. Sebastian, I’m so messed up when it comes to all this stuff. Everyone keeps pushing me to date as if that will somehow give my life the value that none of my actual accomplishments do.”

He grabbed my hand. “You don’t need a man to have worth. How can I make you see that?”

“I’m not sure you can. Is it so wrong that I’ve spent my entire twenties building a fucking fantastic company instead of just fucking?” It wasn’t like me to use such strong language, but he didn’t even flinch.

“Is that why you made the list?”

“It’s why Eliana and Vera made it. We were drinking, and they decided I needed to get the lack-of-sex monkey off my back.”

His grip on my hand tightened, but he realized what he was doing and let go. “Please don’t take advice from them. The only person’s opinion that matters is yours. Do you want this? Not anyone else. You.”

That was the thing. I did. Sort of. “I think so, but at the same time, there are parts of the list I’m not sure I’m comfortable—”

He stood abruptly. “Let’s forget the list then. We’ll only do what you want to do, go as far as you’re comfortable going for now. How about we just hang out tonight? Like old times? No pressure. I think I know exactly what you need.”

He did. I laughed when he pulled into the parking lot of his gym. It was open late, but on the weekends, the place was pretty dead. Sebastian didn’t put his arm around me as we walked, he didn’t try to grab my hand. This wasn’t a date, and I loved him for that.

When most people were stressed, they turned to their favorite food or alcohol. Me? I had a different addiction, something that cleared my mind when nothing else could.



Sebastian waved to the guy at the front desk and led me toward the back, through a set of double doors and then another to the back court. We were the only ones anywhere nearby. The sound of our shoes squeaking on the wooden court, the smell of rubber, it brought back so many memories. Most of them good.

So much of my life had been about basketball that I was never truly able to let it go.

Sebastian reached the rack of balls and threw one back to me. “One on one?”

I stared at him. “How do you always know what I need?”

His eyes lifted to mine, locking in place. “I know you, Kinsey Hart. Every part of you.”

He did, didn't he?

A laugh burst out of me. “Okay, but no one on one. That's not a fair fight.”

“I'm not that bad.” He crossed his arms.

“You're okay.” I took off dribbling, going in for a layup. It came so naturally, so right. “But you don't stand a chance against me.” The ball swished through the net, and I caught it before flinging it his way.

We'd said tonight was just a hang, that there was no pressure, but I'd never wanted anyone more than in that moment. The way he looked at me, knew me. This wasn't about the list.

“Let's play H.O.R.S.E.” I studied him for a moment, trying to decide how he'd react. “And don't worry, I'll give you a head start.” I slid my shirt up over my stomach, pulling it off and tossing it to the side. “Go on. What's stopping you?” I tried to keep my voice from shaking as I gestured to the basket.

He missed.



---

## SEBASTIAN

Kinsey was a damn goddess on the court with a ball in hand, bouncing it with precision, turning on a dime. I knew this would help her. It was something she loved that she hardly ever got to do. I wished she took more breaks and made time for herself. I understood why she didn't though. She was running a company, one she and her friends had built from nothing. It occupied a lot of their time. But at some point, she and the rest of them would burn out. I didn't want to see that happen. They needed vacations, but since I knew they wouldn't be doing that anytime soon, a night playing ball would have to do.

Kinsey made her shot. Of course, it was nothing but net. I wouldn't expect any different from her. Without even trying, she was flawless. I, on the other hand, sucked. And missed.

Then... Then she did something I wasn't prepared for as we started to play the game. She stripped out of her shirt. I wasn't complaining, not in the slightest. Strip basketball? Yes, please.

She sank her first shot, then bounced the ball to me. I missed it because I was terrible, but the main reason was that Kinsey was shirtless. She still had on her lacy white bra. One I wanted to tease my fingers along the edge of and see if I could get goosebumps to break out along her skin.

I was so wrapped up in her that it didn't register at first when she came over to me and slowly pushed my shirt up. Right. Strip H.O.R.S.E. I raised my hands. Kinsey lifted the cotton and threw it aside.

“So eager,” I teased.

“Gotta keep this fair.”

“Mmm, so we do.”

I wanted to take her in my arms and forget all about what we were doing, but Kinsey needed this. So, she shot again. Made it of course. I didn't. Shocker. But when I was about to strip something else off, I had a sudden moment of clarity and remembered where we were.

This wasn't my apartment.

Or hers.

We were in a semi-public place. With cameras.

Shit.

“While I love every single thing about this tonight,” I began, “We're not alone here. Anyone could come in, and there are cameras.” I lifted my gaze and looked at one of them.

“Shit!” she squeaked and dove for her shirt to quickly cover herself. “Maybe this wasn't the best idea.”

“We're here. We can still play. We'll just keep it PG until we're done. Then we can go wherever you want and do whatever you want.” I picked up the basketball and bounced it to her once she was on her feet. “The ball is in your court.” I winked. That line was cheesy as hell, but I went with it.

We went back and forth until Kinsey won. I didn't excel in basketball. Now, if we got in the pool and raced, I'd win there. But neither Kinsey nor I brought bathing suits with us, and we sure as hell weren't swimming naked in this pool. We were ready to get out of here after our game was done.

Kinsey was all smiles. “That was just what I needed.”

I put my shirt back on. “Good, I'm glad. Where to now?” I was hoping she didn't want the night to end here.

“Your place?”

“You got it.”

We went out to the parking lot and climbed into my car. It wasn't a long drive but every second in the car felt like an hour. Our eyes kept sliding to each other. I had to remember I was driving and to keep my focus on the road. Kinsey was tempting as hell though. She looked good tonight. Then again, she always did, no matter what she wore.

The moment the door was closed, and Kinsey and I were inside my apartment, her hands came to my chest as she eased me against the door. Those hands slid down until they reached the hem of my shirt and just as she'd done on the court, she stripped it from me.

“Kins, are you sure?”

“Yes. I want this.” Her words were certain, but I didn't miss the slight tremble in her voice.

Reaching up, I brushed her hair back from her face and let my finger linger along her cheek. “If at any point you want to stop, you just have to say so, and I won't go any further. You're driving this.”

“And you're my passenger?”

“I'm whatever you want me to be.”

“Just you. That's all I need.”

“Then that's what you'll get.”

I leaned forward and closed the distance between us until my lips were on hers. At first, the kisses were tentative, us each teasing into the other's mouth, but they heated quickly.

I slid my hand up along her back, feeling the silky material of her shirt beneath my fingers. I didn't know what my boundaries were, how fast I could move. If this had been one of the women I picked up at a club, we'd have both been naked already. I only hooked up with women who knew the score. Who wanted a night of fun like I did, no strings attached.

But that wasn't who I was with. This wasn't a situation where I could do things like I usually did and get us off

quickly so we could each go our separate ways. This was Kinsey.

Kinsey took the decision from me and pulled her shirt off. With her body more on display for me, I hesitated.

“Touch me, Sebastian.”

“Anywhere?” Damn, when had my voice dipped so low?

“Everywhere.”

“Fuck.”

I gripped her waist and pulled her flush to me. My hands started at her hips and worked their way up her back like before, but this time, I kept one hand there while the other dipped back down and went over her stomach, and up to cup her breast. Goddamn, what had I done to deserve this?

Kinsey was soft and supple. Her nipple easily felt beneath the cup of her bra. She moaned into my mouth, making me bolder. I walked her backward. As fun as this was to be against the door, I wanted to take my time with her, show her what it meant to be with someone who cared about her as much as I did.

We finally made it to my room, and I eased Kinsey back onto the bed. I let my mouth trail from her lips to her jaw, down her slender throat, along the dip to her shoulder. I kissed along the tops of her breasts as I reached around behind her to unclasp her bra and slowly work it down her arms.

Kinsey gasped when I finally took her nipple into my mouth. I sucked and bit down gently, causing her to arch up off the bed. This woman... I wanted to bow at her feet. Have her use me in any way she wanted.

That list filtered back into my mind, reminding me about Kinsey wanting to be comfortable being touched. Now was my chance to truly explore her. To make her feel good and know the person whose hands were on her wouldn't do anything to ever hurt her.

Her jeans were easy to unbutton and slide the zipper down on. I did it so achingly slow, she had ample time to stop me.

As for myself, my dick was trying to see if it could bust through the mesh fabric of my shorts. Thankfully, it had plenty of room and wasn't trapped behind denim. I didn't have to hide how I reacted to Kinsey this time.

Kinsey lifted her hips so I could shimmy her jeans off. Every inch revealed another bit of smooth skin I couldn't wait to touch. I slid them off, leaving her in nothing but a pair of white lace panties. I kneeled at the foot of the bed, staring at her, thanking every deity I was in this situation.

Her hands gripped the comforter as she moved on the bed. "Bastian..."

I crawled up her body, kissing her calf to her thigh to her hip. I ghosted my lips over her stomach. "What do you need, Kins?"

"You. Now."

"So, you want me to fully undress you? Get naked myself?"

"Yes, stop teasing me."

"But teasing is what I do best, baby."

My fingers hooked into the sides of her panties, and I dragged them over her hips and off. Next, it was my turn to get rid of what I had on. Kinsey and I were about to be fully naked with each other again. In my bed. Not in my dreams. At least I had plenty of condoms.

I was naked in record time, my dick hard and leaking, ready for some attention. I fisted it, twisting my hand up and down, rubbing over the head. All the while, I kept my gaze on the object of my desire.

The light was low in the room. It cast a delicate glow over her. Kinsey was soft curves, skin glistening with a light sheen of sweat, partly from basketball, partly from what we were doing. She looked almost ethereal spread out for me.

Her body stopped moving, and she tensed slightly. I took too long, looking at her and not doing anything. If I didn't keep this going, she would get nervous, and things would get

awkward. Kinsey wanted this, and I would make sure she stayed happy and in that frame of mind where she could just let go. Not have to think about work, deadlines, whatever else that occupied her head. This was about feeling.

Instead of coming up over her this time, I lowered myself by her side, resting my head on the pillow. I skated my fingers over her curves, up to the taut peak of her breast where I danced my finger with the lightest of touches.

Kinsey moaned and rolled to her side. “How come you get to have all the fun?”

“You weren’t enjoying that?”

“That’s not what I said. I just meant I wasn’t getting to touch.”

“I’m right here,” I whispered. Right where I’d always been, hoping one day she’d open those beautiful eyes and see who was in front of her, waiting for the moment she could be mine.

And maybe Kinsey wasn’t mine forever, but she was for tonight. She was trusting me to be with her in this moment, and I wouldn’t let any of those self-doubts rattling around my head take root.

I held perfectly still as Kinsey took her time exploring my body. My dick jumped when she got near it, but she traced around and back up, leaving it untouched, teasing me as I did her. I rolled to my back so she could have better access to me, hoping she loved what she saw as much as I did when I looked at her.

This was more than two friends working through a to-do list. It had to be. There was nothing just friends about this. Not when I could see emotions swirling in her eyes, waiting for the moment she would give them a voice. Kinsey felt something deep, hopefully as deep as I did. Because I never wanted this moment to end, this time exploring with her, showing her how fucking perfect we were together. This, right here, was my own personal paradise.





---

## KINSEY

How could a man be so perfect? Touching Sebastian felt natural, like my fingers already knew what to do, where to go to drive him crazy. I tried to remind myself that this wasn't real, that he was just helping me.

But why did it feel like the most real part of my life?

Me and Sebastian.

He'd always been out of my league, so I never even let myself imagine a night like this. I was just happy he stayed my friend all these years.

My hand slid lower, but before I could get to my destination, Sebastian grabbed it and pushed me onto my back. He rose on his arms to hover over me, and those eyes, dark and focused, bore down into mine.

"W-what are you doing?" I asked, getting nervous for the first time tonight. I could feel his length against my thigh, and everything inside me clenched.

He dipped his head to capture my lips in a kiss that was both possessive and sweet. I sighed against him and reached up to pull him down on top of me. He obliged, his weight pushing me into the mattress. Skin to skin. Body to body.

His... thing brushed my lower lips, and I quivered. I couldn't even say the word, but I wanted it inside me. I wanted to know exactly how it felt to be claimed by Sebastian. If this was the only time this happened, I needed it all.

My nipples puckered as they rubbed against the coarse hair on his chest. If there was a heaven, it had to feel like this.

He kept kissing me sweetly, not making another move. But I was ready for it all. For Sebastian to pull out the charms, the dominance I was sure he had with all the women he slept with.

“Bastian,” I whispered.

“Hmm?” He dropped his head into the crook of my neck, peppering my skin with kisses.

I brushed a hand through his hair. “Is this how you do it every time?”

His head lifted. “What do you mean?”

“With the other girls. I’m guessing you move a bit faster.”

A pitying smile appeared on his lips. “You’re not just anyone, Kins. I—”

“What if I wanted to be?” I had a feeling he would say something that was too sweet, that would make me want him more than I’d already started to. Not just for sex. He was only helping me with the list, and I had to remember that.

He scowled. “You want to be treated like a one-night stand?”

“Well, no. Not exactly. I don’t like this conversation. Kiss me again, please.”

He bit his lip to keep from smiling. “Demanding, are we?”

“Always.”

“Fine, kisses it will be.” He didn’t go back for my lips, instead dropping a kiss on my shoulder before moving lower. He kissed each breast and moved on to my stomach. I squirmed, and he gripped my sides to hold me down. He stopped when he reached the top of what used to be my hairline. Now, it was a bit prickly as the hair tried to grow back.

I could hardly breathe. “Don’t stop.” I closed my eyes. “Dominate me, Bastian. Take control.”

He paused, looking up at me as I opened my eyes. “You want to be dominated?”

I nodded. “Number eight. We’re fulfilling the list, right?”

To my dismay, he didn’t keep going. Instead, he sat back on his heels, a new darkness in his eyes. “Right, this is just for the list.”

No. No, it wasn’t. Not on my end, but I couldn’t tell him that. I always kept my feelings so closely guarded, and this time, they were in a safe behind a steel door buried under rock and cement. “What else would it be for?” I wanted to take the words back as soon as I said them.

Sebastian grunted and climbed off the bed. Without a word, he left the room.

I sat up, wanting to call him back, wondering how I could mess this up so horribly.

When he stormed back in, I tried to speak, but he cut me off.

“I wrote my own copy of your list. You want to complete this? Then we will. I’ll dominate you, Kinsey. But there’s one other item we’re crossing off tonight too.”

I didn’t respond, only waited.

“We’re going to perfect your O face.” He set the list on the dresser and approached the bed. “Tonight, I am not your friend. I own you. Do you understand?”

I didn’t understand the personality change, but it was damn hot. I nodded.

“Speak.”

“Yes, sir.” I smiled, but he didn’t return it. If this was dominant Sebastian, I wanted more. Was I sick in the head?

“Spread your legs.”

“W-what?”

He raised a brow, and I corrected myself.

“What, sir?”

“Just do as I tell you. Don’t ask questions.” His face softened for a moment. “But the same rules apply. If you want to stop, tell me.”

“I know.” I’d never doubt Sebastian. I spread my legs, anticipation roaring through me. But he didn’t go in, instead climbing onto the bed to hover over me again.

“When you’re going to finish, tell me. I want to see.”

“Yes, sir.”

He didn’t hesitate again before bringing his mouth to my right breast, biting down on my nipple. I moaned as the pain mixed with pleasure. He worked them both over, and before long, I felt pressure on my thigh. Sebastian’s hand pushed it further away before wasting no time in coming to my vagina. I arched off the bed as he cupped me, one finger diving in.

“Sir,” I breathed. “More. Give me more.”

“I’ll give it when I choose.” His deep voice vibrated against my skin.

A second finger entered me, both of them twisting to hit every spot. Energy flooded me, a kind of toe-clenching feeling that made it hard to breathe.

“Sir, I’m going to…” I could hardly speak.

“Not until I give you permission.” A third finger entered me while another played with the skin outside my entrance.

I couldn’t hold it, not even for him and the desire to be controlled. “Sebastian,” I cried out as I arched off the bed, a thousand tiny explosions erupting under my skin. I didn’t know what kind of face I made, only that it had been the best feeling I’d had in years.

My breathing slowed. Sebastian ran a finger down the side of my face. “Next time, I expect obedience. I almost missed it.”

“Missed what?”

“This face. The fact that it already knows what to do. Perfecting your O face should have never been on that list. It’s

already enough to make me never look away.”

“Sir, I think it still needs more practice.” I wanted him inside me.

He gripped my chin. “Someone liked that.”

I nodded.

“Good.”

I thought he would kiss me then. I wanted him to. Instead, he dipped his head, so his lips brushed my ear.

“Has anyone ever tasted you?” he whispered, a low growl to his voice.

I knew what he meant immediately, but the thought of anyone going down there made me nervous. I was probably sweaty from basketball. Wasn’t it gross? Did it smell?

“No, sir.”

“That’s a shame.”

“You don’t have to. I mean, that’s not part of the bargain, and it’s probably not very enjoyable and—”

He pressed a quick kiss to my lips to stop my talking. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited for this. Open for me.”

I spread my legs again, nerves gathering in my belly.

Sebastian slid down slowly, agonizingly so. My eyes shut of their own accord. I couldn’t watch him.

When a warm breath blew across my lips, I almost couldn’t take it. “You don’t—”

“Don’t speak until I’m done.”

I didn’t even have it in me to say, “Yes, sir.”

His tongue pushed in first, and I held back a cry. I’d wanted domination, and right now, that meant staying quiet. Sensation flooded me as his tongue circled my clit. I gripped the bed with both hands, trying to keep from moving.

“You taste so good, Kinsey.” He dove back in with vigor, driving me insane with his tongue.

It didn't take long for the orgasm to build, this time even stronger than the first. "Sir, I'm going to—"

He moved so quickly up my body to press his lips to mine as my entire body went rigid. I could taste myself on him as he kissed me through the orgasm, that talented tongue dominating mine. The kiss was rough, forceful, and everything I wanted from him.

He rolled us with one quick move, so I rested on top of him. "I'm glad you made the list."

"Are you still my master?" I smirked.

"Rest period. We can just be friends for a few minutes."

"Okay, I'll bite. Why are you glad I made the list? Sometimes I think it was just a giant, wine-induced mistake."

"Maybe it was, but it's only because of the list I can do this." He drew me down into a kiss that had my toes curling again. Then it was over, and he rolled me off him as he sat up. "I'm going to get us both some water." He left so quickly I couldn't stop him.

I fell back against the pillows. Only because of the list. We were just having some fun. I couldn't help thinking when this was over, I not only wouldn't get the guy, but I'd lose my best friend as well.

A sigh rattled through me. I'd just had the best orgasms of my life from a man I truly cared for, and yet I'd never felt more lost.





---

## SEBASTIAN

*Sir.*

While the word from Kinsey's lips was hot, it wasn't me. I wasn't a Dom or anything close to it in the bedroom. But it was on Kinsey's list, so I did it. I'd do whatever she wanted. Anything to make her more comfortable with everything. But I felt almost detached while we were in that frame of mind. Like it wasn't me and Kinsey, but actors playing a role. I wanted to taste her, to touch her. That was still me, but it wasn't, if that made sense. I was so wrapped up in my head.

I stood at the kitchen sink with a glass of water in hand. I drank half of it and simply stood there waiting for my heart to settle. It was racing in my chest from both finally getting to be with Kinsey this way but also with nerves because what just happened in there was out of my realm of what I usually did. I'd give her anything she wanted, even if it was fake on my end.

I just wished me being me was good enough. After what just happened, I didn't think it was. I wasn't what Kinsey needed if she wanted someone to dominate her like that. If we were together, I could be assertive, could pin her arms above her head and drive her out of her mind with pleasure. But I wasn't a Dom. I wasn't someone who could bring her into that lifestyle.

My hand shook, so I set the glass on the counter and bent over to put my hands on my thighs. I had to calm down before I went back in there. We still had another item on her list I wanted to check off. We were in this now.

That fucking list. It was what brought me to this very moment but also felt like it was ending something good in my life—my friendship with Kinsey. I knew nothing would be the same after tonight. I wanted to rip the list to shreds. Burn the thing. Never see or hear of it again.

Why did my chest ache? Why did it feel like I was losing Kinsey before we even started? Though there was nothing to start, was there? This was all part of the plan. Not feelings. Not actually spending time together outside of being friends.

I stood, took a steadying breath, and filled up the glass. Kinsey was lying on the bed when I entered the room. Her hair spilled out on the pillow like a fan of silk around her. She had pulled the sheet up, so it was tucked over her breasts and under her arms. She sat up and took a few swallows of the water when I handed it to her, then placed it on the nightstand.

The words were right there on the tip of my tongue. The ones to tell her that I wasn't whom she needed. But I couldn't get them out. I didn't want this night to end, and if I said them, everything would stop. She'd feel bad for having me slip into a role I wasn't comfortable with, no matter how it seemed in the moment. Ruining this night wasn't part of the plan.

Kinsey's fingers trailed up my arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake. I was still naked and didn't care anymore about that. She'd seen me and I her.

"What's next?" she asked. "Sir."

I took her hand in mine and kissed along her fingers. I pressed kisses up her arm until I got to her shoulders. My dick had calmed down while I was in the kitchen, but with her skin beneath my lips, it was perking back up.

Everything faded away, and there was nothing but Kinsey and me. I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to slip into that false persona again. I just wanted it to be us—Kinsey and Sebastian—nothing more, nothing less.

My body covered hers. The only thing between us was the sheet. She spread her legs as if she was inviting me in, but that

damn sheet was in the way. I tugged it from her body, lifted to pull it away.

“What do you want, Kins?”

“I need more.”

I leaned over to reach the nightstand, opened the drawer, and pulled out a condom. I held it up between my fingers. “Are you okay with this?” I didn’t mean the condom, per se. I meant sleeping together.

She nodded.

Rolling to my side, I tore the foil packet open and removed the condom, but Kinsey was there, plucking it from my fingers so she could do it herself. She knew what she was doing now. She rolled it down, and I became impossibly hard. Her hands on my dick felt so good.

I covered her body again, settling between her thighs but not moving further yet. I peered down into her emerald-green eyes and just held them, waiting to see my best friend in there. Not the woman who wanted me to be someone else. She blinked, and it was like everything came into focus again. She was my Kinsey once more.

With a hesitant smile and a nod, I knew everything would be okay. At least for now, anyway. What would happen tomorrow or the next day? I didn’t know.

Lifting her leg a little to give me better access, I dropped it over my hip. She did the same with the other one until she was wrapped around me. I leaned back slightly to line myself up and slowly entered her.

With every inch, the sensation of her around me drove me wilder. She felt so good, so hot, so perfect. It was everything I could do to not come.

“God, Kinsey,” I whispered when I was fully inside her. I dropped my forehead to hers and just held us there for a moment.

There would never be another first like this between us. I wanted to savor it and let the reality of it sink in. If only she

could see how much I loved her. It was always there in the way I looked at her. Now it was in my very touch. Yet, this was still a list for her. An item to tick off on her way to finding the man she would date, love, and eventually marry. I was just a pit stop.

I shook those thoughts away and slid out of her a little, then pushed back in. Over and over, I drove her closer to her next orgasm. I wanted her to feel good again. Send her soaring.

Kinsey and I became a tangle of limbs as we both fought to seek our pleasure. Every panted breath, every tilt of our hips. It was all there, bringing us closer than we'd ever been before. I wanted it to be real. I wanted every part of this to mean something to her. Like it did to me.

We chased our releases, which for me seemed just out of reach. But Kinsey... she was getting closer. Then when I slipped my hand between us to touch her where I knew she needed it, I sent her flying. Her body trembled beneath me as her legs tightened on my waist. Fuck, she was beautiful like this in the midst of her orgasm.

She cried out and dug her nails into my skin, marking me without even realizing she was. If only those marks would last, but I knew they wouldn't. The only thing I'd have to remember this moment was etched in my memory. Nothing physical would be left behind.

I waited until she came down before I pushed into her a few more times, finally finding my peak and crashing over it. My body tensed, and I came so hard, stars danced behind my closed eyes.

When I came back to reality, I was panting, sweating, and still buried inside the woman I loved.

Instead of collapsing down on top of her, which I was very close to doing, I slowly, and as carefully as possible, slid from within her and fell onto my side. I needed to take care of the condom, but I wanted a second to regain use of my limbs first.

The room was quiet. Nothing but the sound of our breathing echoing through it. It smelled like sex, which I loved. Better yet, I brought Kinsey to climax repeatedly. I grinned and turned to look at her. She had a soft smile on her lips, and her eyes were closed.

Reaching over, I slipped my hand into hers. “Kins?”

“Yeah?”

“You okay?”

“Better than.”

“Good.”

With a quick kiss on the back of her hand, I released her and slid from the bed to get rid of the condom. In the bathroom, I tied it off and threw it in the garbage, then took a look at myself in the mirror. My skin was flushed. My hair had seen better days. It stuck up all over. It was my smile that kept my attention. It was big and genuine. I was so damn happy. And I wasn't letting those thoughts of this not being real invade my mind for the rest of the night.

Instead, I went back into the bedroom, flipped off the light, and curled up on my side, facing Kinsey. She had turned so her back was to me. I reached over and wrapped my arm around her waist. She let out a little squeak but relaxed in my arms as I tugged her close, so my chest pressed to her back. Her body was warm as she hummed softly.

I kissed her shoulder, nuzzled my nose along her neck, and settled in for the night. Because this wasn't ending yet. I wanted Kinsey to sleep soundly in my arms. I didn't want her to leave. I wanted to stay wrapped around her like I could protect her from everything in the world.

Sleep came easily to Kinsey while I stayed awake for a while. Her breaths evened out, her chest rose and fell, and her fingers sat curled around my hand at her waist. This was amazing.

If only this could be every night.

One could dream.

And that was what I did that night. I dreamed of Kinsey and me in bed. That it was *our* bed. Not hers. Not mine. Ours. And we lived in an apartment of our own. Had a life we lived together. In love. We had our happily ever after.



---

## KINSEY

I'd never slept so well as I did with Sebastian's arms around me. Maybe it was contentment—or maybe exhaustion from the night before.

*The night before.*

A smile curved my lips, and I sighed, turning toward Sebastian. He'd shifted onto his back, the sheet tangled around his legs. Sometime in the night, he'd kicked the blankets off the bed, but I wasn't cold. Not with him next to me.

I had the sudden urge to curl into him, to rest my head on his chest and hear the beat of his heart, but something made me hesitate. Last night was our night, but it was a new day, and we weren't together. I didn't get to touch him anytime I wanted.

He let out a soft snore, and I slapped a hand to my mouth to stifle my giggle. This was the man who had dominated me last night? I'd sort of enjoyed it, but there had been something missing. Sometimes, when Sebastian looked at me, I felt as if he saw me. During that part of our evening, he hadn't looked like he knew me at all.

Had I asked too much of him?

“I can feel you watching me.” His words came out softly, groggy.

“I was just wondering how I could ever let such a troll do those things to me.” I laughed.

One of his eyes opened. “Troll, huh?”



“Absolutely hideous. Barbaric.”

He was quiet for a moment before he pounced, pushing me back on the bed and covering my body with his. “I’ll show you a troll.” His fingers dug into my ribs.

I squealed as he tickled me, caught between the pleasure of his body flush against mine and the obnoxious tickling. I couldn’t stop laughing as I pounded his back.

“Stop! Please!”

His fingers froze, doing as I asked. Sebastian was always true to his word. He listened to me, let me lead us.

He tried to roll off me, but I stopped him. “I didn’t say to do that.”

He grinned down at me. “Say I’m not a troll.”

“I don’t lie, Mr. Denver.” I bit my lip.

“Say the words, or I’ll kiss you until you can’t breathe.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?” I reached up to pull his head down so I could press my lips to his. “Breathing is overrated.”

He grew hard, pressing into my thigh, and I smiled into the kiss. “You are not a troll,” I breathed against him. “Thank you. For last night.”

He kissed me again. “Please don’t thank me. You, Kinsey Hart, are a dream. I think I need to kiss you again to prove you’re real.”

His words sank into me, certainly not sounding like a man who was only completing a list. “Sebastian, I—” My phone ringing cut me off. I checked the screen, and it was my aunt, so I figured I’d call her tomorrow. This conversation with Sebastian needed to happen.

“You what?” he asked, his expression anticipatory.

“You and me... we’re—” My phone rang again, and Sebastian cursed. “I should answer. Something could be wrong.” Aunt Delia wasn’t a phone person, so calling me twice wasn’t normal for her.

Sebastian rolled off me as I answered the call.

“Hey, Aunt D. Everything okay?”

She responded. “Kinsey, honey, me and Vera are outside the front door.”

Shit. “Oh, um, I’m not home right now.”

“We know. We checked. Vera said you’re at Sebastian’s. So are we. Don’t keep us waiting.”

Double shit. I covered the phone speaker. “They’re here,” I hissed toward Sebastian. “At your place.”

He didn’t look perturbed. “You might want to get dressed.”

I returned to the phone conversation. “I’ll be out in a minute.” I hung up and scrambled from the bed, searching for my clothes. I found them, though my shirt was wrinkled from lying in a heap on the floor all night.

“Stay in here,” I pleaded.

Sebastian didn’t answer as I slipped from the bedroom. I wasn’t sure why I didn’t want my family to know about last night yet. Keeping it just for me felt good, like I could hold it in my heart and not have to explain it to the world or answer questions such as “What’s next?” The list was mostly done.

I tried to shake those thoughts from my mind as I opened the front door and found Aunt Delia and Vera.

Aunt Delia walked by me into the apartment, taking everything in. “I don’t understand why you slept here last night.”

Vera rolled her eyes. “I told you, Mom, she probably fell asleep watching a movie. It happens.” She sent me a wink and held up a box of donuts.

Aunt Delia shook her head. “V made me stop for donuts, of all things.”

Vera and I shared a look. It was a poorly kept secret that my perfect, beautiful, successful aunt couldn’t turn her nose up at Bavarian cream-filled donuts.

I took a jelly donut from Vera and pulled myself up onto a stool. “So, what are you guys doing here again?”

“Oh.” Aunt Delia wiped her lips. “It’s a matter of some importance, or I wouldn’t have woken Vera early.”

Vera shrugged. “I came for moral support.”

I sent her a look that asked why I could possibly need moral support, but she shifted her eyes away. “Dear.” Aunt Delia grabbed a napkin from the holder in the kitchen and set it on the counter to put down her donut. “I feel like I’ve been patient, not pushing you since we came up with the idea, but we do need to make plans.”

“Plans for...”

“Your date.” Vera’s voice was way too cheery.

I’d almost forgotten what the entire purpose of the list was. So that I could start dating, something that would begin with the blind date I’d promised my aunt she could arrange.

She continued speaking. “I’ve already found the perfect man, and he’s agreed to let me set him up, but I’ve kept him waiting too long, and that’s not polite.”

“Who is it?” Probably one of her models. It would be a good practice date, but I doubted it would lead to a second.

Aunt Delia shook her head with a laugh. “Do you even know what a blind date is?”

I did, but I wasn’t looking forward to seeing anyone but Sebastian. I couldn’t imagine kissing someone else or being as comfortable just hanging out. I’d tried to tell him this morning that I wanted more, that I felt more, but then Aunt Delia called, and I’d learned long ago to just tell her what she wanted to hear.

I’d go on her blind date, but nothing would ever come of it.

“How much advance notice does he need?” I asked.

“Oh, not much. This one’s a good man. He’ll cancel plans for any favor I ask of him. I think he has a date he’s hoping for

though. Something about a party.”

I went to lean my head on the counter as I groaned and smashed it right into my jelly donut. When I lifted my face, glaze covered my forehead.

Both Aunt Delia and Vera laughed.

I was a mess. “So, I’m a favor now? You seriously asked someone to take me out as a favor? Was I not already pathetic enough?”

“Oh, no, dear.” Delia rounded the counter to wrap an arm around my shoulders and wipe the glaze off my face with a napkin. “Any man I chose would be lucky to have you on his arm. He wants to meet women who are interested in dating. It’s hard in our world.”

“He sounds like a unicorn.”

“He most definitely is.”

“Fine.” I sighed. “How is next week?”

“Good.”

Vera laughed. “Mom already set the date, and we both know it. What day have you told him, Mom?”

Aunt Delia glared at her before turning kinder eyes on me. “Next Saturday. It was his idea.”

“You mean in one week?”

“Precisely.”

I only had one week to prepare myself, to become someone a blind date wouldn’t run from, someone who wasn’t in love with her best friend. “Fine. I can do that.”

“Good. I’ve given him your address, and he’ll pick you up.”

“Sounds dandy.” I tried to appear happy about it, but I didn’t know if I pulled it off.

Aunt Delia ate the rest of her donut and clapped her hands together. “All right, Vera and I are off to grab breakfast. Do you want to come?”

I looked from the donuts to her. “Isn’t that what those are?”

“Absolutely not. Donuts do not contain any of the nutrients that start the day well. We’re going to Cicio Cali for breakfast bowls.”

“Maybe another time.” I yawned. “I should get home. I have some work to get done today.”

Vera raised a brow. “It’s the weekend. Why do you always work on weekends?”

I wanted to tell her because my department had a larger load of work and smaller staff than hers, but I’d never complained about it. It was what it was. Plus, I enjoyed my job, and it wasn’t like I had anything else to do this weekend.

I followed them to the door and hugged them goodbye. Once I’d closed it behind them, I turned, and there he was.

Sebastian stood shirtless in the doorway of his room. How long had he been there? How much did he hear?

“If they’d seen you looking so rumpled and shirtless, there’d have been a lot more questions about why I was here.”

One corner of his mouth lifted. “Vera and Eliana don’t know what last night’s plan was?”

I shook my head. “I didn’t want to tell them.” It wasn’t meant for gossip; it was meant for us.

“I see.” There was a lack of emotion in his voice, his expression, that stirred alarm in me. I had to wipe that look from his face.

I approached him slowly, stopping when we were only inches apart. I reached for his chest, but he snatched my fingers before they could get there. Dropping them, he walked by me, grabbing a donut without questioning why they were there.

“So,” he started as he swallowed his first bite. “You have a date next Saturday.”

Well, that answered how much he'd heard. "Only to please Aunt Delia. I don't see myself getting on with a model."

He grunted. "You can get on with anyone you want to." He finished his donut, and his face brightened. "You and I... This has been fun, hasn't it?" His voice now dripped with charm.

Fun. It had been so much more. "Yep."

"It's a shame it couldn't last longer." He smiled. "There was so much I could have taught you." He winked.

"What—"

"We always knew there was an endpoint. When you finished most of your list."

I wanted to scream that we weren't done. There was one more item. But I no longer cared about the list. I just wanted him.

He barely let me get a word in. "Last night was a natural ending. I will never forget how you looked when you—"

"Bastian, stop talking. It doesn't have to be the end. As you said, there's so much more for me to learn."

He came behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. "You're a goddess, Kinsey. But we're meant to be best friends, and we should go back before we've ruined that."

I feared it had already been ruined. How could I see him and not want to kiss him, to push him toward the bedroom and let him do whatever he wanted to my body?

But he was done. Just like he'd never pushed me, I couldn't push him.

I slid off the stool. "I should probably go."

He nodded, following me to the door.

Sliding into my shoes, I reached for my keys. I paused with my hand on the doorknob and turned back to Sebastian. "This hasn't ruined us, has it?"

With a burst of speed, he reached me, pulling me against his chest and into a soul-crushing kiss. I breathed him in,

imprinting this moment in my mind.

“I sure hope not,” he whispered.

“What was that?” I touched my lips. He’d said this was done, and then he kissed me with shocking intensity.

His forehead scrunched like there was a war waging inside him. “I don’t really know. Maybe a promise. You’ll always have me, Kins. Sex can’t break years of friendship. Do you believe me?”

I nodded, touching my lips.

“I hope you have a good time on your date.” He sounded sincere, but I could read him too well. It hurt him to say it, but I was thankful he did, so I tried out something that would hurt me too.

“You should find yourself someone to fall in love with, not these girls you meet at the club.”

As I was leaving, I thought I heard, “I already did,” but I had to be mistaken. So, I kept going. Back to my life of weekend work and solitude.





---

## SEBASTIAN

It was time for the dreaded Halloween party my parents put on. Well, my mom more than my dad. I had my costume thanks to her. I completely forgot to pick something out, but I swore she always had something in reserve for each of us, just in case. I hadn't spoken to Waylen in a while, Shea since that night Mom and Dad fled with pathetic excuses. I had no idea what my brothers were wearing. Guess I'd find out tonight. The only way we were allowed to miss this party was if we were in the hospital. Even then, it would depend on the reason and how fast we could get discharged. I was joking. Kind of.

My mom had a costume for me that, I had to admit, I didn't completely hate. The pants, shirt, and cape—yes, I said cape—were done in a dark gray with what looked like black spraypainted on it to make it look older, worn, and more authentic. Or maybe it was just the fabric. I couldn't be sure. I also didn't care about what went into making it. It seemed like something that was to be worn a long time ago. The way it buttoned up all proper. Like those period movies my mom used to watch and sometimes drag me to do the same. I never got into them, though I loved the details that were there.

Of course, I had a top hat. I mean, it wouldn't be complete without a matching one. There was also a cane. One I could hit people with when I wanted them out of my way. Maybe my brothers just for old times' sake to reminisce when we used to grab sticks and fight with them like they were swords. Fun times.

Then there was the mask. No one would know it was me underneath except my parents. I wasn't sure whether Dad knew or not. It was a skeleton mask with red over the eyes. I could see out of it. Enough to walk, not eat or drive.

So, I put it all on except the mask and got into my car. I didn't have the balls to call Kinsey and ask where she was going tonight.

As I predicted, I wasn't the one she wanted. If I were, she wouldn't have agreed to go on the date. It was the nail in the coffin. One I wondered if my mom had as a decoration for the party. Maybe I could slip inside of it and hide the whole night.

On the drive over, all I could think about was Kinsey and the night we shared. I wanted more, so much more. What we did, it was amazing, but it felt like it was only starting. Too bad I was the only one who thought so. Fuck, I couldn't believe, after all that, I let her slip through my fingers. Though could I hold on to someone I didn't have?

I hadn't seen her in a week. Not in the elevators at work. Not getting coffee or something to eat. We didn't run into each other once. And it sucked. If I saw her, then I could gauge how she felt about me. If she brushed me off and behaved like nothing happened, I'd know for sure she didn't feel anything for me. But if she kissed me again, like she did before we fell into bed, maybe there would be some hope.

*Idiot*, I called myself. There was no hope.

*"You, my friend, have been friendzoned."* Coach's voice was back in my ear like an annoying bug that wouldn't leave me alone.

*"You're not telling me anything I don't already know."*

*"Then pull your head out of your ass. Tonight's a big game. You could find someone else."*

*"Right. Another woman who only wanted me as a friend or someone to go to bed with. I'm not good for anything else."*

*"Just as long as you remember what it's about. The friend zone is the winning zone."*

I flipped him the finger. In my head, because none of this was real, and I was slowly losing my damned mind.

Why did Delia and Vera have to show up last week? Why did Delia have to bring up that date? Kinsey and I didn't get to talk about anything. Then again, I didn't give her the chance to. Once the date was brought up, I checked out. Tried to safeguard my heart from any further damage. The truth was, there was nothing to be done to save it. My heart was already damaged beyond repair.

And I was miserable without Kinsey in my life. One week, and all I wanted to do was see her. Yet, I was driving into the cozy little neighborhood my parents lived in so I could be part of their Halloween tradition.

I had to park down the street. There were cars lined up near the house. They invited everyone in the neighborhood plus their other friends. And us three boys too. Couldn't forget us. I would get hell for showing up without a date. Guess I'd have to deal with that. I didn't even want to think of inviting anyone else.

My mom came rushing forward the moment she saw me. "Seb, you look amazing! Turn around and let me see you." I did a slow spin for her. Better to get this out of the way now. "Perfect. I love the way it fits you." She peered around me. "Where's Kinsey? I thought she'd come with you."

"She had a date, so she couldn't make it."

Mom frowned. "But I thought—"

"Let it go. Please. For me." I couldn't take talking about Kinsey and how she wasn't here with me. It would hurt more. No, tonight she was on a date with a model. A sexy guy with muscles everywhere. Someone I could never compete with.

"Okay, but if you want to talk—"

"I don't, but I appreciate it."

She nodded. "Get in there. Way's somewhere, but I haven't seen Shea yet."

I stepped further into the house and was hugged and greeted like I was everyone's long-lost son. Even with the mask on, they knew who I was. Figured.

I found Waylen in the corner like he was holding up the wall, beer in hand. He was dressed like a lumberjack.

"Original costume," I said, then propped myself up next to him. Maybe it was safer in this corner. Waylen could have found a weird ripple in the party where no one saw us.

"Hi, boys!" one of Mom's friends said as she walked by. She had on a short dress, showing off more than I wanted to see. Wait, wasn't that Louisa? I knew that knee replacement was bullshit. She didn't look like she had surgery.

I grumbled something under my breath and waved back. Waylen tilted his bottle toward her. That was as good as she was getting out of him.

"How long do we have to stay before we can slip out unnoticed?" I asked my brother.

"Unless that cape of yours can turn us invisible, the chances of us slipping out are none. Mom has superhuman hearing. She'd know the minute either one of us had our feet on a blade of grass that was outside their property line."

"You're right. I hate this party."

"We all do, but you're not usually this grumpy."

"Says the man who has his picture next to that word in the dictionary."

Waylen knocked into me with his shoulder.

Then we heard Mom loud and excited again. Her next victim must have arrived.

But her next victim was someone I knew very well even in her costume. My breath froze in my lungs as I took her in. Kinsey was dressed up as Sally from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. And by her side was her very own Jack Skellington. Except this one was shirtless with the shirt painted on. Of course. Muscles for days. Model fit. He had the

striped pants on at least. And a mask to cover his no doubt perfect face.

Kinsey, she was gorgeous. The costume was spot on. It covered her where I knew she'd want to be. Her arms, neck, and face were painted to make it more authentic. Delia probably had something to do with this. With the kind of money she had, she could do whatever she wanted, and those costumes looked professional.

Waylen choked on his beer. I looked over at him and patted him on the back. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he eventually got out. "How are you?"

"A train wreck as always. Life is fun."

"Not in general, jackass. I mean at seeing Kinsey here with Shea."

"What?" I yelled loud enough that the people surrounding us gave me a weird look. But I wasn't focused on them. I was paying attention to Shea. Because the way Mom doted on him, there was no doubt that was my brother. And he was here with Kinsey.

I lunged forward to confront him, but Waylen gripped my arm to hold me back. The man was a solid wall of strength.

"Not so fast," he whispered in my ear.

"Are you insane? Shea knows how I feel about her, and he brought her as his date. There's no mistaking that. I'm going to kill him."

Waylen watched me for a minute, then let me go. "Whatever. I want to go home, anyway. No quicker way to end this night than a fight."

"I'm glad you see a perk to my misery."

He rolled his eyes. "Just go cause a scene."

Now that I was free from his grip, I stomped across the room until I was standing in front of Kinsey and Shea.

Mom's eyes widened slightly. She was dressed in a wetsuit like she was about to go out and surf, but she had a couple of

fake fish hanging over her shoulder. Weird. Then again, this was my mom, and nothing was surprising. “Seb, you know Kinsey,” she said sweetly.

“And my brother,” I growled. “How could you, Shea?”

“Seb...” I could hear the remorse in his tone, but he still brought the woman I loved here. “It was a blind date. I didn’t —”

“Shut up. You and me, anything we might have mended... Done!” It took everything in me not to hit him.

How could he do this to me? He knew how I felt and yet he brought Kinsey to this party knowing I’d be here. He didn’t need to physically punch me for me to feel it in the center of my chest.

“Bastian,” Kinsey’s soft voice floated to me, but I ignored it. I was too angry at my brother. Kinsey didn’t know how I felt about her. That was on me. Shea was a different story. He had all the information and still chose to do this.

“Why don’t you two step outside and talk,” Mom said, trying to diffuse the situation. She’d become a master at it while we were growing up, but we weren’t those same kids anymore, and this wasn’t a stupid fight over who broke whose toy. This was the woman I’d do anything for, and she was standing next to my brother in a couple costume.

Bile rose up my throat. I turned and went for the stairs. I needed some air, and not outside. I didn’t want anyone out there seeing me flee the scene. A spare bedroom I could hide out in a bit until either the party was over or I calmed down. I wasn’t sure which would happen first.

I closed myself inside and leaned heavily against the door. My stomach still churned, but I didn’t feel like I would puke. I was so damn angry though. At my brother. And at myself. Because if I had opened my mouth, I could have avoided losing Kinsey.

It was my fault, and I hated myself for it.



---

## KINSEY

I was going to be sick.

The moment I opened my door tonight to find Shea Denver standing there looking just as surprised as me, I knew what a giant mistake all of this was. I didn't want a blind date or any date that wasn't with my best friend.

I'd been right in my fears that going through the list with Sebastian broke our friendship, but not for the reasons I'd thought. It hadn't just gotten weird between us. No, I didn't want to be his friend anymore. Not only his friend, at least.

I'd known it on some level since the first time he kissed me, but tonight, it became clearer than ever. And here I was ruining it again.

I should have turned Shea away, should have told him there was no way I would go to a party with him and risk Sebastian seeing us, but he was my excuse to go to Mrs. Denver's party and possibly run into the one person I wanted to be around.

I stood in the middle of the party, no date and no best friend. Sebastian had run from us so fast, I didn't see where he was going. Shea had slipped outside.

My eyes landed on the third Denver brother. He leaned against the wall, sipping a beer. He didn't have the refined good looks of Sebastian and Shea. He was rougher, more rugged. Always had been.

"Kinsey." He nodded toward me. "Still have my brother twisted up in knots, I see."



“Waylen.” I crossed my arms over my chest and approached him. “Still playing the asshole, I see.” I’d never liked Waylen. Not when we were younger, nor as we all grew older and apart. We weren’t in school with him because of the age difference, but he’d always been in the background.

He tilted the beer bottle against his lips. There was no crooked smile as Sebastian would have had at my comment, nor Shea’s congenial smirk. He was just... dour. Hard to read, but grim.

“You’re right.” He pushed off the wall and looked down at me. “But I’m not the only asshole here. Excuse me while I get away from you before you pull me into whatever brother love triangle thing you’re playing at.”

I turned to watch him hulk away and sighed. Was he right? Was the reason I didn’t cancel the blind date as soon as I knew it was Shea because I wanted to make Sebastian jealous? To make him see he was wrong? We weren’t only meant to be friends.

“I have three difficult boys,” a soft voice said from behind me. “Which one of them is the most irritating tonight?”

A smile curved my lips, the first all night, as I faced Mrs. Denver. Even before Aunt Delia took me in, before my parents died, she’d been the mother I dreamed of having. Sebastian never quite understood how lucky he was.

She pulled me into a hug.

I hugged her back, not wanting to let go. My entire body shook as tears came to my eyes. Her kindness was too much tonight. I didn’t deserve it, couldn’t handle it.

“Oh, no.” She leaned back and wiped a thumb under my eye. “Come, let’s step outside for a moment.” Placing a hand on my back, she guided me toward the front door and out onto the porch. With fresh air in my lungs, I could finally breathe. Only a few people were out here since the enormous amount of food and drinks were inside.

I took a seat on the wooden porch swing that I’d spent so much time on growing up. Mrs. Denver looked so much like

her two youngest sons in that moment, I almost laughed. She had the same kindness as Sebastian, the same confidence as Shea.

“Your sons are fighting because of me,” I admitted, wiping my face.

She shook her head. “Those boys... they might think they’re fighting because of you right now, but I’m not sure they know how to do anything but argue. Somewhere along the way, they seem to have forgotten that family is the most important thing of all.”

“I’m so sorry I’ve hurt your family.” I buried my face in my hands. I’d never wanted any of this.

A hand smoothed the hair away from my cheek as Mrs. Denver sat next to me. “Don’t you get it, honey? You’re a part of this family too. You always have been. I’ve only been waiting for Sebastian to see how much you truly mean to him. That boy can be as stubborn as his father.”

“I... we’re friends. We always have been.”

A harsh laugh echoed nearby as Shea walked up the steps onto the porch. “Are you that delusional?”

“Shea.” Mrs. Denver scowled at him.

He ignored his mother as he approached, his gaze never leaving mine. This man wasn’t only Sebastian’s brother. He was the guy who broke Eliana’s heart, the one she never truly got over. If she saw us together now... I had to fix everything.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off. “You may have been Seb’s friend, but I can guarantee he has never been yours. Not in his mind. Do you ever wonder why he doesn’t date anyone seriously?”

“He’s not interested in—”

“He has spent most of his life waiting for you.”

“No.” I shook my head. “That doesn’t make any sense.” He never told me, never even hinted. I was the girl who’d needed him for too long, for too much. He didn’t...

Mrs. Denver squeezed my hand and looked to her son. “Shea, you should talk to him before he sulks for too long.”

Shadows crossed over his face. “No. Things between me and him... we need to fix that. He’s only behaving this way because he’s in love with a woman he thinks he can’t have.”

Time stopped moving. My heart stopped beating. “He’s not \_\_\_”

“In love with you?” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “Jesus, you’re perfect for him. Both of you are too dumb to...” His voice trailed off as two familiar figures walked across the lawn.

“Kins!” Vera yelled. “Party crashers to your rescue.”

Even in the dark, I could guess at Eliana’s expression when she stopped moving, her eyes on Shea.

Mrs. Denver nudged my shoulder. “Leave Eliana and Shea to me,” she whispered. “What you need to figure out is what you feel for my middle child.”

“Everything.” The word came without thought. “I feel everything.”

“I’m not the one you need to say that to.”

I jumped to my feet, ignoring Vera calling after me as she dragged Eliana toward the house. Inside, there were people everywhere. It was a popular party that everyone looked forward to. Me, I just needed to get through it.

“Sorry,” I said as I squeezed between people. “Excuse me.” Sebastian had disappeared. For all I knew, he’d taken the familiar exit out of the second-story window I knew so well.

I made it to the stairs, catching Waylen’s eyes on my way. He nodded toward me as if saying I was finally doing the right thing. But I didn’t need him to tell me that.

Every door upstairs was shut, but I knew this path by heart. Sebastian’s old room had long ago been turned into his mom’s craft room, but if he wasn’t there, I didn’t know where else to look.

I didn't knock before pushing the door open. There were two covered easels along one wall as well as various other artwork and plastic tubs full of all sorts of craft supplies stacked high. Racks of paints and brushes and yarn sat on the queen bed pushed into the corner, yet my eyes followed the straight line to the man standing at the open window. It looked out on the backyard that had been strung with white lights, their glow providing the only light in the room.

"I'm surprised you didn't climb down," I said, closing the door behind me.

"I thought about it." He didn't turn, only acknowledging me with his words. "But the trellis is broken."

Flashes of the teenage Sebastian falling as wood cracked under his foot filtered through my mind. He'd been sneaking out to lie with me in the backyard under the stars on a particularly bad night for me. I'd run to him where he landed on his back and found him laughing, so I lay right there beside him, which was where his mom found us a few minutes later.

"We're not fifteen anymore." I joined him at the window.

"How's the blind date going?" he asked, mask no longer covering his face. "Shea being a gentleman?"

There was a beat of silence before we both laughed at that. Shea, a gentleman? He was almost like a little brother to me too, and we'd always enjoyed cracking on him. "You know I'd never date him, right?"

"Do I?"

"Hey." I grabbed his arm and forced him to turn to me. "I didn't choose to go on this date. Maybe I'd have canceled it if..." I couldn't say it.

"If what?" The irritation faded from his eyes as he looked at me, waiting for an answer.

"It doesn't matter. We're friends, right? We always have been and always will be." Why did that feel like such a dirty word? *Friends*. I turned away from him to walk toward his mom's artwork. In the dark, I could only make out the brightest colors, but we all knew the kind of talent she had.

Very little. She liked to try new things, whether she was good at them or not. It was something I envied about her.

“I think she’s getting worse.” Sebastian’s voice was closer than I’d expected.

“At least she’s trying.”

His fingertips grazed my hand from behind, but he didn’t take it. “Like you. The list. It might not be art, but you conquered something you were afraid of.”

I shook my head, turning to him. “I was never afraid of sex, Bastian.” I walked by him to stare out the window again. These were words I’d never even admitted to myself. It wasn’t sex that scared me, it was that last item. The one that came after.

“Then what do you fear?” He came up behind me again, his body so close I could feel his warmth.

I closed my eyes, letting myself relax back into him, letting his touch soothe my fraying nerves. “That we’d never finish the list.”

“But we did.” He turned me to face him and lifted my chin.

“No.” I reached forward, grappling for his pocket. He kept it with him. It was like he couldn’t believe what we were doing and needed the reminder. He went impossibly still as I fished around until my fingers grasped the edges of a wrinkled paper.

I pulled it free and unfolded it, handing it to him. “There’s one more.” I shrugged, stepping back. “I never got to make you want more.”

He stared at the list before ripping it in two. “This,” he said, ripping it again, “was just a stupid list, one you never needed. Don’t you see it, Kinsey? That’s one item you completed before ever writing it down.”

“What do you mean?”

He closed the distance between us once more. “I lied before when I told you we were just meant to be friends. The

truth is, I have always wanted more than that. Every part of you, not just what happens in bed, though that was pretty great.”

My face heated. “It was.”

“But it’s not what makes me want you.” He leaned his forehead against mine. “It’s not what made me fall in love with you. Does that scare you?”

“For once,” I whispered, “I’m not scared at all.”



---

## SEBASTIAN

Noise from downstairs drifted up into the room. It reminded me that there were too many people around us. I wanted to talk to Kinsey somewhere private. If she wasn't scared by what I said, did that mean... No, it couldn't, could it? Kinsey couldn't have feelings for me. But what if she did? There was only one way to find out.

We had to first get out the front door without my mom seeing us leave. If she did, she'd ask a hundred questions, make sure everything was okay, and have me promise to work things out with my brother. And I wasn't in the mood to talk to him right now. I still wanted to punch him.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and sent Waylen a quick text.

Me: We need to leave unnoticed.

Waylen: On it.

We had our issues, but Waylen would cause a distraction just like I'd do for him. Then again, I'd probably try to follow him out just so I could leave too.

I waited, counted to ten in my head before I heard it. There was a loud pop. Then another. Followed by three more.

"What was that?" Kinsey asked.

I grinned. "Our exit strategy."

"Waylen!" I heard my mom shout.



I gripped Kinsey's hand in mine and left the bedroom to descend the stairs. The loud voices of before were quiet now, no doubt looking at my brother like he'd lost his mind for doing whatever he did. Glancing over my shoulder at the bottom of the stairs, I saw Waylen near a table where there were balloons earlier, and now there were none.

"Why would you pop them?" Mom asked.

"You didn't want me to? I thought there was something fun in them." He tried to put on an innocent look but couldn't pull it off. At least to me. It was funny as hell.

I gave him a wave of thanks while everyone's back was to me. He returned the gesture with a slight nod of his head, then focused those fake puppy dog eyes on my mom. It didn't look right with that big, bad lumberjack look he had going on. I'd owe him for helping me.

We got into my car, and I started the drive to my place. We only got to the end of the road before Kinsey started talking.

"I told you I didn't know Shea would be my date." That didn't stop me from grinding my teeth together. "He didn't know it would be me either."

I looked over to her but then quickly back to the road and scoffed. "Sure."

"I mean it. He was just as surprised to see me as I was him."

"Yet you both still came to the party together, knowing what it would do to me." Like a knife to the chest when I saw them.

"Did I?" she asked. Shit.

"Shea would know," I muttered. He could have turned around and left when he saw who his date was if he didn't know. But he still chose to bring her. My hands gripped the steering wheel tighter.

"Shea and I discussed not going, but in doing that, we'd both miss out on the party. Your mom would never let him get away with that. Plus, I wanted to see you."

I sighed. “Why, Kins?”

“You’re my best friend.”

“God, the word friend is getting old.” It was time to lay everything out there. At least while I was driving the car, I didn’t have to look into her eyes and watch as she dismissed me, having no romantic feelings of her own for me. Although, she did give me a bit of hope before. “I love you, Kinsey. Not in a best friend way. Not in a casual way. In an all-consuming one. In an ‘I can’t get you out of my mind’ one. This isn’t a little love. This is much more than that.”

Her voice was small when she asked, “For how long?”

“Forever?” It came out like a question because saying it as a statement felt more vulnerable. More like I was handing her my heart to trust that she wouldn’t shatter it into pieces.

My phone rang before either of us could say more. Shea’s name lit up the car’s screen. I was about to decline it when Kinsey hit the answer button.

She spoke before Shea could. “You two need to talk. Now.”

“Seb...” He sounded upset. Good. He should.

“You did a fucked-up thing, Shea,” I told him. “Really fucked up.”

“I know. It was either not go or try to explain it to you that we didn’t know. We didn’t. We were shocked to see each other. But then everything went to shit, and I didn’t get a chance to tell you what happened.”

“So talk. Now.”

“Seb, we should do this in private.”

“Just say it. I’m tired of keeping secrets.” I told Kinsey I loved her. There was nothing Shea could say that would give anything away I didn’t want her to hear.

“I knew how you felt and wouldn’t have dated Kinsey. Ever. I wouldn’t do that to you. We were going to talk to you after we got there to explain that there was nothing going on

between us. We didn't even hold hands. I didn't put my hand on her back when we left the building. Nothing. You didn't give us the chance to explain."

"Sorry if seeing my brother with the love of my life pissed me off." I was done keeping secrets. Done keeping things inside. If Kinsey rejected me tonight, that would be that. At least I would have said everything I wanted to.

"I don't want to fight with you, Seb, not after we were getting along. I don't want to ruin that."

I sighed. Again. Because this night was draining all of my energy. I finally told Kinsey how I felt and had to deal with my brother in the middle of it. Of course. It was the Denver family way. Somebody was in someone else's business. The difference was that it was usually our parents. Not me and my brothers.

"I believe you," I said. I did once I thought about it. Shea wasn't a bad guy. Sure, I was mad as hell when I saw him show up with Kinsey. But she wouldn't lie to me. And while my brothers and I hadn't gotten along for years, I couldn't see Shea ruining our relationship by trying to date my... Kinsey.

"Okay, thank you. We'll talk soon?" he asked, hope in his voice.

"Yeah, sounds good."

I disconnected the call and dropped my head back on the seat while my eyes stayed on the road. We were almost to my apartment. I wanted to get out of this costume. Where was my hat and mask? They were probably still sitting on the bed.

Kinsey and I didn't say anything until we were in my apartment with the door closed behind us. I leaned against it and held her eyes.

"Do you want to shower?" I asked her.

"Together?" she squeaked.

I laughed and pushed off the door. "No, but I figured you'd want to get that makeup off."

She looked down at her arms. “That would be good. Delia said it would wash off.”

“I’ll grab you something to put on.”

I went into my bedroom and pulled out a pair of cotton shorts and a T-shirt. They’d be too big on her, but I’d love to see her in my clothes.

While Kinsey showered, I exchanged my costume for a pair of black basketball shorts and no shirt. Fuck it. Kinsey and I had seen each other naked. Been with each other intimately. This wasn’t anything she hadn’t seen. And if I were here alone, I’d wear the same thing. Because that costume was starting to itch, and I didn’t want anything on my chest or back right now.

I was sitting on the edge of my bed when she walked into the room. Her hair was wet and hanging over her shoulders. She tugged at the hem of the T-shirt even though it hit her mid-thigh.

Halfway into the room, she stopped. “So…”

I held my hand out to her. “Come here.”

She did so readily. I pulled her close, so she stood between my legs.

I held her hips and eyes. “I meant it, Kins. I love you. If you don’t feel the same, I’ll understand, but I can’t keep it inside any longer. I don’t want to.”

She brushed her fingers along my cheek. “I love you too.”

It was like someone punched me in the chest, and all the air left my lungs by sheer force. She loved me? “For how long?” Why did I ask that? It didn’t even matter. All that did was that she felt for me like I did for her.

“It’s hard to tell. I realized my feelings were strong for you while we were going through the list. Maybe I’ve had them for a while but didn’t see it.”

I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her in so we were only a breath apart. “Do you want to be with me, Kinsey Hart?” I whispered. “Truly be with me? Not only when

we're going through a list? Do you want to be my girlfriend and maybe more?" I was taking a huge leap here, but I was done wading through the shallow end.

"Maybe more?"

"What do you say to living together? We spend so much time with each other as it is. I don't care if it's my place, yours, or somewhere we choose together. I'm tired of being away from you. I want to spend my free time with you. I want to love you like I should have been doing for years."

"You already were."

"What do you mean?"

"You've loved me from the first time we met, Bastian. In your own way, you took care of me. You were always there for me. And that hasn't changed over the years. I didn't see what was right in front of me."

"I'm here. Willing. Waiting."

She hummed. "What will I do with you?"

"Say you'll be mine and that we'll live together."

"Yes."

I closed the distance between us and pressed my lips to hers. She opened for me, and we kissed like we hadn't seen each other in years. This was the kind of kiss I wanted, craved. Because this kiss spoke of feelings. There was no hesitation, just passion, love.

She tasted decadent. I couldn't get enough. Leaning back, I pulled her on top of me as I fell to the bed. Everything about this felt so right. So perfect.

I went to the party tonight thinking I'd lost the only woman I'd ever loved. Seeing her with my brother, yeah, that was awful. But after everything got worked out, after I knew the truth and experienced this amazing resolution, things played out how they were supposed to. Though I could have done without the long time crushing on my best friend and not getting anywhere. Again, my fault since I didn't have the balls to tell her how I felt.

That list... That fucking list, I couldn't truly hate it, could I? Because as frustrating as it was at times, especially when I kept reminding myself she was doing it so she could be with someone else, I didn't think we'd have gotten together without it. I still wouldn't thank Eliana and Vera though. If I did, they'd gloat, and I'd never hear the end of it.

Meh, maybe it wouldn't be so bad. I got the woman I loved after all. And with her in my arms, I didn't need anything else.

# EPILOGUE

“Why did we even come?” I threw my phone down on the sink and leaned over it, staring at myself in the mirror. My makeup was on point tonight, making me look like the perfect evil scientist with a twist. I wasn’t a scientist at all. More like an evil coder. Technology was the future, after all.

I’d kicked this costume’s ass, and here I was at the party, hiding out in the bathroom.

Vera looked up from where she sat on the edge of the tub. “I mean... we’re here to support Kinsey, right? What has you all hot and bothered?”

Bothered was my natural state, as my sister would say. It had never been easy for me to control my anger or any other emotion. “She’s not even here anymore.” I snatched my phone and held it up. “She’s at Sebastian’s, probably having the best make-up sex of her life, and we’re stuck here with stupid people celebrating a stupid holiday.”

“These people are actually pretty great.” Vera focused on her phone, her fingers typing away. “And you love Halloween. It’s like the only time you get to be an even bigger nerd.”

She didn’t get it at all. “I need to get out of here.”

That caught her attention. “What? No. I heard there are some hot model boys coming later...” Her voice trailed off as she winced. “Oh yeah, sorry.”

Hot model boys. As in the one we saw right when we walked in. When I first met Shea Denver, he was a high school



freshman. Yet, he was nice. He tagged after Sebastian when we all hung out, just his little brother.

Until he was more than that. At least to me.

Now, he was Mr. Model, traveling the world with the most gorgeous women hanging on his arm. And I was still me, still the same Eliana with the heart that hadn't healed after all these years. I hated him.

Or I wanted to hate him. That perfect smile, the way his eyes held laughter each time he used to look at me like we had a joke no one else knew.

Vera sighed. "I thought we were over Shea."

She said "we" as if a broken heart was something friends could go through together. Instead, it was a profoundly lonely experience.

"I am." I leaned forward to apply a new coat of lipstick. "But he's so..."

"Shea." We all knew what that meant. It was impossible not to love him, to want to be around him. Except for his brothers. Maybe I needed tips from them.

"Well, we can't hide out here all night." Vera stood. "Just avoid him, drink a few cocktails, and forget there was ever a Sheliana."

I couldn't help laughing. "I hated that nickname then, and I still do." We exited the bathroom, much to the delight of the line that had formed outside. The party was in full swing with free-flowing booze, enough food to make us burst, and way too many people.

By the time I'd reached the living room, I'd lost Vera somewhere in the crowd. She'd probably found a guy to talk to. I rolled my eyes and went searching for a drink. In the kitchen, rows of liquor bottles lined the counter, along with buckets of beers and sodas on ice. It was a help-yourself kind of situation, and I planned to. I went for the wine, but before I reached it, he was there.

Shea didn't notice me as he walked toward the kitchen, but it was impossible not to see him. My eyes darted around the room for an escape, but I was cornered. There was only one thing to do.

I yanked open their massive walk-in pantry, squeezed in, and shut the door. The only light seeped through under the wooden door, but it was mostly dark. It was so quiet, I could hear my rapidly beating heart.

Voices sounded from the kitchen, but they were muffled. I closed my eyes and counted backward in my head to quell my anxiety. Then, the door opened, and I just hoped it was someone who wouldn't tell the world of my hiding place. They didn't seem to notice I was there at all. Instead of pulling me out, a man practically jumped into the small space and slammed the door shut, his heavy breaths filling the silence.

It was only then he noticed he wasn't alone.

"Who—" I started.

He clapped a hand over my mouth as more voices reached us.

"Shea?" Mrs. Denver called. "There's someone I want you to meet. I could have sworn he went in here."

As their footsteps faded away, I looked up into the dark face of the man I once imagined myself marrying. Now, all I wanted to do was stab my fingernails into his eyes. I shoved his hand off me.

"What do you think you're doing?" I hissed.

"Ana." He leaned down to peer closer, lifting a hand to touch my extra-wide fake glasses. "What are you wearing?"

"Don't touch me." I tried to escape the pantry, but he stopped me, his bright teeth flashing as he smiled.

"Fancy meeting you here. Hiding from someone?"

Yeah, you. "From everyone."

He pushed a hand through his soft hair. I knew what it felt like from memory. "I know what you mean. My blind date left

with my brother, and now my mom is trying to set me up with every woman around my age she's ever known."

I loved Mrs. Denver. "Can't get your own dates these days?" My words were softer than I'd intended, but I blamed his closeness for that. My chest brushed his body, but I could only back up so far. It wasn't enough.

"I do just fine, thank you."

"Oh, right. You always did."

He was quiet for a moment, probably contemplating my insinuation. Finally, he leaned down, meeting my gaze. "Is everything okay?"

He'd always been able to read me, calm me. But not anymore. Not now that he was the reason for my anxiety, my anger.

His lips were only inches from mine when he bent his neck to look at me. I could still picture how shy he'd been the first time he kissed me, thinking I wouldn't kiss him back. Now, that insecure boy I'd fallen for didn't exist. "You're too close."

He inched forward. "There was never a too close for us. Tell me what's wrong."

I shook my head. *You!* I wanted to yell. *You're what's wrong.* I could have leaned forward and taken a kiss I knew he'd give me, one I yearned for. Then where would I be? Falling back into old habits? I was better than that now.

I shoved him back and opened the pantry door. "It has been a long time since you've known me, Shea. Trust me, you don't want to know what's wrong."

I stepped out to find Vera in the kitchen with Mrs. Denver and a few others. They looked at me in surprise, their eyes flicking to Shea behind me.

I cleared my throat. "Mrs. Denver, thanks for a lovely party." I walked by her to grab Vera's arm.

"I have so many questions." She grinned.

So did I.

**Don't miss Eliana's Denver Brother story in My Hot Ex's  
Santa List!**

**[Get it here!](#)**

**Turn the page for a sneak peek!**

# MY HOT EX'S SANTA LIST

Number 6: He's too pretty

Red flag, right? According to my list, it is.

Hello, it's me, the woman you may remember from the viral video where I tackled a drunk santa. In case you're wondering, short girls can be quite determined.

Like when dating. I am apparently hell bent on choosing the wrong men. Men who either break my heart or my faith in the human race.

Hence, a red flag list.

It isn't until my two best friends read it that I realize, every single item is something that describes him.

The ex who chose the spotlight over me, the one I can't seem to get away from - or over.

And now, thanks to my heroic takedown of our town's sole Santa candidate for the Christmas festival, we're desperate, and he's there. Always the hero. To everyone except me.

I can do this. Keep my distance from Mr. Sexy in a Santa Suit and remember every warning sign flashing over his head..

But it's been years. What if everything I believed about him no longer holds true? What if I wasn't the only one who broke that day?

**[Get it here!](#)**

# MY HOT EX'S SANTA LIST

## CHAPTER ONE: ELIANA

If my date told me he was a good guy one more time, I was going to walk right out of this bar. Possibly after socking him.

I should have seen the red flag when his dating profile started with, “Good guy looking for a good girl.”

But I was desperate. Something I didn’t like to admit.

“Dating can be hard for good guys like me.” Carl leaned back in his tiny chair. If he’d taken me to a restaurant instead of a crowded bar, the chairs wouldn’t be so small. And I could drown myself in expensive pasta that I planned to pay for myself.

“I’m sure it is.” I pulled at the label on the bottle of Corona in front of me, focusing on anything but Carl Triston. I doubted that was his last name. Probably a middle name, but he’d used it on his profile, and I hadn’t asked about it. That would require him to want to hear a single word I had to say.

He kept talking, and I silently cursed my mom. It was Black Friday, and I’d now forever associate the day with this disaster of a date. Yesterday, I went to Thanksgiving dinner at my parents’ place and was immediately accosted by my mother’s questions about my current dating status, as always. Her three sisters joined in with their curiosity. None of them understood what it was like to be single at almost thirty years old. The dating scene was... rough.

I had nine cousins, all of whom were happily married. Some had multiple children. They were living the life my family thought we all should.

My sister was even married, though she and her wife had decided long ago that kids weren't in their plans. I was now my mom's last hope for grandkids.

*"You know you won't be able to have kids forever, Eliana. You should find a nice boy to settle down with and stop working so much."*

I liked working.

I did not like nice guys. At least, not ones who actually stated they were nice. When Carl messaged me on the dating app, I'd only been able to think about how my entire family was discussing my love life not long before. I said yes to the date out of frustration. And wine. Lots of wine.

"You see," Carl was still speaking, "my ex constantly told me the things I did wrong. All she did was nag. I didn't deserve that."

"What did you do wrong?" I found myself asking.

He stared at me, for once no words coming from his gaping maw.

I sipped my beer, wishing I'd asked for something stronger. But the last time I drank liquor on a date, the guy I was with got handsy and tried to force me to go home with him. Thank God for the help button on *Only Friends*, the app I created with my two best friends. It alerted members in the area that I needed help.

"Women don't just complain for no reason." I set the bottle down. "Statistically, the happiest cohort are single, childless women. So, when we're in relationships, it's your job to prove to us our lives are better with you than on our own. We don't want to raise our boyfriends or husbands." I paused to look at him. "I'm guessing you were selfish."

"I—"

I cut him off. "In the home, in bed. Did you ever do anything for her without being asked? How often did she manage to orgasm with you?" I was on a roll now and enjoying the shock flashing across his face.



“She always—”

“Well, that’s a lie. Either you’re lying to me, or she lied to you. I’m guessing a little of both. When a guy isn’t doing it for us, sometimes we act like we’re done just so that we can get you off of us. You look like the kind of man we’d lie to.” I studied his perfectly crafted features. He was a beautiful man but in a refined way. Blond hair that was styled so perfectly I could almost picture him spending hours in front of the mirror. An expertly trimmed beard and pressed shirt. Smug look.

He definitely only cared about his own pleasure.

“And you look exactly like the kind of woman who is still single at your age.”

“Ouch,” I deadpanned. “That hurt.” I was done playing the perfect date since I wasn’t feeling it. Some men deserved a wake-up call. I was truly doing a service for the rest of womenkind.

“No man wants a woman who says whatever she wants to. Your independence is going to ensure you have to rely on it the rest of your life.”

Now, this was the kind of date that got my blood pumping. It was almost like a sport. Boredom erased.

A smile curved my lips. “Oh, please continue. Tell me more about how women who can think for themselves intimidate you.”

“You don’t intimidate me.”

“Sure.” I nodded, my smile falling. “I completely believe you.”

And there it was. The true reason I’d had a total of two long-term relationships in my life. Both crashed and burned. I intimidated people. Most dates didn’t make it to another because I wasn’t very good at keeping my mouth shut. My two best friends, Vera and Kinsey, said I had anger issues.

They were probably right. But what was I supposed to do? Let people get away with disrespecting me? Not on their lives.

Carl's fist clenched around a napkin. "I'm going to the restroom before you say something else you'll regret."

I rolled my eyes as he walked away. Sure, my mouth sometimes got me in trouble, especially when I was angry, but I never regretted it. I pulled out my phone, preparing to text Vera. Kinsey was probably out with Mr. Perfect, but Vera could call me with an emergency to get me out of here.

I should have just walked out, but there was something inside me that didn't let me ditch a date. It was how I ended up spending hours with all the wrong people.

If I'd been able to leave the first horrid date with my ex, maybe I'd have avoided the heartbreak that came almost a year later. Despite wanting to dump my drink on him when we met for dinner in the beginning, I'd fallen in love. After that date, he begged for another chance, only to smash my heart to pieces months later.

Carl wouldn't be Shea. There would be no more chances for him. Not like he'd want one.

A sight at another table distracted me as I waited. As if my thoughts conjured him, Shea sat with his back to me. I'd recognize him from any angle. We rarely interacted now, despite his brother dating my best friend. Yet, the scene from last month came to mind. The two of us in the pantry at his mother's party. His body so close to mine.

I'd been hiding from him, and he'd come in to hide from his mom.

There was now a pretty redhead on the chair next to him and it hurt. Still, after so many years, seeing him with other women caused physical pain.

Carl's chair scraping against the floor had my attention snapping to his return. I hadn't texted Vera. I sighed, putting my phone down. I might be angry and say all the wrong things, but it wasn't in me to be rude.

Carl folded his hands on the table. "Look, Eliana. Despite your mouth, I like you."

The feeling was not mutual.

“And I’m a nice guy, so I will move past the things you said and give you another chance. Let’s start over.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. “Are you serious right now?”

“Yes?” His brow furrowed.

“Okay, I’ll play.” I drained the rest of my beer. “But first, I need another drink.” I was about to stand up and head to the bar when a beer appeared in front of me, a large hand setting it on the table.

“I thought I saw you over here.” That smooth voice.

Internally, I died a little. I was frozen, unable to look up into the eyes I once knew so well.

Carl didn’t have that problem. “Who the hell are you?”

“Ana’s boyfriend.” Shea’s voice was practically a growl. “You?”

“Who is Ana?”

Me. I was Ana. Few people called me by the nickname Shea created for me. Mostly just him, Vera, and Kinsey.

“Is this guy for real, babe?” Shea’s hand landed on my shoulder. “This is who you choose to cheat on me with, and he doesn’t even know your nickname?”

Cheat. As if I’d ever wanted anyone but him. Even after he broke my heart.

“What are you doing here, Shea?” I finally looked up into those hazel eyes, refusing to lose myself under his touch. Not this time.

“Having a drink with a friend.” He shrugged, trying to speak to me with his gaze. “What I didn’t expect was to find you here with some douchebag. Do I mean so little to you that you have to find...” He looked Carl up and down, disdain dripping from his words. “A nice guy?”

So, he’d heard our conversation. Great. And now, he was making fun of me for it. “You should leave, Shea.”

“Not until you tell me why.” Fake tears came to his eyes. “I’ve given you everything. How long has this been going on?”

“It’s a first date.” Not like he deserved an answer with this act of his.

Carl stood. “Look, man, I don’t want to get involved with another dude’s chick. I’m a good guy, so whatever this is... it’s between you two.” He booked it toward the bar and slid onto an empty stool.

“What is your problem?” I shoved Shea’s hand off my shoulder. Pulling out my wallet, I threw cash on the table and stood. “Can’t you just leave me alone?” Being close to him brought back memories I’d tried so hard to bury.

I headed for the exit, unsure if I should thank Shea for getting me out of the date or break his nose for thinking I needed him at all.

It wasn’t until I reached the sidewalk that I realized he’d followed me. I whirled around to face him. “You are unbelievable.”

“Sometimes.”

“Forget it. There’s no use yelling at you when it won’t make any difference.” I turned to walk away, but Shea gently grabbed my arm.

“I’m sorry, okay?”

“No, not okay.”

He pulled me around to look at him. “You seemed like you needed help. I could hear everything that guy said. He was an asshole.”

“That doesn’t mean I needed you. I had it handled.”

“Oh, I heard. Faking orgasms, huh? You never... with me...”

“Oh my God, not the time. Seriously, Shea, what was with the boyfriend act?”

“He wasn’t good enough for you.”

“Neither were you on our first date, remember? You had to beg me to give you another chance. What if Carl was just nervous, and we fell madly in love?” The difference was, I definitely wouldn’t have given him another date, but Shea didn’t need to know that.

“Him?” He thumbed toward the bar. “You were never going to fall in love with Mr. Hair Gel.”

“He wasn’t wearing hair gel.”

“You aren’t that blind, Ana.” He shook his head. “You deserve so much more than guys named Carl.”

I tried to quell my anger at his assumptions. “It’s not up to you to decide what I deserve. We’re not friends, Shea. We’re not anything.”

“Don’t say that. I’ll always—”

“Stop. Don’t claim you’ll always care about me or look out for me. I can take care of myself. I don’t need you.” I didn’t need anyone, contrary to what my mom attempted to drill into my head.

He tried to reach for my hand, but I pushed him away.

“Stop. Please, you can’t do this. Do you know how long it took me to get over us? You can’t come back into my life now. You can’t remind me why I missed you so damn much. Just let me go.”

This time, when I walked away, he didn’t stop me.

**[Get it here!](#)**

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn Dare is the pen name for authors Michelle MacQueen and Michelle Dare. One day, they were talking about tropes and cliches when an idea was born. Next thing they knew, they had a book planned out. The Perfect Man is their first series together where they combine humor and romance. They hope you fall in love with their characters and laugh at their antics along the way.

**[Join their romcom newsletter for updates, sales, and news!](#)**

