



WHI★RE

Friend



FRANCESCA PENN

WhoreFriend

Francesca Penn

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Prologue

ETHAN

Fear and extreme irritation shoot through my body like a virus. My heart is pounding in my ears and a small sliver of fear creeps up my spine. I bang on the TOPIC wenge door that just slammed in my face a second before.

“Lucille!” I roar through the door. I take a deep breath and try again, softer. I’m desperate enough to try the *honey* approach. “Lucy, darling. Please open the door. Can’t we talk about this?”

For the record, I don’t want to talk shit out. In fact, If I was a guy that subscribed to my baser instincts while angry, I would break the door down and hope it hit her in the process. Right now, she is being an epic bitch.

I knock again softly. I cannot afford to make a scene. “Come on, Luce...please.”

I feel a small slice of victory when the door cracks open. I can only see part of her blonde bang and one of her baby blues that drove me crazy when we first met. I give her one of my soft, sexy smiles.

“Baby, is this necessary? Can’t we come to a civil conclusion?” I lay the honey on thick because deep down I’m feeling anything less than civil. I have one goal here. It’s imperative that I get my way.

“No.” she says in a clipped French accent. “Take your walk of shame like a man, bitch.”

The once sexy accent is now infuriating. I want to choke her. I won't, but I want to. My keys fly through the opening before the door slams again. I grab them. At least I can get into my apartment. Which one has my phone? I slide over to the next door.

I knock, hoping for better luck.

“Mariella, sweetheart.”

She is screaming at me in Italian from the other side. My ire rises. It used to make something else rise. I used to love making her scream things in Italian while I fucked her. Those days are over. I'm just as done with them as they are with me.

“Ella, honey.”

She cracks the door, giving me the same treatment. Her near black hair and dazzling green eyes still made her sultry. And crazy. She has her phone to her ear. Lucy is on the other end. If I could bet money, I would put all my savings on this being Ella's idea. Lucy is more demure and just as likely to just cry.

Mariella is temperamental and wild. Yup. This is totally her idea. The cool air conditioning is starting to give me a slight chill. I shiver a little.

“Can I at least have my underwear?” I am giving her my best puppy dog eyes.

She curses in Italian. “No. We're exposing you for the asshole you are. We're best friends. How could you?”

My phone flies between the crack and slaps against my naked chest. I catch it before it falls. At least I have my important things. I'd left my wallet at home since I wasn't leaving the building.

“You two are not best friends. Neighbors, not best friends.” I correct her. I'm obviously not getting my clothes back. Now that I have my keys and phone, I'm free to be the asshole they are labeling me. “If you two were so close, how was I able to fuck both of you for months?”

Mariella gasps. “You bastard. That’s why I burned your clothes.”

Now I’m enraged. It’s good I’m naked because I feel I have the capability to turn green and grow ten sizes bigger. I like quality things; my clothes are a reflection of that.

“You burned about 300 dollars’ worth of clothes! For what? I’m not your man!” I see blue eyes peeking around the other door. “Both of you were pastime fucks, and you got it confused. I didn’t offer either of you anything but my dick.”

They look amused. Yup. Definitely going to turn green.

“You’re some dense bitches.”

I stop covering my junk and motion to my body before placing my hands on my hips. I’m pretty tall, 6’3 to be exact. Short brown hair and blue-green eyes. I have a strategically grown light beard, it’s enough to be sparse and not look scraggly. I put a lot of time into my body to ensure I look like flesh covered stone. I’m smooth everywhere else to guarantee unobstructed views of my body. And my dick; I’m proud of the big fella. He’s a work of art. He looks like he was crafted by the gods. Seriously, I could sell dick pics of it flaccid. Can you imagine its glory when erect?

“I am not ashamed of my body. All three of us know it looks damn good. I can get in trouble because you two are dumb and can’t keep your legs closed.”

Lucy’s eyes grow moist and Maribel’s shoot daggers. I don’t give a shit. I’m being an ass. This childish prank of theirs could get me arrested. People in the building have small children. I can be labeled as a sex offender. I’m on a roll and the insults fly out of my mouth.

“And if one of us were fucking you and your best friend?”

Maribel spat her question like it was going to give me an “Ah ha” moment. I think of Hardy and his extreme whoring. He doesn’t double dip. Once he’s had a woman, she never hears from him again. I was being lazy and bouncing between the two since they live in my complex.

“We would high five and compare notes.” I shrug. “We might even compete on who can make you scream louder the next time.”

Silence. That’s what I thought. They’d obviously elevated themselves to an imaginary level of importance. *HOW SWAY?* I think in my Kanye voice.

“If you think your pussy is so sacred or special—it’s not. That’s why I was fucking both of you—then you should not give it up so easily. Close your legs and make yourselves more interesting. All we did was fuck. No soul-searching conversations. Hell, I don’t know either of your last names. We didn’t even go on a date. I’ve spent no more than ten dollars on both of you combined. Yet, you think this is appropriate?”

I pressed the down button for the elevator. It’s late, so it opens quickly. I step on and cover my junk while glaring at the two assholes with tits. The door closes on them and any chance of us talking or fucking ever again.

Okay, I know you’re probably thinking. Boo hoo. Poor little fuckboy. Fine, don’t feel sorry for me. I understand karma and the law of averages and all that bullshit. I don’t care that they called me out. I don’t care that they ganged up on me. Again, they are not best friends. They are neighbors that hardly spoke until they found out that they had me in common. I only care that I’m currently in an elevator cold and scared of being arrested. Aside from my relationship intolerance, I am a model citizen. I work, pay my bills, and do my damndest to stay out of trouble.

I look too good for jail. I refuse to have to fight to keep my ass an exit only territory. I shudder at the thought. Bile rises in my throat and metal butterflies damage my stomach. This is not good. I at least have my socks. I cringe at the idea of my feet being completely bare in the public elevator. I look cheesy butt ass naked with porn socks. My key chain is hanging on my pinky while my hands and phone attempt to completely cover my junk.

What are porn socks? Don't act like you've never seen porn when the porn star seems capable of getting completely naked except they somehow miss their socks. Who does that? I swear it's usually the white gym socks on top of that. It pisses me off really. Why would you keep the socks? I digress.

A light sheen of sweat covers my body. I'm nervous. I say a silent prayer. What? Man-whores, as one would call me, believe in God. All I have to do is get from the sixth floor to the first, then across the complex without being seen. The elevator ride, though brief, is giving me an epiphany. Although Maribel and Lucile are bat shit crazy for this scheme, I also understand how my choices led me to this moment. This, my friends, is what rock bottom looks like.

One floor left. I may get out of this mess unscathed. My hope dares to rise until the elevator slows and jerks to a stop on two.

“Shit.”

Please no cops, children, or prudes. I make a quick promise to the Big Guy that if I get out of this without error, I will change my ways for the better. Slowly, aching slowly, the door opens to reveal who is on the other side. My breath catches in a way that's never happened before.

She is the actual definition of breathtaking. She's about 5'10 or so wearing high heeled black boots that come to her knees over dark second skin ripped jeggings. Her flat, taut belly is exposed, and her delicious breasts are covered in a cut out crop bustier. Her body is somewhere between Ciara and Teyana Taylor. Her completion and skin remind me of Tika Sumpter. Her hair is a big mass of waves and curls that frame her face and flow past her shoulders like the Mowry twins. She has glossy white headphones with sparkly cat ears on her head.

Surprise flashes in her light-brown, almond-shaped eyes before they assess me. Her pouty lips twitch with amusement when she sees my socks. Her slow appraisal back up my body makes my dick respond behind my hands. *You're the reason we're in the mess.* She leans against the door to keep it from

closing. The seconds of silence bounce between us. I'm glad she's not screaming. She pulls her phone out of the right pocket of her skull patterned black leather bomber jacket. Fear shoots through my spine. I'll be royally screwed if she calls the cops. I inwardly cringe again. In more ways than one.

Instead, those oh-so kissable red tinted lips tip up in a smirk as she takes a picture of me.

"Really?" I groan dejectedly.

She types away on her phone, giving no indication she's heard me speak. Her phone rings almost immediately. The little cat ears light up.

She presses the answer button on the headphones covering her ears. Her whole face lights up and a smile. It is one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen.

"Hello." Her voice is sultry, and her laugh is sexy. "I know right!" Her eyes are still on me. "That's why I sent it. There is no way in hell you would have believed me. Uh, huh. Yeah. Okay. Bye."

Remember when I said I was at rock bottom? No, this is it. I meet the woman of my dreams and she is sending my photo to her friends and laughing at me. This is true karma. I hang my head. I'm sad and for the first time in my adult life, humiliation washes over me in waves, threatening to drown me with embarrassment and sorrow. Again, I'm not embarrassed by my nudity. It's only one way a man ends up in this predicament. She knows and I know it's woman-inflicted. Never will I ever be able to get near this woman, because I will forever and always be the naked douche on the elevator.

"Come on, white boy. Let's get you some clothes." Her sultry voice holds a note of gentleness.

I look up at her. Hope does a line dance with relief. She motions me off the elevator.

"First door on the right. I will help you, on two conditions." She holds up a black tipped finger. "One, you will take me wherever I want to eat, on you. Two, I want all the

tea. You will tell me exactly how you ended up like this.” The amusement in her voice is unmistakable.

Her warmth is mesmerizing, and she is beyond beautiful. I’ll tell her anything she wants to know. I follow her to her apartment. It’s only ten steps from the elevator, but it’s plenty of time for me to admire her luscious ass. She unlocks her door but blocks me from entering when I start to move forward. We’re practically eye to eye. Our bodies are close enough to radiate heat. Her feminine scent surrounds me. Her eyes roam my face with interest. A charged energy shoots between us.

My blood thickens and my heart speeds up. There just may be hope for me to redeem myself. My skin prickles with anticipation. I must have her.

“FYI, if you are some sort of crazy person, my best friend and mom have a picture of you. I suggest you hold in your crazy and let me dress you. And my conditions, do we have a deal?”

I give her the sexiest smile in my repertoire. “Deal.”

Chapter 1

Ethan

MY BODY PINGS WITH NERVOUS ANTICIPATION. I PRESS THE UP button and wait for the elevator to arrive. It's still early, so the doors slide open almost immediately. I look inside, empty as I expected. No one is on the elevator at 7AM on a Sunday morning. I'd just returned home from a week-long trip and I'm too amped to sleep. So, I took a shower, brushed my teeth again, and donned my favorite Hey Arnold pajamas. Yes, I'm 27 with Hey Arnold pajamas. We'll get to that in a minute.

I jump on the elevator and smile to myself. Two years ago, today. I was living my lowest moment of my adult life. I want to hate the elevator, but I don't. It delivered me to Tess. Her name is actually Countess, but she hates it. I've tried calling her by her real name a few times and was rewarded with a karate chop or the opportunity to admire the current polish covering her middle finger.

She's my best friend. Hold your chuckles, I friend zoned myself and it is by design. I fiddle with my keys until it delivers me to the second floor. I use my copy to unlock her door. Yes, I have a copy. Trust me, you'll hear about it later. I slide in quietly and lock myself inside with her. I kick off my slide on shoes and creep across the cold floor into her bedroom.

The low light from the living room reveals her to me. My heart speeds up and does that crazy beating. It reserves only for her. Even when she's sleeping on her stomach with her mouth open, snoring softly, probably drooling with her arm hanging off the side of the bed. That's my girl,

unapologetically herself, even when she's asleep. I allow my eyes to roam over her, to the dip in her back and the curve of her ass. Her tiny sleep shorts leave miles of her silky-smooth legs exposed. My groin tightens. Two years and my breath still catches when I see her.

Let me explain something to you. When a man is undeniably sexually attracted to a woman, even if it's his best friend, he desires to see certain reactions out of her. He wonders how she would sound or the faces she would make. Me, I want to see her excited with adrenaline pumping, mouth slightly agape, eyes dilated. You know how I think she would look aroused. Unfortunately for her, it's turned me into a childish ass that likes to scare her all the time.

My skin tingles. Excitement flurries in my stomach. I inch closer, then I shake her violently and yell.

“Wake up!”

She screams and almost immediately, I feel a sharp pain between my neck and shoulder. I fall to the floor.

“Ouch!” I knew it could happen, but I took a calculated risk. “Did you just Karate chop me?” I ask, while rubbing the offended area.

It doesn't matter because I am seeing what I aimed for. Tess, on her knees with her hair bonnet still firmly in place. Her deliciously bra free, breast heaving under her ultra-tight spaghetti strap tank top, her eyes big and wild, her mouth agape with surprise. I'm turned on in more ways than one. I scold my dick to go back to sleep.

Her light brown eyes focus on me, then narrow.

“Fucking Ethan!”

Oh, I wish she was. We are both standing now. I rub my shoulder as she continues to glare.

“Haven't you learned by now that sneaking up on me gets you hurt?”

By the way, Tess is a badass. She studies different forms of martial arts and teaches women's self-defense on Tuesdays

and Thursdays. I've even volunteered before to be the creep punching bag. Anything to have her all over me. I shrug innocently.

"I was simply telling you to wake up, so we can go get breakfast."

Her lithe body pushes against me. I find myself flipping into the air before landing on the bed on my back. After I get my bearings, I have to admit that was sexy.

"Scoot." She orders

I do so because I consider the right side of her king-sized bed my side, anyway. We settle back under the covers.

"Fuck you and breakfast."

I chuckle in the dark. "Promises, promises."

She snuggles in, her tight ass inadvertently rubbing against my side until she finds her spot. I mentally recite the bones in the body, putting some use to my abandoned attempt at medical school. Her sigh is full of pleasure when she finds her magical spot. *Femur; patella, humerus...*

Tess pulls me into the spooning position and I'm grateful for my erection abatement techniques. However, I am a man. A heterosexual, fully charged, beyond attracted to her man. My hand lands slightly higher than necessary to rest on her right breast. It's soft, warm, and pliable. I feel a slight pucker of her nipple against my palm. Her hand rests over mine. She laces her fingers in mine. It would be so hot if she wanted me, too. Right now, exactly the way I want her.

I swallow disappointment when she pushes my hand to her side, then removes her hand. My fingers are resting on her hip where her skin meets the band of her shorts. My thumb settles the space between her skin and her shorts. I feel her belly press against my thumb with the breaths she takes.

"Ouch!"

A sharp pain courses through my hand when she bends my forefinger backwards. I roll onto my back and she follows. She releases my hand. Her head rests on my heart and her leg

bends to cross over my left thigh with her knee stopping just below my crotch. Tess stretches an arm across my abs.

“What’s wrong Ethan? Didn’t get any out-of-town coochie?”

I didn’t. I had plenty of opportunities. The Miami girls were throwing poon left and right, and I was blocking it like a professional goalie. I’m not interested in the chase anymore. I want who’s next to me so much. Receiving texts from her was my biggest thrill the entire week. My hit list has dwindled significantly. Over the last two years, I will randomly decide to delete a girl. If I receive a text from a number, I don’t recognize, I don’t answer. I’m down to two. You’ll hear about them later.

I was serious when I said I would change for the better. I only party when it’s work related and spend the rest of my time letting Tess into my soul. She doesn’t seem to notice, she just figures I’m full of shit.

“I’m not on a constant quest for pussy, you know.” Her laugh arouses and annoys me at the same time.

My wayward hand rests on her ass. She moves it back to her waist.

“Oh really? Then why are you touching all of the No Touch Tess zones this morning?”

I feign a scoff. “I did not. It’s dark in here. I don’t know where my hands are going until they get there.”

“And you just magically seem to land in all of my No Spaces?”

“I did not touch your pussy.”

I feel her sigh on my chest. “You touched two out of three. Must your mouth be so dirty all of the time, Ethan?”

I shrug. “My mouth is normal. My hand landed on your ass; I didn’t grab it.”

My hand goes directly to her ass like it’s an ass-seeking magnet. This time I squeeze the juicy cheek. It’s glorious.

“This is me grabbing your ass. See the difference.”

I flinch when I feel a sharp pain in my ribs.

“Tess! I can’t believe you just bit me.” I can. She’s spicy and I like it.

“Follow the friend bylaws and I won’t hurt you.” She says matter-of-factly before snuggling close again. “No ass, tits, or vaginal grabbing, *touching*, or rubbing.”

I want to do all of the above.

“Yeah. Yeah. I know the rules. Your lack of faith hurts. I do have self-control, you know. I…”

Her hand covers my mouth. She kisses my cheek.

“Welcome back, Ethan. Now, shut up and sleep.”

Chapter 2

Ethan

OKAY, STORY TIME;

I think there are three types of man-whores. You have the I-strive-to-be-an-international-playboy type. The I-don't-want-anything-serious-right-now-but-eventually-type. Then there's the my-heart-is-unavailable-type.

I've been in all three categories. I was kind of awkward as a child. A total music freak that spent all of my time in music and arts. There was nothing special about me. I was a little shorter than average and thin. Oh, and the acne. It was terrible and a total pussy blocker. Then the impossible happened the summer before my senior year.

I was sent to my uncle's ranch to work. I was pissed. He lived in Colorado in one of those small towns that didn't have any kind of social life except for a bar and a few restaurants. There weren't many people my age around. I was going through culture withdrawal. Plus, being a ranch hand was hard.

It was the most physically demanding thing I had to do at that point in my life. A week into hell, the foreman's daughter, Dana, came to visit from college. I was 17, and she was 20. She was an average-looking girl. Limp dark hair with even darker eyes. She was short and a little on the thin side. Small rack. She was not drop dead gorgeous, nor was she better-run-ugly. I didn't think anything was out of the ordinary when she started hanging around me more. I figured she was as bored. I was too, so I welcomed the company.

One Sunday, she found me in my favorite part of the barn. The one spot that didn't smell like animal ass. All the way in the back, surrounded by hay and a small window. The summer breeze and the fresh hay smelled sweet and free. Almost clean. I was lying back on a particularly large bale with my hands behind my head. I had on headphones. Plain White T's thrummed through my ears as I smiled at her.

She smiled too. It was a different smile. One I'd never seen in my life. I was about to ask her about the unfamiliar look on her face when she unbuttoned and unzipped my pants. I asked her what she was doing, but she didn't answer. Her black eyes just shone with mischief. Her eyes grew when she pulled out my willy. That was the first clue that I was well endowed. My virgin brain was having trouble computing her aim until she wrapped her mouth around my cock.

Lust I'd never felt before shot through my body as her hand and mouth did things that were foreign to me. I moaned out loud. My hips bucked. I was not sure what to do with my hands. I grabbed my own hair. When that didn't work, I balled them at my sides. I was mesmerized. Seeing her mouth slide on me and feeling her tongue took me over the edge quickly. I came in her mouth and she let me. I didn't know then how sexy that was then. She winked at me and left without saying a word.

Dana appeared randomly throughout the week doing the exact same thing. That Friday, she climbed up my body and taught me how she wanted to be kissed. She slid my hand under her shirt and introduced me to her tits. She had B cups. Her nipples were pink and perky. She rubbed them in my face and taught me how to suck them. She was moaning and dry humping my cock by the end of my lesson. She told me she wanted to fuck me right before she finished me off with her mouth. That night, a pack of condoms were waiting for me when I returned to my room. Naturally, I assumed they were from Dana and threw them in the nightstand.

By that Saturday, all of the adults took my uncle out for his birthday. I took a long, relaxing shower. I returned and was

surprised to find a half-naked Dana on my bed. I thought she tagged along since she was technically an adult.

We didn't speak. I was beyond nervous. My heart was beating 100 miles per hour. The closer I got to her, the less she was wearing. Hers was the first snatch I'd ever seen up close and personal. Dana had a Brazilian wax. She pushed me down on the bed and straddled my hips. She asked if I had a condom. Confused, I pointed to the fresh box in the nightstand. She ripped it open and sheathed me. Her body sunk onto mine and I was in heaven. She moaned about my size and rode me hard. We did it three more times that night.

The rest of the summer was a blur of licking, sucking, and fucking. She taught me how to finger and eat her and I got better at sex. I worked hard during the day and fucked hard at night. I learned her body and had her begging for more by the end. Periodically, a new pack of condoms would appear.

My last day on the ranch, my uncle patted me on the back and handed me another box. He said it was a fresh pack for when I get home. When I looked at him, surprised, he'd asked if I believed in the condom fairy or something. His laugh was rich and boisterous. My uncle is only 13 years older than me. He gave up his life as a successful hedge fund manager and used his savings to buy a ranch. He wanted a simple life. He still worked hard, but didn't have the city cluttering his mind.

He had the Cox male charm and looks. I remember wondering why I didn't look like him when I first arrived. He had the chiseled face, toned body, he was tall with wavy hair that drove the women wild. His hazel eyes and good looks had random women visiting for trivial reasons.

I'd mentioned having feelings for Dana, and he laughed. My dad had given me the birds and the bees talk, but my uncle gave me the getting-pussy-without-getting-attached-or-caught-up talk. He pointed out Dana's approach. He'd guessed that she didn't try to get to know me and went straight to sex. I realized he had a point. I didn't know any more about her than I did when she arrived, other than the abilities of her mouth and the tightness of her pussy.

I'd quickly learned that no effort should be given to build a relationship when the other party isn't interested. He also told me I was young and didn't need any attachments. Don't sleep with girls with stars in their eyes, especially if you don't want them forever. He told me to be honest and aim for sexual gratification. The rest of the relationship bullshit will come later.

I took that information and followed it like the gospel. I returned my senior year a changed man. I'd somehow hit a growth spurt and all the farm work gave me muscle definition. Maybe it was the fresh air or all the sex, or a combination of both, but my face cleared up. The bitches didn't know what to do when I showed up my senior year three inches taller with 25 extra pounds, 20 of it being muscle. I'd updated my wardrobe with the money I earned on the ranch, got a haircut, and switched to contacts. Now all of the sudden, my interest in music and fine arts was cool and girls liked the same old odes I tried to give them before to express my interest in them.

I smashed every bitch that ignored me before my transformation and remained friends with the people that liked me prior. I was then what Hardy is now. Jaded as fuck. Once we had sex with a girl, she never heard from me again. I'd followed my uncle's advice and told them I didn't want anything serious, just sex. But, those words are a challenge to some women. They think their sex is magical and the guy will change overnight. All of them want to be the exception without realizing that they are the rule.

My smash-everything-that-moves mentality followed me through college. Then, I attended my uncle's wedding. He was poon snatched and grinning like an idiot the whole time. His wife was beautiful. So was her younger sister. I banged her in the coat closet during the reception. My uncle knew what I did and gave me the player nod. Then danced the night away with his lovely bride.

That was the moment I fell into the eventually stage. If my uncle and George Clooney could meet the woman they wanted to fuck for eternity, then who was I to think I was immune,

right? Again, I thought much later because my uncle was 35 when he got married and George was older.

But, let us not act like we don't know what happened. Maribel and Lucile happened. I vowed to change my ways because I was over the bullshit. Then the good Lord delivered me to Tess. I will make her mine. Her presence easily slipped me into the my-heart-isn't-available-phase of man-whoredom. I just need to convince her that the smash-and-run me doesn't exist anymore. I'm willing to commit, just to her.

The problem? How have I not been able to find the right moment to convince her in two years? My business. I get paid to party. I am the resident eye-candy/entertainer for my single's adventure company. No, I'm not getting my Magic Mike or Gigolo on, I'm just a representation of what could be. The unlucky single man's professional wingman. I chat up the girls, put my musical background into action and perform a cover or two, suggest alcoholic beverages, etc. I do everything necessary to get the girls riled up for the actual single men to swoop in and make their moves. I've been convincing women to settle for the last four years.

Tess has been to some of the events my company throws and she has seen me in action. Yes, I used to keep some of these girls to myself, but that was before I met her. I flirt for a living, but I keep my hands to myself. You can wipe that disbelieving look off your face. It's true, I have to scratch an itch here or there, but it's not baseless. Usually, the need arises when Tess does something incredibly sexy and my inability to touch her leads me to one of the two women left on my hit list. Apparently, divorced women with other responsibilities are a wonderful way to get your rocks off without all the what-about-us talk.

My favorite is Sade. Well, her first name is Talia, but when I discovered her middle name was the same as the seductive singer, my tongue refused to speak her first name. I met her about seven months after meeting Tess when Hardy decided to kidnap me for a night out. He refused to believe I wasn't trolling for ass and had to see for himself. It was the basis of our friendship, after all.

I'll give you a little background first. Hardy Sterling has been my best friend since college. We were thrown together as roommates our freshman year and have been inseparable since. Not much of an origin story there. It was simple. Two guys with different degree paths and an affinity for leading girls down a lonely path that others fondly refer to as the Walk of Shame. At least we were nice enough to send the girl out with a friend. The one I hit did have the option to converse with Hardy's conquest on their way back to wherever the fuck they were going. Yes, we were immature assholes, but never misled the girls. They knew exactly what they were getting into.

Remember that question Maribel asked? You know, the one about how I would feel? Blah, blah, blah... It already happened in college.

In fact, I sent a particularly stunning redhead home one Saturday morning—forgive me; I don't remember her name — just to see her that night. How is that for a turnaround?

I'd walked in after a smash and run – a quickie at her place followed by me having a compelling reason to leave – to find Hardy on the couch in our common area with his inky-hair covered head thrown back in ecstasy. The mass of red waves cascaded over his dick struck a note of familiarity that caused my sneakers to pause on the linoleum.

Hardy pulled her half naked body into his lap and pushed a foil packet into her palm. Her hair was still covering her face, but the soft pink areolas that I nibbled on the night before confirmed my suspicion. That definitely was the same girl that rode me not even twelve hours prior. I waited to see if I felt anything: any sort of ill wishes, feelings of being left out, any selfish blows to my ego like she should still be satiated, or any malice towards my buddy...nothing.

“Hey man!”

Hardy stuck out his hand to shake mine. Completely unashamed with their partial nudity. His light blue alcohol laden eyes shined with amusement. He wasn't drunk. Hardy

was in that good space where feeling good met tipsy. He had enough alcohol in him to make it a long night for the poor girl.

“Hey bro...”

My eyes clash with cerulean ones. I half expected her to look sheepish or embarrassed. You know, accidentally smashing roommates in the same weekend. No, there was triumph swimming in her optical ocean as she sheathed my boy’s dick. I remember thinking, “Oh, she wants me to care. That’s cute.”

“Back so soon? I just saw you this morning.” Her eyes emitted blue lasers at me.

“What?” Hardy asked, tilting his head back further to look at my face. I leaned in and whispered in his ear.

“She likes to be fucked hard, doggy-style.” It wasn’t a lie. She begged for it not 24 hours ago.

His eyes shone in understanding. “Can do Eskimo Brother.”

I laugh at his reference to the show “The League” as he moved in to do his business.

I tossed a “have fun” over my shoulder. I could feel the angry blue eyes digging into my back. The screams I heard from my room told me she’d gotten over her failed attempt to get under my skin. I smirked at the empty room and fell into an unbothered slumber.

The next morning prompted the sharing portion of Hardy and my relationship. It was the major shift from Bros for Hoes to the Brother I Never Had. While we didn’t mind coming across the same girl. We both didn’t want it to be so soon. It hadn’t bothered me because I was first and done, but I could see how it would be weird if it was flipped.

“I fucked her so good, she’ll tell her future husband about it.” He laughed. “Then I kicked her ass out. I don’t care if a girl does what we do.” He ran a hand down his rugby sculpted chest. “Hell, I’ve been kicked out of a few beds. I kissed them fondly and waved goodbye.” His blue eyes glimmered with

anger. *“But, she crossed the casual sex line and tried to make it personal. Vindictive.”*

I was touched by his solidarity. “Well, now she was fucked by both of us and has nothing to show for it.”

We laughed and started sharing the names and pictures of girls to be better organized.

Anway, I digress. So the night I met Sade, Hardy and I were at a bar that attracted the more respectable, established crowd because I'd mentioned having interest in being a cub for the right cougar before meeting Tess. He'd thought it was a lovely idea.

I studied the crowd. They were different from our usual spots where women were half naked for the sole purpose of getting attention. Well-dressed men and women lounged around on modern furniture, drinking classy beverages, as they conversed around indoor fireplaces. This is where the corporate world partied. The woman appeared more mature, grounded, and comfortable with themselves. The quiet confidence was sexy, but it wasn't doing anything to my libido. Hardy didn't have that issue. He'd sent some drinks and smolders before turning to me.

“Dude. You're not even trying.”

I searched the crowd, hoping to feel something. Nothing. I shrugged nonchalantly.

“I'm not feeling it.”

Hardy sipped his beer before sliding a look in my direction.

“Are you seriously saying being around Tess has killed your desire for other women?”

I laughed. “Fuck no. I'm a man with working equipment.” I said, before taking a sip of my beer. “I just don't feel the pull that I feel when I see her. So it's not worth it.”

Hardy shook his head. His neatly cut black hair stayed perfectly in place.

“But...you haven't fucked her, right?”

“No. Not even a kiss.” I said, not really believing it myself.

“She better have a gold plated twat.”

Irrational irritation punched me in the gut.

“Don't talk about her parts.” I said with more force than necessary.

Hardy laughed in his drink, and a few cheers erupted from a private area of the bar. Our attention was diverted to the ladies drinking with fuck men attitudes.

That's what I need.

The guest of honor walked by in a body hugging peach number that displayed her ass in all the right ways. The sash covering her outfit read Divorcee.

Oh, a divorce party.

Hardy and I gave each other the look and moved to the table nearest to them. We knew the game. Don't engage immediately. Let them notice us first while allowing them to believe we don't give a fuck about their presence.

“Talia,” one of the women said to the one I had my eye on. “Are you happy to be free from that sorry ass bastard?”

“Yes, girl! After a year-long battle, we finally settled and finalized the divorce. It cost me some money, but I'm free!”

Okay, she had a freeloading trophy husband. Got it.

Winking at Hardy, I got up, pulled out my phone and walked right into her, slightly bumping her with my shoulder. This is a good way to approach without looking interested and allowing my partner in crime to read her and her friends' interest in me.

Righting her, I offer my sincerest apology. “I'm sorry. I didn't see you standing there.”

“Um hm,” she pursed her juicy lips because she didn’t believe me. She folded her arms and waited for me to give her some bullshit. I chuckled internally. I’m far more professional than that.

“Again, I’m sorry. Are you okay? Did I spill your drink?”

She scrunched her eyebrows with her men-ain’t-shit demeanor still in play. We aren’t, but I never make it obvious.

“Nope,” she said, sticking to short answers and tucking hair from her sleek bob behind her ear.

I look back at my phone like it’s more important than her and begin texting Hardy random shit. She lingered because she wanted me to make a move. Too bad.

“Well good,” I responded while feigning being distracted. I looked up after a beat. “Well, have a good night.” I shook my phone at her. “Sorry, business.”

I dialed Hardy’s number and left her to watch me walk away. The key is to never go for the obvious. I felt her watching me as I walked away and heard her friends giggling.

I stood outside for roughly fifteen minutes and didn’t look in her direction once I passed again. Signaling down the server that looks the most like her, I ordered drinks and flirted unnecessarily.

“Verdict?” I asked Hardy over the rim of my drink.

“She thinks you’re attractive but a little young and her friends feel you’d be a good post marriage fuck.”

“I would. I confirm. Any self-esteem damage from her ex?”

“None I’ve heard. Her main complaint was his freeloader ways.”

“Got it. It’s time for the all-or-nothing play. Did you get what you came for?”

Hardy nods his head. His blue eyes shine from under some of the chocolate waves that fell in his face.

“Two. A bored housewife and a forever single who just wants to feel like a woman again. I figured this is the way you’d play this, so I have plans with the single one at another bar an hour from now.”

“Productive night,” I laughed. “All right. Let’s give it a go.”

I wave down the server again. “Hello. Give that table of ladies a refill on me and tell the one in the peach dress that I didn’t want to bother her again, but I’m truly sorry for the collision earlier.”

I dropped three twenties on the tray to complete my request. The play was risky. It was an upgrade to buying her a drink with a twist. I didn’t wait for her to get it. It was an unpredictable play because it depended on the woman’s desire to come after me.

Hardy and I rose and moved towards the door. That part is an art. I had to time it just right to give her a glimpse of me walking out of her life. We took our time making it to the door and just as my message was relayed; I pushed the door open and walked out. Part three, give her a moment to reach you.

I pulled up my app and took my time ordering a ride. I gave her two minutes.

“I thought I missed you,” I heard her say from behind me.

Jackpot. I hit order on the ride then turned to her.

“What’s wrong, miss?” Never insult her by giving out unwanted nicknames.

“It was sweet of you to buy us drinks.” Her dimples popped from her cocoa skin when she smiled at me.

“It’s the least I can do for almost ruining your night,” I told her, making sure to sound sheepish.

“You didn’t.” She studied me for a moment and stepped into my space. “If I ask you questions, will you answer me honestly?”

I dropped my phone in my pocket and gave her my full attention. “Shoot.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“I’m nine years older than you.” I shrugged, silently asking her why the fuck was I supposed to care. She crossed one stilettoed foot over the other and folded her arms. “Where are you in life right now?”

“Meaning?”

“Relationship wise.”

“Single. Never been married, not looking for a wife, or a girlfriend, for that matter.”

She folded her bottom lip between her teeth as she considered my answer. “And sex?”

“That I can do. Rough, hot, meaningless sex almost on-demand.”

She squirmed, but looked down at her pretty toes. “How many partners?”

“No more than two at a time.”

She flinched a little. It was expected. She’d just gotten divorced and was used to exclusivity, or at least the promise of it.

“You want to know why?” I prompted. She nodded, and it was my turn to move into her space. I rub the sash between my thumb and forefinger. “Because of this. You’re not looking for a boyfriend or a husband. We’re equally emotionally unavailable. I’m just able to recognize that. You will too. What you really want is someone to give you intimacy without the other bullshit.” I pulled her close and whispered in her ear. “If you want someone, you can call over to fuck you with no small talk necessary. Someone who’ll guarantee orgasms and a good night’s sleep or a midday quickie. A guy who will do all the kinky shit your ex wouldn’t, someone who’ll keep his mouth out of your business and on your pussy, or someone who won’t get offended if you ask him to leave right after...that’s me.”

My ride pulled up to the curb, and the driver rolled down the window. “Ethan?”

“Yeah, that’s me.”

She stopped me with her hand on my bicep.

“Do you have your own car?”

“Of course. Parking over here is a bitch and not worth the trouble.” I gave her one of my cards. “Think about it and call me. I’ll even let you make the rules.”

I was home an hour before she texted me.

Unknown: I can make the rules, huh?

Me: Within reason, yes.

Unknown: And what would you say if I sent you an address and told you to be there in an hour to eat my pussy.?

Me: OTW

Chapter 3

Ethan

TESS TAPS ME ON THE FACE - PALM TO CHEEK - A FEW TIMES TO wake me up out of the nap I didn't know I was taking.

“Stop it, asshole,” I say and try to push her away when metal clanks her headboard and my hands can't move. My eyes fly open to find Tess sitting on my abdomen. Dressed in a new tank and booty short combo (her outside clothes) and her hair is a big puff of curls. I also notice she has a face on. “Tess, why are you all dressed up with makeup and I can't move?”

She taps her smooth cheek like she's thinking hard to give me an answer. “Could it be because I've warned you about scaring me? I've even popped you a few times yet here you are with a stolen key...”

“Duplicated,” I correct her.

“I've never said, ‘Hey Ethan, I think you should have a key to my home. Why don't you make a copy of my key when I let your punk ass borrow my car.’”

“You just did, so it's settled. My key. And you weren't complaining when I let you in that one day after you locked yourself out.” I pull my arms again. “Back to the handcuffs. Why am I handcuffed, and where did you hide them? I already checked out your toy collection. Ohhh, are you trying to be a Domme? I had a run in with a few. I can talk you through it.”

I growl at her and buck my hips. I'm not trying to accomplish anything other than making her tits jiggle. I grin as I watch.

Mission accomplished.

“No, jackass. This is your punishment,” she informs me. She smells sweet today, tropical and fruity. I want to taste her juices.

“Punishment? Handcuffs always mean a good time, babe.”

“First, I’m not your babe. Second, fear me, white boy.”

“No, black girl, but please tell me about your evil plan. We both know you’re not about to pop your pussy on me.”

“In your dreams,” she tries to scowl, but she’s amused.

“Every night and twice on Friday.” It’s a partial lie. I swear if she fucked me right now, I’d get her pregnant just to lock that shit down.

“I know all about your Achilles’ Heel, Ethan.” *Her? Doubtful.*

“So what is it?” I prompt impatiently because I’m running out of thoughts to keep my dick at bay. Tess’s soft body can only be pressed against mine for so long.

“Your favorite body part.”

I frown at her. “What is the plan?”

She leans in until our noses are touching. I promise if she kisses me I’m burning our phones. We’re both starting over.

“Blue balls.”

The bed dips when she sits on my belly again. The heat from her pussy is so close to where she needs to be. Just a little lower...my brain catches up to what she says.

“Blue balls? What do you mean, woman?”

“I mean, the next time you fuck with me, Imma get you all hot and bothered and leave you chained to my bed for hours.”

I should heed her warning, but my heart and dick are more interested in what she’d do to get me there.

“How’d you do that Miss No Touch Tess? The prude in you won’t allow it.”

Her chocolate eyes shine with challenge. “I’m more than capable. I bet I wouldn’t have to do much. Expose it to air or blow on it.”

“Blow it. There’s no need for “on” in that sentence. And if you wanted to see my dick, Helga. All you had to do was ask. You don’t have to tie me up, Helga.”

She frowns and punches my thigh where Arnold and Helga are standing together. “I’m not secretly in love with you, ass.”

“Says the woman who’s chained me to her bed. What’s wrong? The toys can’t deliver anymore? Let me use them on you. I’ll show you some new tricks.”

Tess rolls her eyes. “Must you be a hoe all the time, Ethan?”

I smile at her and hold eye contact. “For you I’ll be the best hoe you’ve ever seen.”

“Whatever, boy.”

I’m not revealing too much. Tess still thinks I’ll fuck anything that moves and she doesn’t consider my words to be special treatment. I love fucking with her competitive side.

“You’re right. You’d lose anyway. You’re not capable of getting my dick hard.”

She gasps, indignant that I can’t seem to see that she’s sexy as fuck. I see it every day but that’s neither here nor there.

“Bet.” she says with a determined tilt of her head.

Her hand slips under my shirt, and her nails graze my abs. I try my damndest to look unbothered. I didn’t just talk all that shit just to get hard at the first touch. I’ll be damned. Her finger follows my happy trail down to the band of my pajamas...

Keep going. I mentally encourage her while giving her my best bored face. Her nails on my skin and our breathing is the only sound in the room. I fully support her biting off more than she can chew. She jumps when someone starts banging on the door.

I smile in triumph, although I'm seething inside. I don't need x-ray vision to know it's Tess's female best friend. Hating ass Ericka. I promise if I fought women, she would have caught my hands by now. Ericka is forever cockblocking. Tess removes the cuffs and jumps off the bed.

"Let this be a warning Ethan. I'll hit you where it hurts."

I scoff because the only way she could do that is by eloping with someone else.

Relocating to the bathroom, I piss to get rid of the mini boner that was beginning to form, then pluck my toothbrush out of Tess's UV sanitizer to freshen up. I keep leaving my shit around to mark my territory without her realizing it. I reach in her cabinet and dab a smidge of my cologne on my neck. The number one rule of man-whoredom is impeccable hygiene and smelling good at all times. You never know when a woman will want to have a conversation with your dick.

Whistling, I saunter towards the living room but sigh when I hear Ericka cackling. I knew it.

"Ugh. You're always here like a bionic roach," she greets me.

"The only way you'd know that is if *you're* always here. Find a man and get a life."

I tell her short ass. I swear she comes to my knee. She's just as fiery as she looks with hazel eyes, reddish brown hair, and freckles. She stomps her five-foot nothing ass on my foot.

"How about Tess finding a man so you can go away, white boy?"

"What Tess needs is a taller friend. I told her hanging out with hobbits is bad for her posture. And white boy? You're a whole black woman and are barely darker than me." She's responding, but our conversation is over. "So, anyway. Are we going to eat or what, Tess?"

Tess stops giggling at us to respond. "Can't. I have plans with Ericka. Brunch tomorrow?"

“Maybe, depends on how much of the brat’s ‘hood’ rubs off on you today.”

“Fuck you, dude,” Tinkerbelle tells me with a shove.

“Yeah, right? My dick is bigger than your little ass.”

My phone vibrates in my pocket, and I fish it out to read the display.

Maya: Just dropped the twins off at practice.

Ah, situation number two. I can’t help but smile. I need to relieve some stress after Tess’s little tease.

Me: Say no more.

I pull Tess into a hug and kiss her forehead. “Call me later.”

She looks like she wants to ask me questions about my text. Aht. Aht. Aht. No girlfriend. No questions. I’ll drop everything for her and both Sade and Maya know it, but she has to trust me more. Yeah. Yeah. I hear you. I’m fucking two different women. It’s not all day, every day. Maya is what I call a maintenance fuck. She’s a busy single mother who had her fifteen-year-old twins young. She’s not looking for a stepdad. Every now and then, she needs something a lot more powerful than her fingers and toys. Although, I’ve taught her amazing ways to get herself off.]

“Okay,” she acquiesces. “I’ll call you later.”

I push Ericka out of the way by her forehead, and she kicks me in the thigh.

“You’ve been stretching. I didn’t think that little leg could get so high.”

She flicks me off and I chuckle on the way to my apartment for a quick change.

This is why I’ve friendzoned myself. Tess is conditioned to believe I’m still the guy who picks up women for the fun of it. I’m majorly different from Hardy, but she clumps us together, not realizing I spend the majority of my time with her.

She calls me a fuckboy less than she used to - she had every right to when we met - but I need for her to see I'm much more stable. At the same time, I cannot follow her around like a lovesick puppy. I have a plan. I'll discuss it later.

Right now, I need to make Maya call me papi.

Chapter 4

Ethan

MAYA PURRS AS I TRAIL MY FINGERS ALONG HER SHOULDERS. We're spent after three rounds. The twins went with friends after practice and gave us more time to play. I look around the feminine room, tracking the changes over the last year. The floral wallpaper is replaced with lilac painted walls. The squeaky queen-sized bed I'd taken her on the first time is now a spacious king with a silver leather padded headboard. In fact, all the furniture has been updated for a queen. The basic wood ceiling fan was also replaced. I like the blingy chandelier and ceiling fan combo suits the new version of herself better.

New version.

I mull it over in my head. Maya has made great strides to transform from the teen who got pregnant from the guy who took her virginity, then mentally abused her to a bold and sexy woman. When I'd arrived, she pushed me against the door and gave me the kind of blow job that would make men propose. Most of us. She smiles up at me when I stretch, but I'm not blind to the kind of smile it is.

"Go on," I encourage her. "You can say it."

"This is the last time," her accent is still sexy.

Tracing her cupid bow lips and taking a deep look into her light brown eyes. They're different from Tess's. Tess's eyes have interesting flecks of gold that I usually find myself trying to count. Mentally slapping myself, I focus on the task at hand. I slide some newly highlighted strands through my fingers.

"I know, I could feel it."

“Feel it?” She asks, looking alarmed.

With a chuckle, I kiss her temple. “Not like that. The sex was spectacular.”

She glows with the compliment, but doesn't miss an opportunity to tease me. “Do you tell that to the other woman?”

“Yes, but only if it's true. I don't lie to any of you.” Maya sits up and my eyes fall to her full breasts. “Your new man is going to love those,” I admit, and squeeze one for good measure.

She smiles, but her eyes are serious. “Ethan, are you sure you don't mind...”

I hold a finger to my lips in a shushing motion. “Hell, no, Maya. When we met, you needed to hear how beautiful you are because you needed to know it's true. You needed someone to remind you that you are one hell of a mother. I got the privilege of being that person. I think of it like this. I found a sweet bird with an injured wing. I wrapped the wing so it could heal.”

Maya tears up, and I wipe at her tears but continue. “I didn't trap you. I was making sure you were strong enough to fly. I knew this was coming before you said anything. I can see it in everything about you. You're ready to soar. Never allow anyone to cage you again. Promise?”

“Promise,” she cries as she wraps her arms around me.

I kiss the silky hair on top of her head. I'm genuinely happy for her. I'm glad I took the woman I found weeping to the grocery store and released her as a woman who doesn't need a man. Now, she knows she's worth the trouble.

“When's the date?” I shoot her the question as I climb out of bed to get dressed.

“In one week,” she confirms.

I have on my underwear and sweats when I turn to her. “Toe the line of sexy: nothing too revealing or boring. Allow

him to be chivalrous. Never settle. Know your hard limits and stick to them.

She nods as she mulls over the things I've just told her. I've told her all of this at some point over the course of our "relationship," but she has to put it into practice.

"I'm proud of you for putting yourself out there," I admit sincerely.

Maya climbs out of bed to reveal her curvy, hot as fuck body. I watch it disappear under a silky robe. Even that's an upgrade. She used to wear a fluffy, oversized terry cloth one.

"And what about you? Are you going to put yourself out there?"

"Don't I?"

She shakes her head. "Nope. Not if Tess still doesn't know about your secret torch."

With a smile, I bow to her and say, "The student is becoming the master."

Maya laughs but wraps her arms around my still naked torso. "I mean it, Ethan."

I return her hug. "I know. It's not as simple with Tess. She met me at my lowest hoe moment and still sees me as that guy."

"I bet Talia and I aren't helping."

I shake my head. "That shouldn't matter. I go months without seeing you and Talia is also a busy woman. It's by design."

Her eyes light up. "I get it. Talia and I don't have plans to keep you. We legit only call you to get off."

"Catch and release." I confirm and smack her ass. "And you're ready to be released into the wild." I give her a goodbye kiss. "And I'm not the kind of asshole who'll pretend you don't exist now that this is over. Don't hesitate to talk to me if you feel you need to. Understand?"

“Got it. Thank you.” We walk to the door, and she bounces to the tip of her toes to kiss my cheek. “Are you going to replace me?”

“I could never replace you, sweetpea.” *Hey, it’s a habit.* “And then there was one,” I say to answer her question.

“And are you waiting for Talia to be done?”

I shake my head. I know what she’s asking. “No. Even if she called me right and said it was over, I wouldn’t go home and pursue Tess just yet. Our relationship would just be plagued with cheating accusations.”

“Good point.” Maya hands me a gift bag that was sitting next to the door.

“What’s this? You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“I wanted to,” she insists with a huge smile. “Open it.”

I emit a low whistle as I check out the new Apple watch.

“You don’t have to open the box, but it’s your favorite color,” she gushes with her eyes shining. “I wanted to get you something music related, but that’s way out of my expertise...”

I peck her on the lips to shut her up. “This is great. Thank you. You didn’t have to do this. Really.”

Professional wingmandom keeps my pockets lined just fine. “Oh, please.” She waves me off. “This costs a fraction compared to what you’ve given back to me.”

Whistling on the way to my car, I realize she’s right. Reminding a woman of her strength and self worth and helping her have faith in herself again is priceless.

Chapter 5

Tess

HARD TRUTHS. I TRY TO GIVE MYSELF THOSE ALL THE TIME, but this one is harder. I've made a spectacular froyo combo but have yet to taste it. It's been hours since Ethan wandered out of my home, and the smile on his face can only mean one thing. The mall is busy so I sigh and watch people go about their day, not wondering what their philandering male best friend is currently doing. Okay, not what, *Who?*

Hard truth one, I missed him the entire week he was gone. Second hard truth, I was all the way turned on when Ericka arrived and pulled me back into sanity. That man is seductive even when he's not trying. His sultry smile hints that he knows several ways to get me off before my head can hit the pillow. His eyes...ugh. He has ways of looking at me that requires me to excuse myself and recollect my thoughts before I become his next victim.

I may say his mouth is dirty like it bothers me, but the truth is, his deep voice and the ease in which he voices his dirty thoughts is one of the most seductive things about him. Yet, we have a good friendship and I'm terrified sex will ruin it due to his hit-and-run nature.

Wouldn't he respect me more?

I shake away the thought. We are friends. I cannot allow my hormones to convince me otherwise.

"Are you finished?" Ericka asks me with a huff.

"With what?"

“Your internal argument you have with yourself every time Ethan runs off to be a hoe.”

“I do not have an internal argument and he’s entitled to do as he pleases.”

Ericka snorts and licks some of her yogurt off her lip. “Yeah, tell your face that lie. It’s not buying it. It’s like your heart breaks a little every time he goes to do what you already know. If he were going to choose you, he would’ve done so by now.”

“You’re right. But do I want him to ‘choose’ me, or do I feel left out and horny?”

“Only you can answer that. When I see Ethan, I see a whole hoe. But he doesn’t have a key to my apartment or whatever.”

Ericka confuses me. She’s done her share of sneaking out once she’s done with a guy, so I don’t know if her advice is due to that or if she believes Ethan is irredeemable. Like an idiot. I check my phone again. He’d told me to call him when I’m done, but I’d hoped he’d send me some signs of missing me. A text, Tweet, or meme. *Something*.

We’ve done some shopping, had lunch, more shopping, and now frozen yogurt. Ericka has some evening plans and I need to get with Ethan to go to the fabric store to get the things I need to make our Halloween costumes.

“I have to go get the fabric for our costumes. Have you decided what you’re doing?”

Ericka frowns. “I don’t even know if I want to hang out with the hoe and the bigger hoe. Hardy is a pain in the ass.”

“So no couple costumes for you two?” I joke. Hardy doesn’t come around often because he has no interest in being around women he’s not trying to fuck. At least Ethan is social.

“The crazier part is you and Ethan are about to do your third duo costume and you’re not a duo.”

“Girl, hush,” I tell her as we stand to leave. Ericka goes out of her way to remind me that I’m not his girl. I know she

means well, but the reminder is annoying sometimes.

The best reminder that I'm single is the time I've spent not having sex. At least Ericka gets some from time to time. Giving classes, working at the boutique, and trying to make my own clothes usually has me too busy for anything, but over the years Ethan has slowly chipped time into my schedule until we had our own rituals. Halloween is one of them. The first year we were David Bowie and Iman, the second we were Olivia Pope and President Fitzgerald Grant, and this year we're still deciding, but I'm sure it will be along those lines.

Me: I'll be back within the hour.

Ethan: K. I'll leave my door unlocked.

I chew my lip, trying to read into six words. *Is it a good thing he's home?* Thankfully, one of the guys Ericka is messing with right now called and it gave me the thirty-two minutes it takes to make it back home to think about everything. Something is different, but I can't quite place it. Stopping by my home, I drop off my bags, use the restroom, and freshen up my appearance before going downstairs.

I must go into my usual mode before seeing Ethan before he begins to think I'm crazy. Out of habit, I knock before opening the door. He may share his body freely, but people hardly come into his home. I'm one of the few and am not oblivious to the honor. The instruments are where his living room furniture should be. I'd asked him about it when I first came over and he said he's only concerned with access to his things and anyone who wants to visit him comfortably could either invite him over or meet him somewhere else.

The drum set sits in the middle, different guitars hang on the walls, a keyboard is near the window but I find him at the piano. His shirt is missing and his hair is still slicked back from the shower. I doubt he's noticed my arrival. He's in that place musicians go when they have a melody stuck in their head. Ethan is leaning with his elbow on the piano and his palm supporting his forehead as his right hand plays the same notes in a loop. It's literally how he thinks.

"New song?" I ask to get his attention.

He looks up and offers me a half smirk that displays some of his perfect teeth. Turning on the bench, he tugs at his lounge pants and swings a leg over to straddle it. It takes everything in my power not to check if he's wearing underwear. Ethan is art; A beautiful sculpture. I want to run my hands all over, yet I feel he's in a museum. Visually entertaining but unobtainable.

The setting sun peeks through the blinds, leaving trails of light on his body. It reminds me of how he looked sleeping in my bed this morning to restore his hoe energy. Ethan stretches and reveals fresh red scratches on his side. Somehow, It's sexy and also hurts my feelings. I shake the thought away. It's not like he's cheating on me.

"I see you still have on those little ass shorts," he says in lieu of an answer.

"Yup. You have a problem with them?" I challenge him while folding my arms.

He rubs his beard as his damp hair falls in his face. His light eyes drop to my toes, then take a leisurely perusal of my legs.

"Come here," he orders me as he hooks two fingers at me. I move further into his place until I'm almost standing in front of him. "Turn around," he tells me with a twirl of his fingers.

Normally, I'd argue with him or threaten to kick his ass, but climbing on top of him this morning has thrown me off. I turn and close my eyes tight when his fingers graze the back of my thigh.

"What are you doing?" I whisper.

"Don't worry. I'm not messing with your no touch zones." He slides a hand up my inner thigh, causing my breath to hitch, but his thumb stops at the hem of my shorts. Just as quickly, his touch disappears. "Meh. They're not play-with-your-pussy length. They could be shorter." I feel his heat on my back when he stands and whispers in my ear from behind. "Did you at least poke out your ass and make them pant?"

Whistling again, he walks in the direction of his keyboard. He has a fantastic back with muscles and - to my dismay-

more scratches. “I know what we’re going to be.”

“What?” I ask, my voice huskier than I’d like it to be.

He starts playing a tune on the keyboard while grinning, but I can’t quite catch what it is. Rolling his eyes, he moves to the drums. His abs clench when he lowers himself on the stool. He plays the rhythm of the song, but the only thing he accomplished is me being in awe of his musical abilities once again. Also, his biceps flexing with each strike of his drumsticks aren’t helping. He stops when he notices me nodding along with the beat but lacking the recognition he wants. Ethan drops his drumstick in their holder, then leans back as he runs his fingers through his hair.

“You’re killing me, Tess.”

I blink a few times because him groaning my name is sexier than it should be.

What in the hell is going on?

This time, my eyes drop when he stands. *Damn.* Those lounge pants are the only thing he’s wearing. The outline of the only part of him I haven’t seen is clearly visible through the thin fabric. The veins in his forearms pop when he reaches for his acoustic guitar. He slings the strap over his head. He begins strumming as he looks at me.

“I guess you need the lyrics,” he says.

The damn butterflies attack my stomach when he begins singing an acoustic, slower version of a song I haven’t placed but sounds familiar. I’ve seen him perform covers at the events his company throws, but he’s never done any version of a serenade when we’re one on one. He’s only hummed along with a song in the car or sung snippets of songs while he’s cooking. Now, he’s giving me a private show with damp hair from his shower while being one clothing item away from complete nudity. This is the definition of unplugged. The lyrics aren’t helping.

I do my best to not look like a turned on groupie, but his voice has the sexy grit of a rock star that seems to go straight

to my nipples. I'm relieved when he gets to the chorus so I can recognize the song. I cannot take this version of Ethan.

“OH! So you want to be Ciara and Justin Timberlake?”

I hate how his grins seem to involve some level of lip biting.

“Took you long enough,” he confirms while putting his guitar back in its place.

He walks to me with both hands extended. Grabbing my hands, he walks backwards towards his room.

“Come,” he tells me again. Turing, he drops one hand but keeps a few of our fingers laced with the other as he leads us into his room. His room is sleek and masculine, with not one thing out of place the way one would suspect. The combination of black, gray, and white is a sexy yet simple motif.

Ethan climbs on his big black bed like an agile jungle cat. He settles on the bed with his back on the headboard. Bending his left knee, he tucks his left arm behind his head, revealing his rarely seen tricep tattoo. *I am me* runs horizontally in cursive. It's a true statement. There's only one Ethan. He tilts his head to the side to study me. His sexy eyes don't reveal anything, but he pats the space next to him.

“Coming?”

“To what?”

He grabs the remote next to his leg and waves it. “Let's watch the video for outfit inspo.” I sit at the foot of the bed facing the television. “Are you okay, Tess? You're acting weird. Almost like my bed is a casting couch or something. We literally slept in the same bed not twelve hours ago.”

Am I being that awkward?

“That's your imagination, Ethan Allen. I'm just not used to being here. *You* climbed in my bed, remember? This is legit the first time I've been in your room.”

He furrows his brows. “Really? Oh, and you know that's not my name.”

I nod. “Yes, really. You’re always at my place. Plus, I like calling you that.”

“I’m not a furniture store or a founder of Vermont. Well, that’s an easy fix. You’re spending the night.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s time for you to become acquainted with my bed.”

Chapter 6

Tess

IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY. I'M TIRED, YET I'M WIDE AWAKE staring into the darkness and wondering about life. The Ethan thing is bothering me. After I gave him some clothes two years ago, he took me to dinner as promised and confessed his hoenanigans. We laughed about it. I was in tears on the behalf of him and the women who retaliated. I laughed at him for being crazy enough to bounce between neighbors and them for thinking they'd earned the right to be upset with a guy who neither of them made him work for them.

Even with the harrowing experience he had an hour prior, he was still comfortable in his own skin. That night he'd told me that he was done being a hoe, but I didn't believe him. *Who changes that fast?* I'd met Hardy a few days later and was even more skeptical. The hoe was strong in that one.

Somehow we'd become closer until we ended up where we are now. We've met each other's parents since he and I like to house hop during holidays. Ericka calls him my holiday boyfriend. Ethan is funny and sweet when he wants to be but that doesn't mean he's trying to be anyone's boyfriend.

It's also confusing that I am trying to think of him that way when it didn't happen until recently. It's like I woke up one day craving Ethan.

"You're fidgeting, which means you're thinking what's on your mind?" He asks from his side of the bed.

I dunno. I could be falling for my womanizing best friend and lying in his bed while wearing his t-shirt is unnerving.

“It just takes me a while to relax in a new environment.”

With a sigh, Ethan rolls into my space. I can't see him well, but I know he's lying on his side facing me.

“I know you're not home. But you're in the same building and I should be comfort enough for you. We've gone out of town together and you've fallen asleep by now.”

“I would be tired from traveling.”

“And you shopping all day with Ericka then dragging me around to four different fabric stores isn't tiring enough?”

I frown at my irritation in the dark, happy that he cannot fully see me. “What are you saying, Ethan?”

“I don't believe the bullshit that just fell out of your mouth. Try again.”

“I'm deciding if I should start dating.”

“Okay. Do you have a reason to not date and does it outweigh the reasons why you should?”

Why? Do you have one?

“I guess not. I'm just thinking like Ericka is out, you have fresh scratches, and I'm just existing. I'll probably test a few dating apps.”

“Ah, so sex is what you want.”

“Ugh, another Ethanism.” I turn to face the opposite way.

“What do you mean by that?” I hear the edge in his voice, but he can't be oblivious that sex is his favorite subject.

“You find ways to circle a conversation back to sex.”

He huffs which is not normal for him, especially when talking to me. “*You* brought up the scratches I acquired from sex. Ericka is not living in a romantic comedy at almost two in the morning. The only thing to be done right now is eat, sleep, or fuck. If sex isn't your goal, why did you use those two examples?”

“I only meant you two are living your lives. I should find a companion.”

“Companion? What are you? A sixty-year-old widow? You have companionship.”

“No. I don’t.”

“What the hell am I? You’re currently lying in my bed *talking* to me. I’m not an imaginary friend.”

“So, you’re saying I shouldn’t date and sit around waiting for you to call me after you finish hoeing for the day to do our next activity?”

“No. I’m saying you need to be honest with yourself about what you want before you start dating. And what’s with the double standard? Ericka is out there getting her rocks off while I’m at home in bed talking to you and I’m the hoe in this scenario?”

“Ericka is not a hoe. She’s just single.”

“So am I. You keep making me be the guy you met, Tess.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then explain how you have two friends who both had sex today, but I’m a hoe and she’s just a normal person. Understand this, Tess. If I were the guy you keep hinting that I am, you wouldn’t be here right now. We wouldn’t be friends because I would have fucked you dirty by now and moved on with my life.”

The truth in his statement bugs me and makes me hot at the same time. Figuring he had sex today is different than having him confirm it. Would he have really fucked me and ran off?

“Do you know how empty that makes our friendship sound, Ethan?”

“It’s the truth. Do you see Hardy hanging out with anyone other than me?”

“I hardly see that man,” I dismiss.

“Because your legs aren’t open.” There’s something extra in his tone I don’t like.

“Is that how you really feel? Are you bothered we’ve been friends for years and haven’t had sex?”

“You’re the one with all the rules and triggered in the middle of the night. I was half-sleep. Is this a Helga moment? Do you want access to my dick?”

The room may be dark but I see red. I don’t remember ever being pissed at Ethan, so it’s a foreign feeling to my body. Climbing off the bed, I announce I’m leaving.

“I’ll just go home.”

“Lie down.” His voice is full of authority, but I’m stubborn.

“No.”

“You complain about lack of companionship and not being allowed in here. You’re here. Get your ass back in bed. If you try to walk out of that door, I don’t care what you know. We will fight.”

I’m stunned, but I sit back down. After another beat, I lie down on my side.

“Closer,” he commands. I scoot further into the bed. Ethan’s big hand grabs my waist and pulls me back against him until he’s the big spoon. “Now keep your mouth shut and go to sleep.”

Chapter 7

Ethan

CALM DOWN. I'M NOT AN IDIOT. I'M AWARE TESS WANTS THE D but she can't have it until she stops picturing me as a man hunting for pussy. I can get that with little effort. The kicker? I'm referring to Tess. I may tease her from time to time, but I recognize her problem. I saw how her eyes traced the marks Maya left behind. My girl's friendship goggles have fallen off - as intended- and now she's in this space that makes her uncomfortable. Good.

I'm up before her. She looks good in my bed, but I need her here without the bullshit. It's crazy. I have to do this in phases. It's like hoe karma. She thinks she wants me to make a move or confess my devotion to her, but she'll balk the moment I do. She doesn't understand men like the one I used to be. There is no way in hell old Ethan would have played the long game. Hardy sure as hell wouldn't. He rolls his eyes at me every time I mention Tess.

I order her favorite breakfast and get up to start grooming. My day is pretty busy. Hooked - the company I have with Hardy - has an event tonight, and that means Ethan Cox needs to get to work. Hardy and I were the original on the ground men flirting for a living, but as the business grows, we have been able to hire other professional "wingmen" Hardy still does it to keep his skills sharp.

Now, I focus on the party and the entertainment. Hooked is a multi-layered company, which is another reason why I almost cussed out my woman. What the fuck does she mean dating apps? That's step one of our service. As if I'd allow her

to use a competitor. Hell, as if I wouldn't erase and block her shit had she tried to create a profile on mine.

Look, I'm not one of those double standard I-need-my-cake-and-eat-it-too kind of guys. I hate that phrase, by the way. What the fuck is the purpose of having cake if you aren't eating it? I'm just biding time until she catches the fuck up. Her time to try to date was prior to her starting to realize she may be interested in me. Now Tess and I are in the next phase of my plan. My phone vibrates once I shut off the shower. I wrap my towel around my waist and go to check it since it can be an update for our food, but it isn't.

Shannon: Did you pick the song for our duet?

Oh yeah. That.

Me: I have. I'll send you and the band a link for the vibe I'm looking for.

Shannon: K. And you'll be there early for us to rehearse, right?

Me: Duh, I'll be there at four. We can practice the duet and that other bullshit you want me to do.

Shannon: LMAO. It's not bullshit. People eat that shit up.

Shannon is almost the female version of Hardy and me, but since we have similar music interests, she's kind of my work wife.

Me: Whatever. Bye.

After people match up on our site, they can choose to be online only and make their own arrangements if they decide to meet. Or they can do a blind date option where they meet at one of our events, or they can do a premium membership where they can choose any option per match. The holidays are the big pay at the door events, where all the unmatched people can come to a big party and let nature—with the help of our wing people if requested—take its course.

Tonight is just one of the weekly events for blind dates and hybrids. We have a venue locally and when we do "Hooked on

Travel” events like our week in Miami, we rent venues. Our house band is great, but Shannon and I will do performances here and there. I don’t play instruments at work because I don’t want any members of the band feeling like their job is in jeopardy. I’d originally set up performances to get it out of my system, but now the subscribers do online polls to pick the shit they want Shannon or me to do. It’s not too taxing since they know we’re only doing about two songs each. Tonight there will be five songs all together since some asshole wrote in a duet request and other subscribers voted on that option.

The voters picked Britney Spears for Shannon and Enrique Iglesias for me. Knowing Shannon, she’s gonna be on her bullshit. She loves posting thirst traps. I post them too. It’s good for business, but I don’t live on social media looking at the comments. Honestly, I only like thirst trapping the person in my bed.

Speaking of which, I swing the door open without bothering to check the bed. I know she’s awake. I can feel it. With my back to her, I remove my towel to dry my hair. At the angle I’m standing, she’d be able to see my dick through the mirror if she wants. I dry the rest of my body and drop the towel on the floor. Turning to the side, I pluck out some black boxer briefs and slip them on.

Casually, I turn as I run my fingers through my hair. Tess is in my bed with the cover pulled all the way to just below her huge, shocked eyes.

“Oh, you’re awake. Good morning,” I greet her nonchalantly.

The doorbell chimes and I go to get our food without bothering to put on extra clothes. I know she expects me to bring up the night before, but it’s pointless. I’m not going to continue to plead my case since she needs to start paying attention to actions. My actions tell her she’s my priority, but she has to fucking see it.

I return with the bag of food just as she’s coming out of the bathroom. “I have a toothbrush for you in there once you’re done eating. It’s the same as the one you have at home.”

Her eyebrows shoot up in surprise, as if I don't spend a lot of time in her bathroom. It doesn't matter because she looks fucking beautiful wearing nothing but my t-shirt. Okay, I'm exaggerating. I'm sure she's wearing panties, but that's a quick and easy fix. Her skin is still a little flushed from my peep show. The glow pisses me off. It adds another level of beauty to her body and I want to cancel everything, throw caution out, and give her the rest of the show.

"Thank you," she whispers.

"Get back in bed so you can eat. I got you your usual. Maple bacon waffles with two eggs scrambled hard."

I grab a clean towel and spread it on the bed, then I put the food on it. The only way I want syrup on my sheets is if I just licked it off Tess's pussy.

"What are you wearing to the Hooked party tonight?"

"I didn't think I-"

I cut her off with the same question. "What are you wearing to the Hooked party tonight?"

"I'll have to see. Is there a theme?"

A much better response.

"No theme tonight."

I inhale my egg whites, turkey sausage, and fruit cup. I'm eating light because I believe Shannon will have me half-naked for no reason.

My phone keeps buzzing due to several work related questions from various people. This is normal, the big stuff is done, so it's just the small things that need to be decided. And since the parties are my area, all questions come to me.

Hardy is a nerd with a glow up like me. His specialty is computer science. That dude's head is a computer. He can calculate shit as fast as a calculator. He's over the app. I'll give my opinion as an end user, but I don't know a damn thing about algorithms.

It works for our personalities. He prefers structure, and a measured amount of work over time. I rather be left alone most of the time than have to work my ass off a few days straight. Of course, it's not complete freedom on those days, but I don't have an office in the corporate building and people usually look worried when I show up for an occasional meeting with Hardy.

It's quite funny since Hardy is the one that should worry them. He's not a tyrant, but he loves looking out of his glass office to watch his minions working. I don't give a fuck as long as I get the desired end results. Also, that sick bastard likes to dress up and make his employees drool, knowing he'll never give in to any of them. While he likes his mind games with many. Only like playing with one.

"Why are you smiling?" Tess asks me after she swallows a bite of her waffle.

I've been texting almost non stop. She probably thinks it's woman related." I'm laughing at something Hardy does. "Why?"

I glance over at her. Her bare nipples are almost visible through the fabric of my shirt. I want to rip it off and bite them. Tess shrugs and tries to look casual.

"Just asking."

I don't press the issue because it's not time. "You know the drill. I'll be busy all day. Be there at seven."

She licks some syrup off her lip as she studies me. I have to run an errand then hit the gym. "Are you kicking me out?"

You'd think I just fucked her and gave her walking papers. "No." I toss the duplicate key I had made for her on the bed. "Lock up when you leave."

Tess has the look of a woman who wants to check my phone. She won't find anything. I don't sext. Only thing Sade and Maya did was send me details where to meet them. We don't do all that other shit. Fuck textual foreplay; they're not my woman. I'll show them when I get there.

I drop my phone in the pocket of my sweats and sit on the bed to lace up my tennis shoes. Leaning back, I kiss her on the cheek, then make my way to the door.

“See you tonight,” I inform her just as a call comes in and makes my phone dance around in my pocket. “What’s up, Shannon?”

I answer just as I lock the door.

“This duet is gonna be cute. I have some ideas on how to sexy it up.”

“Does it need my immediate attention, or can it wait until I get there?”

“Wow. Someone needs to get some. Don’t look at me. Ain’t it.”

“First of all, don’t act like I can’t talk you out of your clothes. Second, I am not undersexed. I’m just not building fantasy teams like you and Hardy.”

“First of all, no one fucks as much as your friend. I’m a lady. I just like to tell guys the fastest route to take to leave me the fuck alone.”

I laugh as I unlock my car. “I see you didn’t dispute my first point.”

“I didn’t say you couldn’t get it again. I’m just saying I’m not volunteering. You have to work, bitch.”

“Ah, in Britney mode already? I’m busy. Get off my phone. I’ll see you at four.”

She hangs up but texts me a picture of her flicking me off. I ignored her admission that she’d fuck me again. No shit. It’s irrelevant. Now, calm your tits. We fucked years ago and we only talk when it’s about work.

Almost any woman I encounter more than once knows I’d ignore the fuck out of them for Tess. Now it’s time for her to know.

Tess

I feel disoriented. He'd gone from yelling at me to take my ass to sleep to being his normal self. The difference between the two Ethans is polarizing. There is still so much I need to learn about him. I put my empty containers back in the bag and fall back on the bed to stare at the ceiling. My hormones are raging and he walked out the door while talking to bitch ass Shannon. She hasn't done anything to me personally, but her accent and willingness to be all over Ethan all the fucking time is annoying. She'd even taken a selfie on Hooked's social media page of herself and Ethan. She had on a bikini that barely covered anything, and she was in his lap as they smiled for the picture.

The caption read. *I bet you wish you came.* I feel like it was directed towards me. I could just be sensitive, but she irks me nonetheless. Ethan is reasonable. Maybe I should tell him about my conflict. Wait. How would that sound? *Hey Ethan, I think I want you.*

No. That's not a good look. Do I go the romantic comedy route and kiss him with the hope that my kiss somehow cures his wandering nature? There has to be a better way to navigate this without making a total fool of myself. I roll onto my side. Being in his bed and surrounded by his scent isn't helping my thought process.

Nor is the memory of seeing glimpses of his dick through the mirror and from the side. *Gah.* I squeeze my eyes shut tight. I need to get out of here. Jumping up. I get dressed with lightning speed. And grab the key he left behind. I don't know why he wanted me to spend the night or gave me a key, but I'm not going to process everything right now.

I breathe easier when I enter my apartment. Our friendship could fall apart because of this. I must keep my shit together. Well, that's what my brain says. The other part of me picks out

the sexiest outfit I could muster. I pull out a dress I made but never had the occasion to wear. Ethan hasn't seen it either. Maybe if I start looking irresistible, he'll notice. It's worth a shot.

Chapter 8

Ethan

TESS LOOKS LIKE SHE'S TRYING TO GET FUCKED. SHE COMES IN late with her half-pint sidekick in tow. I can't really see Ericka because my eyes are glued to Tess's completely exposed left leg. How the fuck is the dress hanging on? She turns to address someone and I fight the urge to walk offstage and carry her ass out of here. She never shies from wearing anything that shows off her phenomenal body, but this dress is different.

Ericka grabs her arm and I grip the damn cage type box Shannon has me in for her bullshit. Tess's leg is exposed all the way to her hip, where she has a cute little bow to tie the skirt part of the dress together. All I see is an invitation for me to remove it with my teeth.

"Focus big boy. We're about to start. You can ogle your non-girlfriend, girlfriend after."

"Shut up," I grumble. "What the fuck is she wearing? She's almost naked. And why?"

Shannon surveys Tess's outfit. They can't see us, but we can see them. "She looks hot, but it's to get attention. Either yours or someone else's."

Ah. So is that what we're doing, Tess?

"Is that why you're in lingerie underneath that red mini trench?"

"Shut up," she scoffs. "This is the replica of what my girl Brit wore for her performance for the 2016 Billboard awards,

if you must know. You can't be Brit these days without being practically naked. Pissing off Steve is just a bonus."

Her British accent makes her crazy schemes sound posh. If she didn't earn us a lot of money, I would have cursed her out for this idea. I'm not a fucking prop. With it being so close to the performance, I conceded, but told her never to put me in this position again. She can have her tiff with her fuck buddy next time without me. She found out he signed up for this service and is supposed to be meeting a match tonight.

She updated her song selections to some of the most sexually charged upbeat Britney songs she could find. She didn't want the subtle shit. Nope. The fact that people are always trying to "ship" us - her words - makes this even funnier to her.

"Show time," she whispers, then moves to her mark. I work to keep my face neutral as the curtain opens. We must project chemistry in times like this.

The music for "Oh, Oh, Baby" starts pumping through the speakers and Shannon begins her choreography with two girls dressed similar to her. She lives for this shit. I can tell she's going to be beyond extra tonight.

Tess' eyebrows shoot up once she realizes I'm in the clear box like a present to Shannon. She is playing homage to Nsync's Bye Bye Bye video. I'm perfect Ken Doll Ethan in this scenario. I'm wearing a blazer, a buttoned up shirt, and jeans.

Once Shannon begins to sing she sits just below the box. The choreography is supposed to illustrate her desire to get me out. The beginning lyrics are highly complementing, like I'm perfect.

The chorus hits and Shannon has her feet on the horizontal bars while holding the vertical ones as she faces me. She dips and arches her back to stick her butt out to the crowd as she sings about feeling me deep inside. I try to remember what's it like to fuck her, but we were fucked up so some of it is fuzzy.

She turns to face the crowd while still hanging on and sings the chorus. It's my cue to reach out and touch her. It's as if her desire for me brought me to life. The dancers open the door and Shannon grabs me by the hand and leads me center stage as she begins the second verse. She sidesteps me and slides down to the ground while holding my leg when she mentions being my biggest fan.

I pull her up to standing, and she walks around me, touching me as she goes. I allow her to remove my blazer and she tosses it to the back. This time, when she sings about feeling me, she's in front of me and leans back against me. She slides down my body and opens her legs towards the crowd, but quickly closes them while sliding her hand down her torso

My job is to stand there, look sexy while looking at her like she's the most fuckable woman on the planet. She's selling the seduction part, just not for me. I still have a deep brown naked leg and back floating in my head. Shannon lifts my shirt slightly to display an ab or two. I told her in rehearsal that I'd allow it, but I'm not removing my shirt.

Shannon pokes her ass out against my crotch as she sings about being filled up. Grabbing my hand once more, she leads me to the next prop as she sings about me having something she really wants. It's a huge solid rectangle made to look like a bed. I sit and she pushes me back as she sings for me to lie back.

She straddles me and leans in until her lips almost touch mine to sing the part about liking me. The next part is saying *baby* a shit load of times. She uses that moment to pretend to be riding me although she's closer to my knees than my dick, but there's no telling how it looks to the audience. Playing my part, I touch her when appropriate for the song. I sit up and grab her hips as she sings the chorus, but as the "baby" part starts again, she sings my name instead.

We didn't rehearse that. I swear if I have to fight that dude today...

"What the fuck?" I mouth when the lights dim.

The song fades out, and she gets off me getting ready for the next song.

They're standing center stage when "Get Naked (I Got a Plan)" starts. I move behind her, mouthing the guy's part in her ear as if I'm trying to pick her up as she dances. She pretends to reject me, then I move back to sit when the verse starts.

Shannon gyrates her hips as she sings about being a freak. Then the choreography continues. She turns to me and opens her trench coat while the song asks me what she has to do to get me to want her body. Our rehearsal wasn't dressed, so this is the first time truly seeing the outfit on her. My eyes dropped to check it out. This woman is a sneeze away from being naked.

After a quick tease, she and her dancers throw their jackets and continue the choreography as rehearsed. I'm actually enjoying it and nodding along. Shannon, the little trickster, goes off script again and comes to straddle me in the chair while singing about not being ashamed of her beauty. I know this isn't for my amusement, but she also knows I would have told her hell no.

She bends backwards while singing about her on top abilities and flips out of my lap. I sneak off stage once she joins the choreography. She doesn't need me. There's enough routine for her to go on without me. I have to change for the duet and my songs. Plus, there's a half naked woman I need to find. I freshen up and once I'm done, Shannon is off stage. The DJ takes over while her props are being removed. She high-fives me as I pass, but I stop her.

"Shannon..."

"I know," she laughs and hits her own hand. "Bad Shannon. Bad, bad girl."

She's so not sorry. We're whispering so no one can hear our disagreement.

"You ambushed me. That's not okay!" I whisper-shout.

“I’m sorry, but wait until you see the playback. Good for business, and Steve is pissed. That’s what he gets. No backsies.” She looks to the side, then flinches. “You’re right. Sorry. That was over the top. I owe you a cheesecake or something. I hope you know CPR.”

“What?” She’s gone before I can decipher her message.

I look in the direction she looked before she got weird and see a flash of Tess’s dress before it disappears. Okay, so this is where it gets weird. A boyfriend would run after her to check her mood and explain away any misunderstandings. But I’m not her boyfriend. I want to be that and more, but right now I really don’t have anything to clear up. Shannon and I do not want each other. Still, I find myself moving in that direction, but the coordinator tells me it’s time to go on.

Fuck. I do the only thing I can. I don’t fucking want to, but I’ll do it. I tell the band leader to scrap Rhythm Divine and switch the song. I know they know it, so I’m not worried. I hate performing ballads, but it’s a necessary evil.

I can see her talking to Ericka and trying to leave when “Hero” begins and I internally roll my eyes, but it’s Tess’s favorite Enrique Iglesias song. He oversold it in my opinion, but I’m not his target audience. I think at least half of the world was in love with him for this damn song.

She stops and turns as I begin to sing the lyrics. I take my focus off her because what I’m not gonna do is serenade her publicly. That’s a big play for big shit. Now is just to get her out of her feelings. I find myself getting lost in the lyrics because they are far more personal than I intended. I must roll with it. This is why I don’t do ballads.

I open my eyes when I get to the musical breakdown. “Get those lighters out. This is my best friend’s favorite Enrique song!”

It appears that I’ve made some couples. So people look hugged up and in love. I’ll take it. I glance at Tess to make sure she stays but moves on to working the crowd by the stage. This is why some of these people are still single. People like Shannon and I are not part of the menu. Tess’s eyes may have

been misty, but I cannot focus on that. She's getting there, but she's not ready for me.

The next song "Let Me Be Your Lover" begins and Hardy comes to be Pitbull. The partiers cheer like they're at a real concert and Hardy is some kind of celebrity. This is right up his alley. My part is about getting the girl and his is about partying and one-night stands.

We dance to music as he does the intro, then it blends into my part. I sing the first verse and chorus as Tess and Ericka make their way back to the front where they're supposed to be. I reach out for Tess to bring her on stage and Hardy grabs Ericka - pre-planned. Hardy cussed me out earlier for the suggestion, but it's not his performance.

I spin Tess as I sing the second verse. I dip in front of her at the mention of going down, but let her go. She and Ericka can be on stage with me, but I'm not singing to them the whole song. I let them dance on their own behind us.

Hardy taps Ericka's chin as he raps the first verse, then strategically moves her out of the way so he can address the crowd for the rest of his rap. I sing the beginning of the chorus to Ericka so she doesn't feel left out, then return to the crowd. Hardy exits since his part is over and takes the ladies with him. One on each arm like the player he is.

I finish the song and have the crowd clapping. The music fades and the band blends into an acoustic slower version of "Sucker" Shannon appears to sing the beginning to launch us into the duet. She's not as naked as she was before, but she isn't dressed normally either.

Shannon is sporting all black. She's wearing a leather jacket with a black cut out leotard and fishnet stocking combo that all female pop stars seem to favor these days. Her hair is blonde and sleek and her lips are fuck me red. She brings all five feet and five inches plus heels towards me as I begin singing my part. She isn't quite white, black, or Asian. I don't even think she's Hispanic. Honestly, I don't know what she is, but her look is sultry and men eat it up.

I reach for her as we sing a part together. We spend the rest of the song playing off each other's energy. We flirt and touch each other, but we both know it's for show and once this last obligation for the night is over, we'll be going our separate ways. Still, I grab her cheek and she wraps an arm around me and we lean in as we sing like we're going to kiss but hug instead.

We exit the stage to allow the band to take over since my sets don't use props like hers. We're talking about the success of the performance when we find Hardy, Ericka, and Tess in the hallway still.

"Hey, Tess," she beams. "I told Ethan earlier that I love that dress! Where did you get it?"

"Thank you. I made it." Tess's response isn't rude, but it isn't friendly either.

Ah. She thinks I'm fucking Shannon. I almost laugh at that.

"Shannon! How could you!" Some guy I'm assuming is Steve yells from the other side of the hall. "If you think you can replace me with a pretty boy..." He's so mad, he sputters. "Dude, I swear. Touch her again and I'll-"

Hardy pushes off the wall and rises to his full six feet and four inches. His eyes blaze with challenge. "You'll what?"

Security grabs Steve before he can get anywhere near us. "You don't have a say, Steve! We were over the moment you downloaded Hooked. Kiss my whole ass." To demonstrate, Shannon turns and bends shaking her ass in his direction, then pats it. "That's the closest you're ever getting to it! Fuck you sideways, bitch." She holds up both middle fingers until he is pulled out of sight.

Her smile is huge when she turns back to me. "Thanks, Ethan! I told you that would work." She sighs like she's just inhaled fresh air. "Ah, the power of showing a man the repercussions of cheating without actually having to cheat. Winning. Whew, that was a long two weeks."

"Wow, you actually stayed with someone for two weeks? I'm impressed." Hardy whistles.

“Yup. That revenge was so fun. I locked him down yesterday, sexed him into a coma. Left him on read all day, then boom! A dance performance with Ethan.”

I point at her, but she rolls her eyes and nods before I can speak. “Yeah, yeah, yeah. Be petty on my own. No more using Ethan for a prop. I got it.”

“You wouldn’t have these issues if you let me and Ethan double team you,” Hardy suggests, like he offered her water.

Shannon sucks her teeth and starts to walk off. “Um, no. Don’t you have a policy about not fucking your employees?”

Hardy shrugs. “Meh. Ethan is your boss, not me.”

Chapter 9

Tess

DECIDING TO CROSS FROM A FRIEND TO LOVER IS A BIG DEAL that requires deep thought and kid gloves. Sure, it'd be fun to jump Ethan's bones, but I have to ensure it's not a rash decision that'll doom us forever. He's right. I heard it and I'm trying to unravel my thought process. I must make sure I'm seeing who he is today. From our first meeting, I placed him in the man-whore category and haven't looked back since. I was perfectly happy with our friendship as is until he didn't invite me to Miami. I could have asked and pressed the issue, but at the time, I didn't want him to feel obligated to bring me along while he's trying to do what single men do. Having your female best friend attached to your ass while trying to get some is counterproductive.

Over a week ago, I understood that. I agreed even. We joked all the way to the airport where I gave him a big bear hug and double checked if he had condoms so he wouldn't catch anything. Then waved like a proud mama sending her kid to school. The next day, I'd seen the pictures of the beach and snippets of video of Ethan and Hardy living their best life and began to feel some kind of way. Then Shannon - a woman he never talks about - started to annoy me out of the blue.

The lack of communication from Ethan didn't help. It forced me to realize we talk all the damn time and this radio silence was opening my eyes to different possibilities. I'd gotten one text from him the entire week and nothing else. By Thursday, I was in tears. I couldn't understand why I was so sad and he woke me up Friday morning. Then the butterflies. My nipples hardened to the point of hurting when his hand

cupped my breast. The way he speaks coupled with him being in my bed holding me. Every time his hand landed in one of my zones, I wanted them to stay. I wanted to let him explore, but I also got a glimpse of how it'd be if he didn't talk to me and that scares the shit out of me.

I wanted to kill Ethan and Shannon Saturday night, but then he did my song. It was so sexy and I felt he sold the hell out of the vulnerability - he seemed to want to ask someone those questions. That side of him - soulful and complaintive - is his sexiest side of all. I was stuck and falling harder than I thought possible.

After the fall out I witnessed, it was obvious that Shannon isn't the one who'd given him the scratches. However, I don't know if it's good or bad. Like what if all this confusion is for naught and he's having a whole secret love affair? We had dinner after we left Hooked and had fallen back into our usual banter. It felt great to have that easy conversation we've had over the years. Emotions aren't helping so, I decided to employ critical thinking and I can't do that under Ethan. I'm not avoiding him, but I'm not easily available due to throwing myself into work.

I'm concentrating hard on folding some shirts perfectly for the display when the bell chimes. Looking up, I greet a new customer. Usually, small boutiques like mine and Ericka's have regulars. I've never seen this stylish woman before. Black woman. Sleek bob with not a hair out of place. A rich brown skin tone similar to mine. Her fitted pantsuit is designer and so are her shoes. *Ooh, outfit goals.*

I wave since she's on the phone and giving the person on the other end the business. She smiles briefly but turns to look at some clothes while she finishes her business. She ends the call with a threat, then turns sunshine on me like I didn't hear the conversation.

"You have such a charming boutique! Are you the owner?" She asks with genuine curiosity.

"Co-owner. I'm Tess." her smile widens at my name and she shakes my offered hand.

“I’m Talia. It’s very nice to meet you!” She looks around, her interesting brown eyes taking in everything. “This place has promise to be so much bigger. Not size, but known. Do you only have the pre-ordered clothing or do you offer a custom service?”

“A small one. I’m working on getting a line put together. Do you have something in mind that you don’t see here?”

“Great response! You saw an opening and took it. I like you. There are some pieces I like,” she says moving back to the rack she was perusing while she was on her call. “I love these. She holds up a crop top. I wish this was purple.”

I pull out swatches. “Which shade?”

She runs a manicured finger over the options. “This one in medium.”

“Okay! Fill out this form, please. I’ll contact you when it’s ready.”

She nods and accepts the form and pen. “Ring me up for the rest, please.”

I finish the transaction by the time she’s done. “And just think, I’ve walked past this building almost daily and eat across the street often.” I get a whiff of her expensive perfume when she leans in like she’s about to impart some great wisdom. “This is why it’s necessary to pay attention to what’s right in front of you, right? The best thing ever could be right under your nose.”

“Agreed,” I respond with a laugh.

She grabs her bags and looks at me one last time. “I’m a business consultant. Let me know if you have any expansion questions.”

With a wave, she floats out of the store like she owns the whole block.

I read over her order form, and we have a questionnaire asking special orders how they found us. My eyes bulge when I see the line. She marked the “other” field and wrote Ethan.

Ethan

I'm pretending like Tess isn't avoiding me. It's good for her. It gives her time to weigh her options. If we both thought like me, we'd be fucking right now. I'm at my piano, toying with my notes again when my phone rings. TS pops up on my display and I smile. My little corporate monster.

"Hi," I answer. I know she's not calling for sex. This would be out of schedule for her.

"You dirty bastard. You sneaky weasel. I was targeted. You set me up that night."

I chuckle. She's not mad. My sexy little crazy is turned on. "And?"

"And, you little asshole. She looks a lot like me."

"Ah, is that how you figured it out?" I humor her while still toying with the piano.

"I went to her boutique and ordered some clothes."

I stop playing and look at the phone. "You did, did you?"

"Yes," she hisses into the phone. "Imagine my surprise when I found out she looks like she could be my little sister?" She pauses, waiting for me to reply.

"You broke a rule, Tess."

"You just called me Tess," Sade points out.

"I'm aware. You break a rule, you lose privileges. Your name is a privilege."

Her gasp is full of arousal. "Or you've been looking for the opportunity to call me, Tess."

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

“Where are you right now?” She whispers her question.

“That doesn’t matter either. No dick until I say so and you will open your legs no matter when I show up, even if I have to fuck you in the conference room during one of your meetings. Understood?”

“Fine.”

“Is that the response I want?”

“Yes, E, I understand. I want to be mad.”

“Be mad and whatever else you want to feel. And channel it through sex because horny is the only thing you’re allowed to feel around me.”

“Grrr. You’re so arousing!”

I smile and rub my hardening dick through my pants. I know the next time will be the last. It’s one thing to confuse Tess out of her comfort zone. It’s another to keep giving her mixed signals.

“Much better. You could’ve been getting this hard dick right now, but you don’t know how to behave.” She groans. I slip my hand in my pants and start stroking myself. It’s fucked up. The original is avoiding me and the surrogate is in time out. “Another thing, I just might moan her name as I fuck you since you like to break rules.”

I hang up because there’s nothing else to discuss. Don’t worry about Talia though, I know we’re doing the same thing.

“*Fuck*,” I mumble as I rise to get in the shower. I toss my phone on the bed en route to some relief.

Turning away from the spray, I palm the wall with my left hand as my right works to relieve my affliction. I keep my strokes hard and rough while imagining fucking Tess hard. The orgasm hits me fast and almost buckles my knees. I lean against the wall and pant until I regain my energy.

Lathering my body, I move over my plan and what needs to be done. First, normalcy. wing night. Finishing my shower, I return to my room and retrieve my phone.

Me: Get unbusy and meet me at our place at seven.

Tess: I'm doing inventory.

Me: Seven, Tess.

An easy dinner gorging on wings and alcohol should do the trick. I'll work on unraveling our friendship later. It sucks, but I have to kind of mess up our friendship to push Tess out of the "what if" protective mode.

She doesn't respond to me until I'm finished getting dressed.

Tess: Fine.

It doesn't take me long to get to our spot. We love it for the good wings, atmosphere, and the location. With it being within walking distance, we don't have to decide who'll be the designated driver.

I nod at the hostess and take our usual table. After I order our drinks, I stare unseeingly at the menu as a memory hits me.

Tess took a shot and whooped like she'd just won gold in the Olympics. We'd taken full advantage of the drink specials and were both in a terrible decision making mode.

"We should get home," I slurred and threw money on the table and grabbed her arm. She'd had a bad day, and I'd offered to bring her to my spot.

"We need to come every Wednesday," she suggested as she teetered on her heels. Wrapping my arm around her, I guide her back to our complex.

"Sure," I promise. "It's a date."

"Date?" she giggles, covering her mouth like she has to be quiet.

"What's so funny?" I ask, although I'm laughing with her.

"You. Are you capable of dating?"

We enter the building, and I usher her to the elevator.

"Yes. I am."

“Speed dating, maybe,” she laughed harder and leaned her head on the elevator. “You get it? Each is over fast. Multiple in one night.”

The door dinged, and we headed to her apartment. I grabbed the key and unlocked it for her. “I’m able to date like a regular person, Tess.”

“You are?”

“Yes. For the right person,” I confirmed as I pulled her into the apartment. She pushed me and we fell on the couch with her on top. Leaning in, she pecked me on the lips. I grabbed her head and made the kiss linger.

“Gah. If I was the one-night stand type of girl, Ethan, I’d say strip.”

“And what if I offered you more than one night? Forever even.”

Tess guffawed and smacked my chest as she climbed off me. She moved toward her room as she stripped.

“Don’t be silly, Ethan. Once a hoe. Always a hoe.”

“I’m here,” Tess announces to bring me back to the present.

“Hey,” I greet her as she lowers into her chair. She’s studying me and I already know why.

“One of my friends called and said she visited your boutique.”

She nods, and her face scrunches while she tries to pose the question rattling in her head.

“I met her at a bar while she was celebrating her divorce. She’s one hell of a business consultant.”

I leave at that because when the fuck does a single man have to explain so much about his personal life? Besides, Sade only did this to get punished.

“Do you want the same flavors or should we get frisky and try a new sauce?”

“Same,” she answers, but her mind is somewhere else.

“Alright.” I tap the table and get up because I order from the bar. The bartender is a friend of mine and he always gets my stuff right.

I find an empty spot and step up to order. “Yo, Eric.”

Eric, a black guy with waves and dimples, slides down the bar and fist bumps me. He looks to my usual spot to see if Tess is with me. “Um, thirty count wings, equal number of drums and flats. Ranch for the lady and blue cheese for you. Spicy. An order of lightly salted fries.”

I nod, impressed. “Wow. I’ll just wave next time. You have it covered.”

He shrugs. “You and your girl are in here all the time.” I don’t correct him.

“Oh, my! Is that the real Tess?” I hear in the accented English.

Maya is standing next to me, dressed up with a full face of makeup.

“Hey,” I hug her. “What brings you this way?”

“My date!” The excitement in her voice is adorable.

“Really? On a Wednesday? Here?”

Her face drops and I curse myself for making her worry. “Why? What does that tell you? I’m I being played? I don’t have time to be played.”

“Calm down. It could look like that on the surface, but it’s not one answer to such things. It all depends. He may have a job where Wednesday is his Saturday. And you could be stopping here before the next activity to talk and because they make damn good drinks. Trust yourself. I know dating is new to you, but you’ll be fine.”

She laughs. “Sorry. I’m nervous. Tess is really pretty. I can see why you’re enamored.”

“Thank you. Get up and turn.” She does as I ask. She has on dark skinny jeans and a cute navy top that gives just

enough cleavage. “Good pick. You’re sexy, but don’t look like you’re trying too hard. Don’t put too much hope in your first date, but keep an open mind.”

“Right.” She takes a shot and shakes off the nervous energy. “I got this!” She gives me a side hug. “Get over there and claim your woman. She looks contemplative.”

“Talia visited her today.”

“No! Did she get all territorial?”

“Nah, curiosity was killing her. She actually offered business advice,” I tell her, thinking about the text I got after I hung up.

Maya shook her head. “Oh, Talia.”

Eric slides me the drinks and I nod. “Good luck, Maya.”

Tess is texting, and she puts her phone away when I sit back down. “Here’s your drink.”

I pass it to her and she offers me a weak smile. “What’s wrong, Tess? Long day?”

“Somewhat,” she pouts. “Maybe a long week.”

I nod, then sip my drink. “Well, drink up then.”

She takes a weak sip and my hopes for a normal night seem to be dwindling by the second.

“Okay, what’s really wrong? You’ve been extra sulky, and it goes beyond being tired.”

She sighs and takes a bigger drink. “I know you flirt for a living, but could you shelf it when we go out? Like you dragged me out of inventory just to go flirt with some woman. It’s like I’m in Ethan-land surrounded by women.”

I scrub my face because this not-really-best friend-yet-somewhat-jealous-girlfriend-mode is getting old. I know she’s just now catching up to the feelings I have for her, but I didn’t interrogate her when she’d gone on dates. In the beginning, I knew my feelings from day one.

“I’d prefer for you to ask me questions instead of accusing me of the same damn thing every time I’m not in your sight. How about you act like my best friend instead of whoever this judgemental person you’ve become?”

She leans back and folds her arms and narrows her eyes at me. “I’m not judgemental. I’m just pointing out what happens. You know, like when you have that one friend who drinks heavily and you feel like every time you go out, you have to be the designated driver?”

The server puts the wings between us, but I just nod at her comment.

“Oh, yeah? Did you just compare me to a heavy drinker like I have a compulsion to flirt? Tell me about a time you had to watch me flirt with someone.”

Her eyes widen with surprise. “Just now.”

“And before that, Tess?”

She looks around. “Well...” she sputters.

“That’s what I thought,” I look over my shoulder and back to her. “And my friend, you accused me of flirting with a minute ago. What’s she up to?”

Tess looks over my shoulder to find Maya holding hands with her date as they talk over drinks. She looks down at the wings she hasn’t touched.

This is the hard part. Other times I would have looked over her comment or tried to appease her, but now I know limbo is uncomfortable. I have to move up the timeline and take her to the uneasy part. She has to get out of the umbrella of our friendship and make the hard decision. The fear of breaking us cannot exist. It’s all or nothing. I’d love to give her all the time she needs, but arguing about stupid shit will kill us faster than anything else.

“Don’t do that,” she fights back. “Don’t act like I’m crazy. I may not have a time to name, but you and I know you do. How else do you meet women to screw and get scratched?”

I hang my head because the next part may hurt her feelings, but she needs to hear to move out of this phase.

“Honestly, as my best friend, that’s none of your business.” She stares off at the television, but I continue. “You have no say in who, when, how often, or why I fuck. Those are girlfriend concerns. You have no idea what I do all day, but somehow I’m a fuckboy from sunrise to sunset. What do you want from me, Tess?”

She doesn’t respond and I hate that she’s on the verge of tears, but it had to be said. I’ve paused the majority of my life to shove myself up her ass, and she’s just now acknowledging that. I’d spent a solid seven months with no sex, no girls, no flirting, and a dry phone log, but she didn’t even notice. It’s not all her fault. I wasn’t yelling at her to look at what I was doing, but she should have noticed an entire hiatus. Instead, she called me a hoe who’s incapable of changing my stripes. I’d only put myself back in play to keep from gnawing off my arm or going at her aggressively.

There is so much I love about her, but she cannot keep attacking my character. At the risk of losing it all, I stand and lean forward with both palms flat on the table.

“I don’t know what this is, but a best friend withholds judgment and a girlfriend trusts. You’re not doing either right now.”

“A girlfriend would not trust you with scratches on your body.”

I snort and reach in my wallet and drop some money on the table. “Correction. If I had a girlfriend, the scratches would be hers. Call Ericka. I’m out.”

Chapter 10

Tess

ERICKA PICKS UP ANOTHER FLAT AND I FROWN AT HER. THE flats are mine. Ethan knows this. It's not like I'm eating them anyway, but he at least knew the drill. I sit on my couch, staring off into space. I keep seeing him walk out. It hurts like a bitch. I've lost my damn mind. We've lost our minds. This isn't the thing friends argue about, right? Yet seeing him smiling at me like he wants to see me naked, and how he unconsciously bites the pad of his thumb when he's thinking is messing me up.

His plaid shirt clung to his body, but enough buttons were undone to show glimpses of his chest. Then he'd gotten up wearing my absolute favorite pair of jeans and a boot combo. When that pretty woman approached him and he hugged her, irrational jealousy kicked in again.

“So are we gonna talk about it or am I supposed to eat half for you to tell yourself Ethan stayed?”

“Why do you hate him?” I ask while continuing to study my toenail polish.

Ericka laughs and shakes her head. “I don't hate him. I literally repeat back to you things you say to me about him. I hardly know him. These are the things I know about Ethan on my own. He's damn hot, he smells good, can rock the hell out of a song cover, and he does things for you like eat the drums because like nobody wants the drums. Oh, and until now he's usually stuck up under your ass.”

“Then why do you always call him a hoe?”

“Because that’s what you think, and I only say it to avoid the look you have right now.”

I look up at her and watch her continue to eat my food. “What look?”

“The my-world-is-falling-apart-without-Ethan look. You’ve had this man in the surrogate boyfriend category for years. It was only a matter of time before one of you noticed.” She shrugs. “So I call him a hoe to see when it’ll start annoying you.”

“Why?”

“Because it’ll mean you stopped lying to yourself about where you really want him.” She lifts her arms above her head and starts grinding in the chair to illustrate her point.

I throw my pack of tissues at her because I don’t want to get wing sauce on my pillow. “You get on my nerves. What made you so sure?”

She shakes her head and rolls her light eyes heavenward. “Um...look at him. Did you think you were bionic? No woman but his mama can have him up under her and not want a sample. Look a male with no friends other than Superhoe befriended you and has stayed in your life for years without trying to get some. You have to ask yourself why.”

“Any guesses?”

She shakes her head while she drinks. “It’s your journey, ma’am. Now, can you two argue at that steak place I like next time? Please and thank you.”

I flick her off and fall back into deep thought. Falling sideways, I lie down on the couch and I remember something from about four months ago that I’d somehow forgotten.

We were watching television when one of those rescue dog commercials came on.

“I need to rescue a dog one day. Maybe I’ll get one when I’m less busy .”

I snorted because a hot single guy with a dog is like the new tramp stamp in my opinion.

“Dogs require a lot of commitment,” I warned him. “It’s like a child who never grows up.”

He slid his eyes over at me. “I’m aware. I’ve been a pet owner before.”

I shrugged. “I’m just saying a dog is a good way to learn commitment.”

“There are some things to learn, I’m sure, but a person has to be willing to commit. It’s a choice.”

“I rescued a stray before.”

He looked at me, impressed. “Really? What happened?”

“Well. I wasn’t going to at first, but those big eyes pleaded for help. I couldn’t leave him out in the cold.”

He finished his mouthful of popcorn. “What did you do with him?”

“Nothing. He never left and is currently eating my popcorn.”

Ethan gave me a look that says my joke was fucked up, then threw his head back and laughed.

“So you want to fight?”

After a scuffle, he pinned me down - I let him since the only way to get out was to hurt him - and threatened me. “Quit playing with me, Tess. Do you know how dogs show affection?”

“You better not!” I laughed and swiveled my head from side to side. Ethan grabbed my chin and licked my lips.

“Still want to call me a dog?”

“Uncle!” I yelled.

He stood up. “I have shit to do, so I’ll let you make it.” He grabbed his wallet and placed it in his back pocket. “You know the issue with dog analogies? They’re loyal as fuck with the right owner.”

He left before I could respond. I’d never thought of it that way.

Ericka flopped down next to me on the couch and snapped to get my attention.

“Where did you just go?” She inquires and hands me a drink.

“I was just remembering a conversation I had with Ethan before. And there must have been times where he thought I was being a colossal bitch.”

“You weren’t, otherwise he wouldn’t be around all the time and singing your favorite songs and shit. You are just a victim of a female double standard.”

“What?”

“There are a set of double standards both sexes have. This one is female based. If Ethan made hoe jokes about you as much as you have about him, you would’ve fought him by now or cussed him out. Actually, you wouldn’t be the friends you are now. I’ve been your friend longer than him, but we’ve never argued about where I’m going and who I’m flirting with while we’re together. As far as you know, has he done anything remotely crazy enough to land him naked on an elevator again?”

I can’t think of anything. “Nothing I know of, but I don’t know what he does with Hardy.”

“And to quote Ethan, it’s none of your business.”

“I know, but don’t friends share? You tell me about some of the things you do.”

“True, but maybe it’s different on the male/female friendship model. Like if you went out right now and had spectacular sex, would you want to share that with Ethan? Better question. I know for a fact you’ve hooked up with someone since you’ve befriended Ethan. Did you discuss that with him?”

“I think I’ve only had sex with two guys since I’ve known Ethan,” I explain.

Ericka nods like I’m slow. “And did you rush to his apartment to tell him about it? Or did he toss any tables when

men were flirting with you at Hooked?”

“Okay, I see your point.”

“Like him if you want. Be his best friend if you want. But pick a definite path. Or the friendship that you’re trying to protect will crash and burn, anyway. This is a prime example. I’ve learned not to look for you and Wednesdays, yet here I am.”

It’s only been a week since I’ve realized I have feelings for Ethan. If this awakening of emotions has us not speaking to each other right now, what will happen if things continue this way?

“He’s a really good friend, Ericka. He knows my favorite things and will rearrange his schedule to help me at the last minute, like he doesn’t have his own company.”

“You mean like the time one of your male models dropped out before your fashion show and he left a Hooked party to fill in?”

“Or when I broke up with that one guy like two months into our friendship and he dragged me to his family reunion and made me do silly things with him like a three-legged race.”

Ericka laughs. “You told me about that. You wanted to do karaoke, and that’s when you found out he could sing in real life.”

“I side-eyed him so hard. He could have warned me. I was the only one on stage who couldn’t sing.” I smile at Ericka. “Did I tell you about the time I was PMSing and in a terrible mood and he kept getting stuff delivered to me?”

She shakes her head. “No. What stuff.”

I toy with the hem of my shirt as I think. “The first was soup for lunch. The note said he read warm stuff helps with cramping. Then he sent painkillers, socks to keep my feet warm, and chocolate. Then after I received dinner. He texted me that he left me something. It was a weighted heating pad. I slept like a baby.”

“The one you let me borrow that one time?” She sighs blissfully when I nod. “That alone would make me love Ethan.”

The mention of love shakes me. It’s crazy to think I’ve fallen, right? “What? Pimpette Ericka could fall in love?”

“See, that’s why you’re in trouble with Ethan now,” she quips.

I laugh and grip my chest. “Ouch. That’s a low blow.”

Ericka smirks. “Too, soon?”

“You think? The wings are still warm.”

Ericka sobers. “So what’s the plan?”

I rub my chin as I consider. “I guess the first step is to make sure we’re okay, then move from there.”

Chapter II

Ethan

I MISS TESS AND ALTHOUGH SHE'S CALLED AND TEXTED; I avoid her for a few days. One, she has to see what it's like to miss me and my drop-everything-for-Tess treatment. Two, I need to practice what I preach and make sure we have the same expectations for each other for now. I'm easing her out of the friendship zone without pushing her out of a moving vehicle. I've been hitting the gym hard to have something to do with my energy. Sade is still on punishment, and I don't want to pounce on Tess when I see her again.

By the time I showered and changed at the gym, I decided I'll invite her to brunch in the morning. We can make up over mimosas or some shit. I left Shannon's crazy ass in charge because although it's only around ten p.m. on a Friday night. I'm mentally exhausted. My apartment is quiet, and it hasn't bothered me until now. Maybe I should get furniture and allow people other than Hardy and Tess to visit.

Moving to the laundry area, I place the items from my gym bag in the wash and strip to add my backup clothes. I wander naked through my home, grabbing a drink from my refrigerator, then continuing on to my room while deciding between watching television or trying to go to bed.

I stop short when I notice a surprise in my bed. Tess is sleeping in the middle of my bed, snuggled up on my pillow. I smile at the cuteness of it. It's like she missed me and my scent soothed her to sleep.

Reaching into my drawer, I grab and slide into a pair of lounge pants so my dick isn't the first thing she sees if she

opens her eyes.

Bed it is. Smiling, I kill the lights, climb into bed, and pull the cover over us. I inhale her, loving the familiar clean yet slightly sweet scent of her shampoo, then lie on my back to stare at the ceiling. It's comforting being next to her, although we're not really speaking right now.

The bed shifts as Tess rolls over and snuggles on my chest like she always does. The only difference tonight is my shirt is missing.

"Please...stop being mad at me," she murmurs, still half asleep.

I kiss her forehead and rub her back. "Go back to sleep."

"I'm sorry. It's...it's been a crazy week, and I took it out on you." I am not surprised that she's still talking. That's Tess. She wants to face the issues. It isn't a problem for me, it's just we're both tired. "You're the best friend a girl could ask for, and I wasn't treating you like one."

"I accept your apology. Go to sleep, Tess."

"Ethan," she is whining a name that she should be moaning. Sacrilege.

I already know what she wants. She wants us to air out the whole issue, have a touchy feely (not the kind I like) moment and cry it out. Yuck. That's Ericka's job. We'll do it my way.

"Two," I confess.

"Two? What's two?"

"The number of women I've fucked since I've known you."

"At the same time?" It's not a jab. She's really trying to understand.

"Total. I've switched between the same two women this entire time."

"Switch?"

“Yes. They’re not my girlfriends. We know the role we play in each other’s lives.”

“Sex?”

“Mostly. One needed a confidence boost. The other needs to take breaks from being in charge of everything.”

“Sounds...complicated.”

“It’s not. They are simple arrangements. But they are just that. Arrangements. I’m not leading anyone on or fucking everyone who moves. I’m a grown man with a normal sexual appetite. Not some animal led by my dick.”

“I wasn’t trying to make you feel that way, Ethan. That’s not how I see you,” she insists, but I’m on a roll.

“I’m a man of my word. I’ve never lied to any woman who chose to get naked with me. I definitely not going to lie to a woman I’m *not* fucking. I was seriously concerned with the way they stole my clothes. When I was on that elevator, scared that I’d run into someone with a child or be labeled as a sex offender, I promised myself I wouldn’t be the same person I was an hour before. Then you saved me. I’m beyond grateful for that, but you don’t get to keep making these types of assumptions about me. Understand?”

She nods, but I feel the moisture on my chest. I reach for a tissue and give it to her.

“You don’t need to cry, Tess. Just have some faith in me.”

We lie in almost silence with our thoughts and her sniffles. She’s considering her words. I know because she’s rubbing the side of her pointer finger with her thumb. It’s what she does when deep thinking. Tess takes a breath to speak, hesitates, then finally decides to say what’s on her mind.

“You are a very important person in my life, Ethan. I don’t want to imagine it without you. I didn’t like the preview.”

Her confession strikes a vulnerable chord that extends beyond friendship. *Finally*.

Turning, I prop myself up on my elbow and cup her cheek so she can look at me in the low light. “I’m not going

anywhere.”

She studies my face as much as she can, as if it's her first time looking at me. She wants to kiss me. The longer I stay in her face, the more she considers it. I make the decision for us and turn away from her. It's a messy way to cross the line. We both need to be free of everything else.

“You can be the big spoon,” I tell her. “And respect the No Touch Ethan areas. You are by no means allowed to grab my dick.”

Her breasts press against my back as she giggles. I smile when she slings her arm around my waist. I grab her hand and hold it. It's just enough intimacy to keep her encouraged.

“Just in case you try to get frisky,” I joke before falling asleep.

Game night is a sporadic occurrence. Having Hardy come along is even more rare. It's usually not his thing, but he doesn't hate Tess or Ericka.

“Let me get this straight. She's been in your bed twice. The last time was last week. She'd missed you, was sad and vulnerable, yet you still haven't closed the deal?”

He questions as he adds more alcohol to the cart. We're doing a liquor run before we go over.

“I swear you're emotionally daft. I have loose ends. It's not the time.”

“Not the time, or are you scared that this could blow up in your face, or maybe your fantasy won't live up to your expectations?”

“Or you're jaded and are being a grump.” He pushes some of his waves out of his face to glare at me properly. “I told you the long game requires finesse. I can't just Miley Cyrus my way into this.”

Hardy shakes his head in disgust. “Dude. I don’t know which is worse: you using music artists and expecting us to know what song you’re talking about or the fact that my brain translated that and knew exactly what you’re talking about.”

“I came in like a wrecking ball,” I sing, and a decent-looking girl stops and grins at me with her overly glossed lips.

Hardy passes her his business card and pushes the cart forward without a word to her, then picks up the conversation.

“That’s the only reason I look over your bullshit. Random girls like it. And I’m all for punishment, but go fuck Sade’s sexy ass and move on if that’s the hold up.”

I wave him off. “That’s only a fraction. I have a timeline in my head and getting in her face tonight isn’t part of it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He stops to pull his phone out of his ripped jeans.

Hardy has all of the rockstar flare with none of the talent. His thick, dark waves- which provide great contrast to his light eyes- are always styled slightly messy so girls want to run their fingers through it. He’s rarely without two chains and three rings on each hand. He has enough well-placed tattoos to start conversations. His wardrobe full of button up shirts always ensures at least one tat is available for view.

“My game phone is on fire tonight,” he brags as his ringed thumbs fly over the keyboard.

Hardy has a phone for business and people who can call him more than once like me. And his game phone is for his hookups.

“Aht. Aht. Game night first. Then you can go fill your pussy quota.”

“Hurry up. Let’s go.”

We get to Tess’s apartment. She’s more of her normal self since we made up which means I can tease her again. She has on second skin jeans, sexy as fuck heels, and a crop top that shows off her light abs definition. She didn’t bother with wigs or

hair straightening, so the curls I love so much are in a cute puff at the top of her head.

“Stop drooling and let’s get this shit over with,” Hardy whispers and waves his game phone at me.

Ericka, who looks like someone set her on fire, is cute in her own stare-at-her-uniqueness kind of way. She has a good amount of curves in that little body. If someone were to smack her booty, something would bounce back.

“Where’s everyone else?” I ask as I look around.

“Um, it looks like it’s just the four of us,” Tess offers as I line up the alcohol.

“Looks like everyone was busy but me,” Ericka lies.

They keep forgetting that Hardy and I have unofficial degrees in reading women. They didn’t invite anyone else.

Hardy folds his arms and narrows his eyes at them. “Hmm. How domestic,” he quips. He rubs his beard with his thumb and forefinger as he thinks. “Fine. We’re upping the stakes. Get the shot glasses - no bullshit mixers, pull out the raunchier games. We need to place some bets, and if anyone gets fucked by me tonight, it’s your fault.”

The girls look shocked, but I expect nothing less from him. Hardy rubs his hands before he throws out his orders.

“Ethan, you and Legs are a team, and I’ll take the Smurf.”

“Smurf? Look, you oversized green bean. You and your boy will stop disrespecting my height. I will fight you.” She gets in his face as much as her height will allow, and Hardy chuckles.

“Aww!” He looks at me. “She’s like a rabid puppy. Look, this would be scarier if you knew some shit like Legs over there, but you’re dick height.”

“What do you think I’ll hit first, hoe.”

Hardy laughs harder.

“Or you can make your mouth useful since I had to cancel appointments tonight.”

If the girls don't see the difference between us, I don't know what to tell them.

"Okay, y'all. What game are we playing?" I ask to break up their bantering.

"We have the Dirty Minds board game," Tess announces with the shake of the box.

"Child's play," Hardy scoffs as he folds himself onto the couch. He's not fooling me. He's already slipped into his game face.

Tess pours some shots and passes them out. I look at her while holding the glass to see if she says anything. Ericka gives a random toast and we shoot them back. Tess and Ericka make matching faces, but Hardy and I mastered in taking hard liquor.

"Stop bullshitting and get the games started," he grumbles as he responds to another text.

"Your dick won't fall off if it takes one night off, ya know?"

Hardy gives Ericka a hard stare after she offers her unsolicited opinion. "Keep on and I will test your resistance."

I look between the two of them. I hold no hope of them being together, but I'd bet they'd fuck at least once. Only difference is he'd respect her afterward. There are things about the time before we met that he doesn't talk about and I think it's directly linked to his lack of female attachment.

My favorite scent reaches my nostrils as Tess slides into my space. "Let them bicker. It'll be easier to destroy them."

I put my arm around her shoulders because I miss touching her. "Oh sweetheart, they were going down regardless."

Chapter 12

Tess

ETHAN AND I WON THE FIRST FEW GAMES. OUR COCKINESS LED us into picking a trivia game where Hardy murdered us single-handedly. Damn him and his computer brain. Ethan hums while he cuts into some dessert since he opted to cut the drinking for sweets. I would say it's one of his weaknesses, but there's no actual proof.

I've been halfway between excited and aroused since he arrived. Ericka and I planned this game night so I could spend time with Ethan without looking overeager. I'm happy to have carefree nights with him again, but I'm able to admit that I want more. I'm also firm that I don't want it with anyone but him. I look at Hardy. He's damn sexy, but I do see the difference between him and Ethan. He has that wild look in his eyes that suggests he's still thrilled by the chase. A soft moan catches my attention and my eyes float back to Ethan in time to see him sliding his tongue over the pad of his thumb. He closes his eyes with another soft moan as he shoots his tongue back out to collect the sweetness off his lips.

I'm suddenly lost in the fantasy of him acting the same way as he eats me. I shift in my chair as I imagine the kind of pleasure Ethan would give me. I'm sure he gets pleasure from giving; it's something I want to experience. I don't remember closing my eyes, but when I open them, he's in front of me with serious blue-green eyes boring into mine. I don't know if he has an idea where my mind went, but his gaze is unnerving.

Ethan holds up his fork. "Open up, baby. Taste it."

He's called me all kinds of pet names, but this time my heart flutters. I do what he says, and the cake layered in chocolate mousse is divine, but it's not what I want. Ethan drops the fork on the plate he's holding in his left hand and uses the thumb of his right hand to collect the remnants of the dessert from my lips.

The up close view of him sucking cream off his thumb far exceeds the thrill of seeing it from afar. The television starts playing and successfully pulls me out of my trance. I look in the direction and Ericka winks at me.

I smirk as a silent expression of my gratitude. I was seconds from throwing my pussy at Ethan. He's so seductive that I'm not sure he even realizes he does it. A commercial plays "I'm So Excited" and sends Ericka and me into laughter. I know *Saved by the Bell* was touching on a sensitive subject, but Jesse was hilarious.

Ethan hums along and I swear I saw Hardy inch closer to the door. "It's a good song. Sexy."

"Sexy?" the three of us question in unison.

"Yeah," Ethan insists. I know by the way his brows dropped that he's about to dig in on his opinion. "It's a sexy song."

"When I hear it, I just think of an overworked overachiever having a breakdown."

He nods. "I remember that, but the song is so much more. It's seductive even."

Hardy doesn't give a damn. He checked out of the conversation long ago, but Ericka and I aren't convinced.

"Seductive?" I know he's the musician but I can't hear it.

"Yes," he replies after another bite of cake. They were only using an arrangement that was popular for the time, rightfully so because it's a hit but it can be used for seduction with a slightly different arrangement."

"Bullshit," Ericka mumbles as she pours herself a drink. "That song is not sexy."

Ethan puts down his plate and walks out of my place without another word. I worry for a second that he's offended, but it's not his style.

"Congratulations, you just issued a challenge that the music geek will accept," Hardy snorts before he takes another shot. "We could be here all night."

I'd love for Ethan to be here all night. Alone. Preferably naked. Ericka and Hardy fall into another hoe debate until Ethan returns with his guitar. He looks damn good with his instruments. The t-shirt and ripped jeans cling to his body in all the right ways. I rub my face because I need to get my life together. It's not easy to tell him I want him.

Ethan takes his seat and begins slowly strumming his guitar as if he's deciding on the key and tempo. He starts playing, keeping a tempo much more relaxed than the original. As we fall into the music, he starts singing deep and slow. His voice washes over me in a way it never does. It has nothing to do with my internal admission of my feelings and everything to do with how he's singing it. Seductive on purpose with more depth than he displays at work.

The lyrics come to me more than I ever paid attention. I get it now; the song is about sex. She's excited to take that step with him and is anticipating it. I zone out, watching his fingers move over the strings, wishing they were on me instead. This is bad. I'm turned on and he's not trying to seduce him.

"Well, damn. I stand corrected. Now I'm excited," Ericka jokes once he's done.

I can't move or speak. I weakly nod, then drop my eyes to my phone. The goosebumps on my skin confirm that Ethan is watching me. He wants my opinion, but I can't give him one. I feel capable of proposing. Damn men with great voices.

"I can help with that. My schedule is free for now," Hardy offers, breaking the tension in the room.

Ericka scoffs but I know she'd asked once if I were curious if they were as good as their hoeing ways suggest. I feel the curiosity will eventually get her.

“Boy, whatever.”

She delivers her dismissal with a severe eye roll, then moves to the kitchen to refill her cup. Hardy follows her. I watch as he sidles up behind her, leans over and whispers in her ear. Ericka gasps and clutches her chest since she's not wearing pearls. Her hand trembles as she takes a sip of her drink.

“Get away from me Satan,” she half yells. Hardy belly laughs as she nudges him with her elbow and power walks out of the kitchen.

He leans on the counter as he continues to smile. “You’re just mad that you want me to back my words. Scared you’ll get addicted?”

I can tell but the way her skin flushed that he said something she liked. “No, I’m scared I’d fall for your bullshit and be bored to death. Another notch for no reason.”

Hardy shrugs as he rubs his bottom lip with his thumb. “You might die, but boredom wouldn’t be the cause.” His phone goes off again and his smile is almost sinister. “Time’s up, y’all. I’m moving to my next *activity*.”

He stops and turns right before he leaves. “Apparently, I need a date to the prom. I’ll send you the details on the colors we’ll wear, Tinkerbell.”

Ericka does one of those minute long eye rolls with fluttering lashes and everything. I’m so amused by their exchange that I decide to shelve the ‘prom’ comment for now. I don’t know what he’s talking about, and Ethan hasn’t mentioned anything.

“First you’re too old for prom and second, I didn’t accept.”

Hardy gives her a bored look. “And I didn’t ask.” His voice has so much authority that it even gave me a thrill. It’s polarizing to see both Ethan and Hardy use seduction skills they used to reserve for conquests on us. “Like I said, I’ll send you the details.”

He salutes us, then closes my door and ends Ericka’s chance for rebuttal. I move my eyes from Ericka, who’s sitting

on the couch trying to pretend that Hardy's bossiness wasn't sexy, to Ethan.

His eyes soften before I can read the intense look he was giving me. I don't know the cause, but I know my stomach flipped. While we may not be at odds, our relationship has changed. I can feel it.

Chapter 13

Ethan

THE SEXUAL TENSION BETWEEN TESS AND I WAS PRETTY HIGH at game night, so I backed off just a little to give things time to cool down. The more she wakes up to the possibility of us, the more she subconsciously requests the romantic kind of attention from me. I'm more than willing to give it but we're not at the sweet spot yet. Plus, I have a loose end that I've been allowing to simmer.

To keep her from being suspicious, I barge into her apartment with my unauthorized copy of her key like I would have any other day.

"I'm hungry," I announce before I see her, not realizing that I've unintentionally used a double entendre.

Internally, my body ceases like I'm about to swallow my tongue. Tess is in the kitchen, fresh from the shower. Her little absorbent hair wrap thingy is secured to her head. She's wearing a crop top that is rich with under-boob. The thin material tells me just how taut her nipples are from the cool air exposure.

"Put on some damn clothes, woman."

Tess rolls her eyes and turns to the food she's making. "Says the guy who was naked when I met him."

It's not a dig, it's a fact that would be a little funny if I weren't having the biggest argument with my dick. It takes me a moment to respond since she's wearing a soft pink, cheeky cut lace and cotton number that begs to be ripped by my teeth. I can't handle this much violence early in the morning.

“Besides, I’m at home minding my business,” she adds. “Unlike you.”

I tear my eyes from the juiciness that are her ass cheeks, to lock gazes with her. She’s looking at me over her shoulder, but breaks eye contact first to stir her eggs.

“Go put on some clothes. I’ll take care of the eggs.” My tone is an order because my ability for finesse is non-existent right now. I’m usually more tactful, but catching glimpses of what could be is making me impatient. My hunger switching from sustenance to pussy isn’t good for either of us. “Now.”

I practically growl but opt to pretend I’m speaking normally. She moves the eggs to a plate. Just that one small movement makes her ass jiggle a little, then turns to me with her arms folded.

“I know you haven’t been to my evening classes, and you skipped the one from this morning, but you do remember that I can kick your ass, right?”

“And you do know that the time it took you to say all of that, you could have been dressed, right?”

I take a step in her direction, but I don’t know if it’s threatening or pleading. Her eyes shine with challenge much like it did the morning she handcuffed me. We’re back in that space where we’re both silently challenging the other to take it there. If I were more impulsive, she would have already been lubricating my dick, but I didn’t come this far just to give in so easily.

Tess shimmies, causing her pert breasts to shake, teasing me with the possibility of seeing them fall out.

“I’m. Not. Putting. On. A. Damn. Thing.” She tilts her head, silently asking me what I’m going to do about it.

I advance, moving forward until her body is trapped between me and the counter. She’s tall, so I’m not exactly towering over her but I have enough inches over her to still be intimidating. Her eyes are naturally level with my chin, but they linger on my lips longer than necessary. Tess wants me to kiss her, not knowing that if I do, we’ll never stop. Her tits rub

my chest with every inhale. She's driving me insane while doing the minimum.

Learning in, I rest my palms on the cool surface, caging in her hips. We're damn near nose to nose and I can inhale every sweet breath she takes. I'm so hot for her I almost feel dizzy. Finally, she tilts her head back to look me in the eye. Her gaze holds all the lust I've wanted to see from her since the moment we met, but it's only desire. I'm playing a dangerous game being this close to all that I desire, but I can't get anything done from a comfort zone.

Tess's eyes roam my face, taking in how I clench my jaw. There is so much seduction in her expression.

I don't want seduction; I want total surrender. She's not quite there yet. Plucking some grapes from the bowl behind her, I stand and pop two in my mouth. Stepping back, I smirk at her, but the disappointment she's failing to hide turns my smirk into a full-blown smile.

Continuing to retreat, I walk backwards; being in her space and not acting on it has killed the remainder of my willpower for the day and it's only a few minutes before 10AM.

"Fine, I'm going to brunch alone," I tell her smoothly while trying to hide the desire that's burning me alive. "I'll have all the bottomless mimosas to myself."

I leave before she can respond. I'm not hungry for food right now.

Sade's office is posh and expensive, just like her. I'm not surprised that I'd find her here on a Saturday morning. I didn't tell her I was coming because I promised that the next time she saw me, it'd be on my schedule and she'd have to accept it. My relationship with Sade is much different from the one I had with Maya. While we consider each other friends, we don't exactly have touchy-feely moments. Maya needed a confidence boost, encouragement, and great sex.

Sade just needs dick. Well, bossy dick. She wants to take a break from making all the decisions.

It's not BDSM. That requires more than she's willing or should be giving me; she's surrounded by 'yes' men and just wants to be disrespected a little. Her secretary isn't there, but it doesn't matter because I just would have blown past him, anyway. People in her small work circle should know the drill by now. I open her door without knocking and close it behind me. Big brown eyes go from surprised to amused.

"Get the hell out. Not now," she challenges me, but I shake my head because it's unacceptable.

Her red painted lips tip up, but she rolls her eyes. "So you believe that you can hang up on me, then just show up almost two weeks later with no contact and I'm just supposed to give you some pussy?"

Her eyes fall to my hand to watch as I rub my hard dick through my pants. My impatient steps eat up the space between us. Her black dress contours to her curves and makes her tits look delicious. Her bob is sleek, with not one hair out of place. She looks poised and expensive. I ready to fuck it all up.

"That's what I know."

"I have a meeting in fifteen minutes, Ethan."

Her words come out like a purr as she watches me unzip my pants and pull out my dick.

"Push it back, then get on your knees."

"I can't." She tilts her chin with a stubborn flair and crosses her arms over her sweet tits.

We both know she's the most important person in the meeting. I'm in her face in seconds and gripping her chin.

"Shut the fuck up and do what I told you."

Sade snatches her chin out of my hand and types something on her computer.

"Twenty-five minutes," she announces, but doesn't move.

“I gave you a two-part directive. Act like you know now to follow instructions. You don’t want me questioning your intelligence, do you?”

I’ve heard her say some version of that to one of her employees. She gives me a brief smirk, but the time to play is over.

My head falls back when she sucks me into her mouth. It’s one of her many talents, but I know this is the last time. I run my fingers through her hair and laugh when she swats my hand. She hates when I touch her hair while she’s working.

I close my eyes, allowing the sensations to take over. My groan is deep, like it fought its way out of my vocal cords when she sucks me down my throat. Pulling out, I slide back in to relive the sensation.

“Fuck, this is good, but assume the position.”

It’s an overused phrase, but everyone knows exactly what it means. She rests her palms on the desk. I take my time rolling up her dress. She gave me a time restraint but should know by now; I don’t give a fuck about her rules.

Her beautiful ass comes into view, covered in underwear most women can’t afford. It’s one of the things I adore about her. I take my time rolling them down, which is something I never do.

“This is it. Isn’t it?” It’s poised as a question, but she already knows my answer.

“Yes,” I confirm as I roll the latex into place. Tess is almost ready, so no more distractions.

I’m taking my time for more than one reason. While I want to savor the moment, there is always a method to my madness. Like I said, we don’t have soul searching conversations, but she does allow little nuggets of knowledge to fall out periodically.

Resting my covered dick at her opening, I kiss my way up the back of her neck and tease her clit with my fingers. Her moans fill the quiet office as I work her with my fingers while continuing to tease her with my dick.

“Fuck, Tess really has you worked up today,” Talia teases me through aroused sighs as she cums on my fingers..

“Yes,” I enter her, slowly feeding her every inch and prolonging her orgasm. “But it’s about you right now.”

I fuck her slow and hard, running down the timer until the meeting pops up on her screen. Her camera is off and she’s muted, but it still serves my purpose. Benjamin Knox, who is always early to the meetings, face is plastered on the huge monitor. His look is somewhat rocker with longer hair, a beard, and pierced ears, but his face is stoic with an almost permanent scowl. He’s usually all business despite his relaxed appearance. Sade’s eyes practically turn into hearts whenever they’ve had business and I’ve always pretended not to notice. What she was considering as admiration is a full grown woman crush. He has dark hair, dark eyes, and a rigid personality; he’s the perfect man for her to have to peel back his layers and get to know.

In other words, Sade damn near creams herself every time he barks a command at someone. I saw the Club Desire invitation on her desk. She’d taken me the first year she’d gotten her membership, while we had some hot sex watching the action. I knew I wasn’t the right person to go with her. Benjamin seems like the right fit. Last year, I talked her into sending him the invitation anonymously, but she was disappointed that he never showed.

Gripping her neck, I hold her head back so she can see the screen. I know when she does because she clenches on me.

“So, this is the important meeting? Should we turn on your camera so he can watch?”

Her moan tells me just how arousing my suggestion is, even if her words deny it. Sade cries out when I pinch her nipple,

“Invite him to the club again.”

“No.”

“Do it.”

“Talia? I don’t know if you can hear me, but I just saw your message. I’ll just wait here when you’re ready.”

The sound of his deep voice penetrating her office makes her shiver. She has it bad. He gets up, displaying his fit body behind a simple v-neck black t-shirt and some lounge pants. Just watching him move around and doing something as simple as adding items to his blender to make a smoothie has her cuming hard. She is beyond into him.

From the little I’ve heard about him from her, they have similarities; two borderline workaholics who are tired as hell from nasty divorces.

She disappears into her bathroom to make herself look presentable. I’m decent when she comes back.

“I have something for you. After I met Tess, I knew this day was coming soon.”

“Something for me?” I ask, surprised.

“Yes, a parting gift.”

I shake my head because it isn’t necessary. They gave me what I needed. Maya and Sade were outlets to keep me from losing my mind while waiting for Tess to wake up.

“You didn’t need to,” I tell her. “You and Maya with your goodbye gifts.”

“I know I don’t need to do a damn thing. I wanted to give you something. You were the best cub a woman could have.”

I tilt my head. “Cub, huh? That’s new.”

She laughs. “I’m pretty sure me being nine years older than you and divorced makes me a cougar.”

“Maybe, but this *cub* isn’t looking for anything extra.”

“Too bad it’s already done.”

I’m not a person who can’t take a gift, but Sade is one person I went over and beyond to make sure she knew I didn’t want anything her money could buy.

“I know you’re not that sorry ass ex husband of mine, Ethan. It’s okay.” She hands me a check for thirty grand made out to my business. “Consider me an investor.” She pulls out a folder and gives it to me. “A business plan for Tess. Tell her if she follows this, she’ll double her profits by next quarter.”

I point at the computer in time for her to look over and see Benjamin lick some of his smoothie off his lips. Her eyelids flutter and she hums low in her throat without realizing it.

“Invite him again or ask him to dinner. Either way, take a chance.”

“I don’t know, E. I know I’m attracted to him, but he’s not really giving off ‘do me’ vibes.”

“Tell your pussy that.”

She laughs and pulls me into a hug. “You’re right that it was time for this to be over, but I’m going to miss you.”

I nod. We have been in each other’s lives for years, so I get it. I tell her the same thing I told Maya. “Just because the sex is over doesn’t mean you can’t call me if you need a friend. But, you won’t need to if you play your cards right. Men can be just as subtle or weary as women. There are things you can look for, though. Does he try to amuse you? Ask about your life? Turn on the camera right now without warning or unmuting. If he adjusts his appearance at all, he cares how he looks to you.”

I stand off to the side where I can see her screen but not be in view of the camera. The moment she turns on the camera, he sits up straighter, runs his fingers through his hair, and leans in closer.

“Leave him muted, pick up that pen, then turn to face me.”

She holds up a finger, silently asking for a moment, and turns to me. Since she’s standing, he’s getting a good side view of her breasts and ass. He slowly looks up, down, then up again.

“Don’t look, but I’m damn sure he just checked you out. Drop the pen.” She follows my suggestion, then bends to get

it. He sits up more as if he can see down the monitor. “Take your seat and bounce unnecessarily to scoot it to your desk.”

Benjamin’s fingers are running along his bottom lip by the time she’s ready to start the meeting. I know desire when I see it. They will be just fine.

I leave the office after a thumbs up and tuck my gifts under my arm as I call Hardy.

“I just ended things with Sade,” I announce when he answers.

“So, from two to none.”

I chuckle as I climb into my car. “No. On to the one that matters.”

“Now?”

“No, but soon.”

“It’s about damn time. I am sick of both of you pretending not to be drooling over each other.”

“Yeah, just don’t treat Ericka like the rest.”

“I’ll give her my real number after I fuck her. That’s the best I can do.”

Chapter 14

Ethan

I DIDN'T RETURN TO TESS UNTIL TWO DAYS AFTER I LEFT HER apartment. It was necessary to find my center so I wouldn't act completely out of character. I took my frustrations out on Sade, but it didn't dampen my hunger for Tess. It's like drinking soda when you need water; they aren't any really good replacements.

The time for me to put it all out there is coming soon. My caution lies in making sure she's ready because once I decide to spill the desire that I've kept buried deep, there will be no putting it back.

My inability to accept 'no' as an answer is why I took my time. Because of our friendship, Tess understands that I'll go after something I want aggressively, and if pushed I push back harder.

I let myself in again, not because I'm a glutton for punishment, but because she expects me to act as if I didn't strongly consider fucking her where she stood last time. My sigh is internal as relief floods my body. She's not almost naked this time. Instead, she's surrounded by swatches of fabric as she looks over her designs.

"Did you get lost on the way to brunch?"

I see the jealousy. She's much better at hiding it, but I zero in on it like a homing beacon. The slight pout of her bottom lip gives it away.

"No, I went to brunch."

I leave it simple because it's true. I needed food and alcohol after leaving Sade's office.

"Where? Egypt?" She questions with a frown.

I stroll over and drop on the couch and rest my arm on the back. "France," I deadpan. "I wanted my mimosa to be perfect."

Tess snorts, and the puff at the top of her head bounces when she moves her eyes back to her drawing. Our conversation may seem simple, but it was our equivalent of testing boundaries. She wants to know my business and I'm telling her to mind hers. It's fine, conversations like this will stop very soon.

"What's the folder in your lap?" she inquires, although she doesn't look at me again.

Picking up the folder, I hold it out to her. "Talia sent this for you. She said if you follow this, you'll double your profits by next quarter."

Tess looks at the folder like we fucked on top of it. "Ah, so your sugar mama took you to France."

Her claws are out, but it's subtle. With a laugh, I shake my head. "I'm self sufficient. I don't have a sugar mama. I'm not as rich as her, but I can take myself to Paris, stay in the best hotel, party freely for a week while eating and drinking liberally, and still come home like nothing happened." I lock myself in her gaze, since she's looking at me again. "My pockets won't feel a thing." We stare at each other for a beat before I start talking again. "Besides, since she charges \$350 an hour for the advice she just gave you for free, I'd say she's more *your* sugar mama."

Tess huffs, then drops the folder on the table as she stands. My eyes immediately fall to her legs, since she has the most beautiful legs I've ever seen. I'm not surprised she's wearing short blue jean shorts.

"Nothing is free, Ethan."

"That report is," I counter absently. I'm more interested in watching her body move around her apartment as she goes in

the kitchen to get some water and avoid her feelings for me. It's sexy and maddening.

"For *me*," she counters as the water fills her cup, separating the ice, and reminding me that I just compared her to the very substance.

"For all," I correct. "Except Sade, who spent her time doing it."

"Yes, it was completely altruistic."

I don't miss the sarcasm.

"It was. She's my friend, not yours. I didn't ask her to do it. Why do you have a problem with the advice? You haven't looked at it."

Tess shrugged, and her brown eyes flitted to mine briefly. She has no idea how Sade is no competition for her.

"I don't have a problem like that. It's just weird getting something from one of your conquests."

Standing, we watch each other as I approach.

"Talia is nine years older than me and twice as rich. She's hardly a conquest. She's a friend."

Her lips set in a thin line as she gives me a heated look. I know what she means, but if she's going to push the issue, she needs to speak plainly. Explicitly.

"Then you use the term friend loosely."

I take the glass from her, taking a sip of the only thing that won't get us in trouble.

"Does that mean you don't believe me when I call you a friend? Because you don't believe Talia is a friend?"

She rubs her temple as she rolls her eyes.

"You FUCK her, Ethan. Not me."

Putting the glass down, I take a risk and grab her by the jaw. It's sexually dangerous for us to be so close. Plus, I haven't forgotten that she could kick my ass, but we're getting to the end of our ropes.

“Is that what you want, Tess? Do you want me to rip off your clothes and fuck you hard and deep until you feel like your lungs are going to explode from cuming too much?”

We’re a breath apart and I’m so fucking close to everything I’ve wanted for years. I swear if she says the right thing, I’d risk it all and put both of us out of your misery.

“I...” Tess takes another breath, although it doesn’t hide the desire burning in her eyes. “I just meant we’re different.”

Her eyes follow my tongue as I wet my lips. My thumb traces her bottom lip, and she unconsciously leans into my touch. I can almost taste her and I already want more.

“Then what Talia is or isn’t shouldn’t matter. Take her advice or leave it; it’s your money. As for the rest, I’ll ask again.” I lock eyes with her once more. “What the fuck do you want from me?”

I watch the war in her eyes, weighing if she should say what’s really on her mind. She’s worried about her desire wrecking our friendship but hasn’t realized that we’re not really friends anymore.

Longing rips through my body, making everything throb impatiently. I’m all in. I just need her to show some faith in me. Tess’s eyes flicker between my lips and eyes, then she moves in so slightly that I would have missed it had I blinked.

“Tess! Hardy the Hoe is so damn bossy. He said I have to wear silver because my coloring already has too much red.” Tess jumps back like we’re doing something wrong just as Ericka finds us. Her eyes jump between us as she retreats. “I’ll just come back...”

“No, it’s fine,” I tell her. For once, her timing worked in my favor. It would have been crazy to let Tess fuck me out of jealousy. We need to cross that line with clear heads. I want to be the only thing on her mind when I finally get to feast on her pussy. “It’s for the best, Ericka. Tess is wearing red. The dress I picked will be delivered tomorrow, since the prom is two weeks out.”

I give them the information as my feet take me to the door. I can't be trusted being close to Tess. I've been watched before and have no qualms about fucking her in front of her friend.

“Delivered? You never invited me, Ethan. I'd gotten another date.”

I pause at the door but keep my hand on it to stay anchored as I look over my shoulder.

“Cut the shit, Tess. You're always my date for Hooked events. Cancel it. You're not bringing a different guy unless you want me to break his fucking jaw.”

I close the door harder than I anticipated but am beyond giving a fuck. Sexual tension is suffocating me and I don't need to take it out on some dude who'd want to do the things to her that I've fantasized about for years. If anyone is fucking Tess at prom, it'll be me.

Chapter 15

Tess

“LOOKS LIKE I WALKED IN ON SOMETHING INTENSE”

I shake my head to dispel the haze of lust Ethan had me under. The energy that’s been bouncing off him lately is intoxicating.

“We had some words over Talia.”

Ericka tilts her head, making her auburn hair brush her shoulders. “Talia...” she snaps her fingers when her brain catches up. “The woman who came to our boutique. What about her?”

“Nothing much.” I pick up the folder, then join her on the couch. “It’s just that Ethan and I had a disagreement, nothing serious, a couple of days ago. He just now came back, and he had this folder. He said it was a business plan from Talia that is supposed to double our profits for next quarter.”

Ericka’s eyes grow, and she snatches the folder from me. “That’s wonderful news. Why the disagreement?”

I shrugged as I leaned back. “I told him it was weird to get a gift from one of his conquests.”

Ericka snorts. “Not for me.”

“Then he said that she was his friend. It annoyed me that he called a woman he’s fucking his friend.”

“Why? Because he’s not fucking you?”

I groan and drop my head back on the couch. “Now you sound like him.”

Sighing, I unload the entire conversation, and everything that happened before she arrived. Ericka just looks at me the entire time, then nods when appropriate.

“I almost kissed him right before you showed up.” She just looks at me with a bored expression. “What?”

“Nothing. I’m just waiting for you to admit what I already know.” Continuing with looking bored, she studies her fresh set of nails like she didn’t send me a picture of them earlier.

“What do you mean?”

She drops her hand and fixes me with the hard stare that she knows annoys me enough to talk more. I know exactly what she means, and it terrifies me. It’s like I’m split into two different people and am unaware of who should lead.

“Okay.” I squeeze my eyes shut because the truth hurts. “I’m in love with Ethan. I don’t know when it happened, but the feeling hit me hard without warning. My thoughts are jumbled, and it fucks with me. Every time he’s around me, I feel like a shy teenager with an impossible crush. I get nervous around him, which was never the case. It hurts when he mentions another woman. It shouldn’t, but it does.”

“Is that the reason you just lied to that man about a date you don’t have?”

My hand covers my face as embarrassment clouds me. “I just don’t want him to think I’m waiting at home, hoping to get his attention.”

“That’s the thing, Tess. You do want his attention. You’re better off just telling him the truth.”

I shake my head sadly. “I don’t want to lose him.”

Ericka’s hand covers mine, warming it and bringing my attention back to her. “Listen to the summary, Tess. You two disagreed. He left for two days. He came back; you argued. At this rate, you’ll lose him, regardless. Remember when you two argued over wings? You were crushed when he stopped talking to you. I know he cares about you. He wouldn’t just shrug off your feelings.”

I shudder at the thought. “It’s scary.”

Ericka nods in agreement. “I know, but you get jealous if he breathes next to another woman like he hasn’t spent the majority of your friendship up your ass.”

I blink, surprised. “He has not.”

Her head falls back as she laughs. “Ma’am! We run a business together and he still sees you more than me.” Ericks starts ticking things off with her fingers. “Wing night with Ethan. Movie night with Ethan. Hooked events with Ethan. Happy hour with Ethan. I have to pop up on you just to see you. The majority of the time, he’s here when I arrive. Then you give him the where-are-you-going moon eyes. I think him leaving you behind by not inviting you on one of his trips for the first time freaked you out. Now you notice his absences because there weren’t any before.”

I nod because there’s nothing to say. She’s right. I always miss him when he disappears. I just didn’t realize I was spoiled by his presence.

“You have to decide which is scarier, telling him how you feel or losing him to someone else.”

After our talk, Ericka and I looked over the plan Talia sent. Like he said, it’s a solid plan that speaks to her vast experience. Ericka took it home to study it more since she’s on the marketing side of our business and I was left with my thoughts of Ethan. We won’t know unless we try, but I get nervous every time I think of crossing the line. We can’t go back, but we aren’t the same either way. I’d fallen asleep trying to think of the best way to broach the subject, only to be awakened by the delivery man.

My jaw dropped when I opened the box. I’d recognized the silver embossing anywhere. With shaky hands, I pulled the dress out of its packaging. The red material slipped through my fingers effortlessly. Between the quality and designer, I

didn't need to go on the internet to know it cost over a thousand dollars for him to get it for me.

I slipped into it without hesitation. It fit almost perfectly. I considered things like how I'd take my breasts to keep them from spilling out of the low V and the accessories I'd wear as I turned in the mirror looking at all my angles. The low back and hip high split ensured I'd be a sexy date. Soon, I found myself imagining how it'd be for Ethan to remove it.

The "Prom" will take place in San Antonio, which is about a two and a half hour drive. It ensures we'd get a hotel room. Forcing my thoughts off the upcoming trip, I gasped when I remembered something. I've seen this dress before. Ethan and I had gone to The Galleria, where I'd pointed out that I'd get the dress if I could afford it. Our boutique does well enough for us to pay our rent and live comfortably, but I'm not *buy fifteen hundred dollars' dresses for the hell of it* rich.

My alarm reminder to get ready for work pulled me back to reality. I carefully put away the dress and rushed to get ready. On my way out, I sent Ethan a thank you text and enveloped myself into work.

It wasn't until I was home, showered, and with the covers pulled up to my chin, that I realized that I hadn't heard from him all day. Prior to realizing my feelings, I used to be able to fall asleep almost immediately.

Now, the cover swishes as I move my feet back and forward while I stare at the ceiling. Giving up twelve minutes later, I climb out of bed and grab my phone and keys. I ignore the people looking at my tank and shorts pajama set with matching bonnet as I ride the elevator to Ethan's floor. It may be damn near midnight, but I reserve the right to pop up on him the way he does with me.

I'm relieved and stressed to find him in his kitchen making a smoothie, wearing nothing but his boxer briefs.

"Well, look at this double standard," I tease him with a smile.

Ethan looks over his shoulder with a grin and points at the smoothie. “Want some?”

I do, but it’s not his smoothie. I fold my arms and give him a stern look like he does me. “Put on some damn clothes.”

He takes a sip as he walks in my direction. “I’m not putting on shit,” he mocks me with a shimmy.

It steals my breath with how effortless he looks so damn good and seductive. The low light highlights the dips and curves of his sculpted body. His freshly washed hair falls in his face, reminding me I’m one of the few people who get to see him unfiltered and completely relaxed.

He tilts his head to study me when he gets closer. “What’s wrong, Tess?”

“I should have thanked you yesterday and left it alone. Ericka is eating up Talia’s plan like it’s an information buffet.”

He nods and continues to sip. “Good.”

I do my best not to stare at his ass when he goes back to the kitchen, opens the refrigerator, and swaps the smoothie for water.

“And you can label Talia however you want.”

“I know,” he states simply, then grabs my hand to lead me to his bedroom. I want to be annoyed, but we’ve been at odds too much lately and I’m sick of it. Plus, I’d like to think he’s leading me to his room to make love. “My title for her isn’t bothering you. What’s the actual issue?”

Ethan lets me go and sits on the side of his bed as he drinks his water. I know he’s been asking what I want from him and the answer is everything. I almost tell him the truth, but pull back to a partial truth. I’ll wait until the prom event to have it out. We’ll be in a different city and unable to retreat to our comfort zones.

“I didn’t realize how much time we spent together until you weren’t around. I missed you and wasn’t expressing that properly.”

“And you feel people like Maya and Talia were taking the time I’ve allotted for you?” The amusement in his voice is unmistakable.

Tired, I sit on the edge of the bed and look at him. “What’s funny, Ethan?”

“Tess, I’d have to move in with one of them to even recoup a fraction of the time I’ve spent with you. I didn’t spend a weekend with Talia. I saw her for one hour and spent the rest of the time harassing my mom. I felt like you needed some time alone, so I gave it to you.”

I climb further into the bed so I can face him. “No. I’m used to fun-day adventures. I wished you would have asked.”

He grabs my hand and pulls me closer. “And I wish you would have called.”

I smirk at him while fighting the urge to get lost in his blue eyes. “Fair point. We’ll use our words.”

Ethan settles under the covers and pats the space next to him. “Come here.”

My body tingles like he means it in a different way. “You’re tired?”

“No, but you are. You’re usually asleep right now. Come, rest knowing you’ll never be replaced.”

I accept the invitation and climb in next to him. Ethan tucks me close to his side after he turns off the lights. Making me relax the moment my head falls on his chest. I breathe him in. I fill myself with anxiety from the notion that I may not be able to do this one day.

“You will fall in love eventually, Ethan.”

“So will you, Tess.” *I already have.* “But you don’t have to worry about me, there’s only one Countess.”

His laughter when nip at his side brings a smile to my face. “Don’t get beat up in your own place, Ethan.”

He sobers and turns to me more, wrapping me in his arms, then kisses me on the forehead. “We’ll spend the day together

tomorrow. How's that?"

I'll come clean at prom; I'll just live in the moment for now. "I'd love that."

Chapter 16

Ethan

I KNOW WHAT Y'ALL ARE THINKING. I'M MANIPULATIVE. IT'S true I have my moments. It's hard to be a professional wingman without some manipulation, but I always use it for good. I know what's wrong with Tess. I just need her to admit it to herself, which is why I've made plans to woo her at prom to ensure she's had ample time.

It started with the dress-a sexy designer number that I knew would make her drool. Then I will give her all the attention she's been craving to ease her into the idea of us. Finally, by the time we get to prom, she'll be undeniably ready to receive what I've been wanting to give her since we met. No, I'm not talking about my dick. I mean my heart. Disclaimer: my dick comes with my heart.

I've spent my time between work and Tess, which she likes since we haven't had another disagreement in almost two weeks. We're a day out from the event, the plans are laid and my song options are picked. All that is left is for me to make her mine.

Our intimacy has gradually increased without crossing the friendship line. Fuck, I want to cross every line possible. Impatience is riding me like a well-paid whore. We've spent most of our nights together, swapping where we sleep. Last night was spent at her place.

Tess is still in my arms when I awaken. My smile is short-lived once the rest of my body wakes up. Her soft, warm ass is pressed against my front. With a grunt, I drop my hand on her naked side where her shirt rode up. Her skin pebbles under my

touch, making the smile return. I love knowing how easily she is affected by my touch. I bow my back to stretch in the position I'm in, not caring that she can feel every hard inch of me.

My soon-to-be girlfriend opts to pretend to be still asleep, although I know she's not. In fact, I know she woke up before me. I strengthen my hold on her to hug her from behind, then drop a kiss on her bare shoulder. It's cute she tried to suppress her shudder. It doesn't matter. I already know how she feels about shoulder kisses.

"Good morning," I greet her as I let her go.

"Morning," she mumbles, but turns around when I climb out of bed.

Everything she feels is in her eyes, whether she knows it or not. Those light brown orbs of hers are filled with lust and the unspoken plea for me to get back in bed. I'd love to, but if I do well both be naked in seconds.

Choosing the safe option, I disappear into the bathroom and get ready for the day. When I return, she has some control over her expression, like I have over my dick.

"So, reminder. Hardy and I are going to San Antonio today to make sure everything is ready and in order. You and Ericka will meet us there tomorrow. Just a reminder. You two are our dates." I fold my arms and scowl at her. "Y'all better not get amnesia and forget between now and tomorrow. We don't want to have to fight y'all." I swing in the air. "I hate for you to catch these hands."

Tess laughs so hard that she falls on her side. "More like *you* don't want to catch these hands," she reminds me with a fist shake.

"Yeah, yeah," I dismiss, although I'm fully aware that she could kick my ass.

It's funny, not once did her skill set intimidate me. Maybe because my goal always was to make her love me; her fighting skills didn't matter.

"Come lock up."

I walk away, listening to her footsteps behind me, and nervousness hits me for the first time. I hope I've given her enough motivation along with leaving my very quiet unlocked phone in places where she could find it. Tess isn't the go through your phone type, but I wanted her to have that option for a limited time only. Beyond that, she needs to trust me.

"I'll see you tomorrow," she says at the door. I hear the sadness in her tone; I'll miss her too.

"Yup." I turn to look at her again. "I can't wait to see how beautiful you'll look in the dress I picked out."

I leave her blushing. I can't linger; she's too damn tempting.

The suites look good and are equipped with all of the amenities one would expect with paying top dollar. We'd considered getting a two-bedroom suite, but Hardy asking me if I really wanted to hear him make Ericka scream had me alter that plan. I know, I know. Hardy and I were wild in our college days, and such a thing would have never bothered us before. We're somewhat older and a hell of a lot more mature. We know when exposure is unnecessary. Even with us still having exhibitionist tendencies, we would not do that with Tess and Ericka.

Right now, we're in the room he'd share with Ericka, hiding from our employees. He crosses a long, black pants covered leg over the other as he looks at his phone with a scowl. His white shirt is tucked in but unbuttoned enough to show the chain he's chosen for the day. His perfectly combed waves are out of his face, bringing attention to his thick eyebrows and almost clear eyes.

"The firefly talks too much. There has to be someone else she can text."

I take his phone from him, and he has two texts from Ericka. Both are under five words. The unexpected discovery

has me laughing so hard. I'm wiping my eyes when I'm finished.

"All she told you was what time they're landing and which terminal."

He snatches his phone back, still not amused. "I don't give a fuck. Looks like something for her to tell her rideshare app."

"Hardy, you made her come as your date and you want to fuck her. You can at least treat her better than your random hookups. Both of you are part of a very small circle of friends."

He purses his lips in his version of a pout. "Fine. She's not too bad to be around. Don't start expecting double dating. I don't want to have to knock you out after all these years of friendship."

"You dating Ericka or being her boyfriend is the last thing I expect or want." His head snaps up, and he has the nerve to look offended.

"I could be a good boyfriend if I wanted."

"But you don't want to be anyone's boyfriend right now, and that's fine. I'm not going to knock you if you decide to commit. I'd be the last person who could doubt you, but I'm also not stupid enough to think it'll be tomorrow with Ericka."

He nods. "I'm sure something like that will take time besides-" Hardy's phone pings again, cutting off his sentence and he checks the screen. "She's fucking texting again! She's going to make me change my number, watch."

Leaning over, I look at the display. "Dude, she's just asking if you got the other text?"

"She fucking hit send, didn't she? Of course I got it."

"Just respond."

"I think responding encourages more of this behavior, but fine." He sent "k" and dropped his phone back in his pocket. "What?" He asks when he sees how I'm looking at him.

"And you really thought, expected double dating?"

He laughs this time and shakes his head. “I see your point. Besides, you might not survive tomorrow night, anyway. You’re probably gonna explode.” He blows up his hands. “Just puff, spontaneous combustion if Tess gives you some pussy.”

With a snort, I throw one of the decorative pillows at him. I am nervous and a bit anxious about everything; I just want it all to go right. Tess means more to me than any woman I’ve ever known. The thought of us not working is terrifying. The steady hum of longing I felt towards her over the years is now a full-blown roar.

“I’m more nervous about coming clean about my feelings than the sex. You asshole.”

Hardy smirks, but notices that I’m anxious and slips into friend mode. “You’ll be fine. You two have been dancing around this. It’s what you both want, just gotta make it official. You’re just thinking too hard.”

I look at him with a half smile. “You think so?”

“Yeah, you know she wants you, anyway.”

I nod, agreeing with the obvious. “Yeah, but I need her to be in love with me because I’m in love with her.”

Hardy shifts in his seat like he’s nauseated. “Y’all have been stuck in each other’s asses for years. She must feel something.” He stands and stretches. “Enough of that. I can only talk about relationships for so long. You’re killing my vibe.”

“Okay. You’ll be my best man and I’ll be yours.”

He moves towards the door and opens it. “Get out. I think I’m going to be sick.”

Laughing, I push him on the way out. Life would be dull without him. Hardy did his job by relaxing my nerves some but I’m too amped up to focus on anything but Tess. In a little over twenty-four hours, I’ll completely pull the rug from under our friendship. It isn’t anything either one of us can undo once it’s done. I’d be devastated if I ever lost her. Life without her is unimaginable, yet I cannot let things stay the way they are now. I love her and it’s time she knows it.

Chapter 17

Tess

WE'RE A LITTLE LATE. OUR FLIGHT WAS DELAYED AND BY THE time we arrived and fought for our luggage, the guys didn't have time to get us, so we ordered a ride. Ethan sent me the digital key since he has the keycard on him. We're on a mad dash to get ready and my nerves aren't helping. I missed Ethan, and we were only apart for a day. I can no longer deny being in love with him after getting a taste of exclusive attention from him. He spent every possible moment with me after I confessed that I missed him and now I'm hooked. It felt weird going to bed without him last night.

I'm eager and anxious to get to the prom themed party. Ericka's phone pings when we get off the elevator and she starts walking in the opposite direction.

"Where are you going?" I ask her as she reads the signs on the wall.

"Hardy sent me a key."

A smirk forms on my face because they're full of shit. "So you really gonna go through with it?"

Ericka sighs and shakes her head. "I must admit, curiosity is killing me. If nothing else, he can just be my trophy date. He looks damn good. Depending how the night goes will depend if I give it up." Her lips tip up in one of her devious smiles. "Part of me wants him to suck so I can clown his ass. If the chemistry is off, I know how to book my own room. If this hotel is booked, I know how to rideshare."

I've seen them together. That's a long winded yes since they both have a one track mind when it comes to sex.

"Okay, girl. I want the details. I can't wait to hear if he lives up to his reputation." I glance at the room numbers again. "I'm to the right."

Ericka pointed in the opposite direction and winked at me before sauntering off. She had me make her dress, which is just a touch more than barely there.

I am happy the door opens on my first attempt. The last thing I needed was to waste more time having to go to the lobby. The door closes behind me after I push my way inside with my luggage. A suite. Rooted in place, I look around, impressed by what I see. Ethan doesn't spend money just because he wants the best. If he gets something expensive, it's because of the quality. I can see that in this room. It's huge with its own fireplace. Strolling deep into the room, I stop to admire the view from the window. I don't go out onto the huge balcony. I don't have time and I'd get lost in the view of the plush trees surrounding a golf course. I really am getting resort and spa vibes. Turning, my attention falls to the bed.

Although it's made, I can't help the nervousness I feel thinking about how Ethan slept there the night before and that we'll be here together in a few short hours. I almost fainted when he kissed me on my shoulder the other morning. There have been plenty of moments recently where I could have crossed that line if he were anyone else. We never did. It is frustrating.

I didn't have time to dwell. I need to take a quick shower to wash away the airport, then get ready. I'm curious to see what Ethan did for the prom.

By the time Ericka and I shower, change, and fix our hair and makeup, the party is loaded with singles, looking to make a love connection. The decor blows me away. I spend a moment taking in my surroundings. I know he has a

team, but nothing on the event side gets done without Ethan. I'm thoroughly impressed by this side of him. While he can seem like an easy going party guy, he takes his work seriously.

Pride warms my body when I think about all he has accomplished. I also feel a sheen of guilt from having him believe that I've seen him as nothing but a man whore. I'll correct it.

"It's beautiful in here," Ericka whispers excitedly.

"It is. If only my actual prom looked like this," I agree. "I'll admit, I frowned when he said the theme was Starlight like so many proms before it."

The decor and ambiance makes it easy for me to forget that I just walked into a hotel ballroom. The lights on the floor give an illusion like we're walking on glitter. The string lights hang in thin, white tendrils, providing a glowing path to the dance floor. The dark space with soft lights makes me feel like I'm stargazing indoors.

The beauty surrounding me, however, isn't what takes my breath away. Ethan slides into my field of vision. His waves are combed out of his face, enhancing his blue eyes even in the low light. He looks so damn good. I'm stuck staring without hearing a word Ericka has said. I've seen Ethan in several levels of undress but have never seen him wearing a suit. He's in an all navy suit and shirt combo sans a tie. Ethan drops both of his hands into his pockets as we look at each other. The cut of his suit looks like it was made just for him. I've tailored some of his clothes before, but didn't have anything to do with the suit that displays just how fit he is under his clothes.

The butterflies flutter in my belly, tying my insides up in knots. He's a beautiful man. Ethan drops his hands out of his pocket and starts to saunter my way while keeping our eyes locked.

1,2,3...I count inside my head to remember how to breathe. His approach shouldn't be so nerve wrecking. Hardy stops Ethan and says something to him. Ethan looks his way, breaking the trance that held me hostage.

“Wipe the drool,” Ericka teases.

I snap my head in her direction so I can roll my eyes properly. Ericka looks hot with her almost red hair straightened and falling just past her shoulders. Her dress is silver and blue. The jeweled straps occasionally reflect pieces of light. She had me design the bodice, so it cuts low enough to tease some cleavage but not have her boobs spilling out. It makes sense since her sides are almost bare. I used rectangle straps to hold the sides together while displaying so much naked skin that she couldn't wear any underwear.

The spark in Hardy's eyes once he and Ethan are in front of us tells me he has already calculated just how naked his date is in public. His eyes take on a more predatory glow the closer he leans into her.

Ericka's lips stretch into a saucy smirk at whatever he whispers in her ear.

“Boy, you wish.”

Hardy stands back with a satisfied smile. “No, *you* wish.”

“Hey,” Ethan whispers from behind me, making the other two disappear. Goosebumps cover my skin. He's fast. I don't know when he moved behind me. His hands grip my hips before he makes his offer. “Want to dance?”

I've danced with him before, but it all feels different. “Sure.” I don't recognize my voice but I pretend that the raspiness is normal.

Ethan laces his fingers with mine and pulls towards the middle of the dance floor. His strong arms wrap around me with his big hand splayed on my naked back. He warms me in more ways than one. I drop my head on his shoulder, secretly inhaling him like an obsessed fan.

Regaining composure, I look up at him. “You did a great job, Ethan. It's beautiful. In fact, your events are always amazing. I'm really proud of you.”

Ethan drops his forehead to mine and mouths, “thank you” with a soft smile. It's the closest he ever gets to blushing.

Shannon is on the stage finishing Rita Ora's *Body on Me*. She's just as half naked as I'd expected her to be, but she looks pretty in her lavender number that contours her body and stops just below midthigh. I stare at her shoes for a couple of minutes, thinking I need to find a similar pair. Ethan hugs me tighter when Shannon starts singing *Make Me...* by Britney Spears.

"I like this song." I say distractedly.

"Um hmm. Me too," he agrees.

I suck my teeth because very few guys listen to Britney. "No, you don't," I challenge him.

"I do. I've even performed it before."

I look in his eyes, happy to be able to have some banter with him. "Really?"

Ethan smirks and starts singing the second verse as he sways with me. The words have a much different effect coming from him, especially when he sings about going back to his room. He keeps eye contact as he sings to me. I run my sweaty palms up the muscled arms of his blazer, then lock them behind his neck. I want him to tell me everything he's singing. His hands move up and down my side and hips in concert with the song. Taking my hand from his neck, he spins me until my back is pressed against his chest.

Ethan doesn't miss a beat or stop singing. One of his arms wraps around my waist and he slowly trails his fingertips down my torso as he sings the first part of the chorus. He dips his head, wrapping me completely into his world. The hair from his beard tickles my ear and his breath teases the side of my neck. Each word wrapped in panty melting seduction. Rolling his hips in tune with the music, Ethan sings the "ooh" part of the chorus with a quality that makes it seem like he's moaning them.

I close eyes, lost in the music and him. My nipples bead as I try to ignore the dampness of my panties. He made me wet with part of a song and little effort. If he were to suggest that, we should go up to the room. I'd sprint there.

My eyes fly open when I hear Hardy's voice. He is on stage with Shannon doing G-Eazy's part of the song. I'm starting to think he likes rap more than I originally thought. I can't look at the stage too hard because I'm wrapped in Ethan's world again. He turns me again while mouthing some parts of the rap, but I can't help but stare at his lips. There is something about the way he says "sensational". I realize he's saying end of the wrap out loud. Against my volition, my body moves in more, prepared to kiss him.

"I'm next," he informs me, oblivious to my plan.

Ethan spins me out of his embrace and winks at me before disappearing towards the stage. It shows me just how cold I feel without him. Like we always do, we move forward to watch him. Hardy is standing between Ericka and me. She keeps sneaking glances at him because he looks damn good in his black on black pinstripe suit complete with a vest and tie. He looks regal and expensive.

Yeah, they're definitely going to fuck.

Ethan appears with his guitar. His blazer is missing, bringing my attention to the few open buttons displaying the top part of his chest. His pants pull against his legs deliciously as he bends; I tilt my head as he takes a seat. This isn't his usual method of performing. He never goes out of his way to play instruments or not have the backing of the band or a track. While he's a musician, his quick numbers are more about the entertainment than the art. I give him a cautious smile because I'm more curious about what prompted the change.

"Oh shit, he's going for it?" Hardy mumbles.

"For what?" Ericka and I ask in unison, but he ignores both of us and keeps his attention on the stage.

Following suit, I return my attention to Ethan, who's looking at me while he strums his guitar. I smile when he starts singing *Imagination*. It's one of my favorite Shawn Mendes songs. My amusement drops away when Ethan makes eye contact with me. He doesn't do that often, but there is an intensity shining in his blue eyes that I've never seen before.

This song is mainly second person. I feel every ‘you’ he sings touch my soul, especially when he mentions craving. Craving has been my middle name lately. I’ve wanted him so much I feel like I’d be sick if I never get a taste.

I hate to think it’s wishful thinking or that I’m crazy, but my heart is racing like I’m an Olympic sprinter. I’m scared to jump to conclusions but the guitar, romantic song, and eye contact all scream *Scenarde*. My legs feel weak at the thought. *Imagination* is a song that’s about being secretly in love and not knowing how to express it.

Does Ethan love me?

He finishes the song and racks his guitar. He moves to the standing microphone as a track starts to play. I believed his second song would give me time to catch my breath, but I was wrong. Same message in a sexier delivery. *The Other Side* is about turning your best friend into your lover. Ethan, of course, is not doing the radio upbeat pop version; he’s chosen the acoustic, sexier version.

He has amped up the seduction but the romanticism remains.

“Damn, girl,” Ericka whispers. “I knew it.”

Her statement seals it for me. I’m not crazy. Just like the last one, he sings to me. My eyes track every movement he makes. Picking up the microphone, Ethan moves to where I am and drops to his knees on the stage in front of me. If this were a concert with my favorite celebrity, I’d be screaming. Instead, lust and love have me immobile. It’s surreal, but he reaches over and cups my chin as belts out the “kiss me” part.

If I were a fainter, I’d swoon. I’ve always loved his voice, but he’s never used it to seduce me. The low lights, the vulnerability in his eyes, and such public display guarantees that I’m his. I’d die if this were simply a performance.

He leans back and sings a big note. Hardy grabs my arm and ushers me up the stairs, killing every attempt to turn back. I can move him, but I’d have to hurt him.

It's too late. I'm on the stage; the crowd cheers when Ethan grabs my hand and pulls me close to him. He rests my palm over his heart and leans into my face as he finishes the last few words. Ethan keeps me in place, using his arm to secure me to his body. His tongue teases his top lip, still not in reach of mine but prompting me to follow it back into his mouth. It's only a second or two, but it feels like a lifetime has passed by the time our lips meet.

Excitement floods through my veins as his tongue expertly teases my mouth. The mic hits the stage with a loud thud, but nothing can pull me away from Ethan's kiss. I feel his moan vibrate through me. My head falls back a little when he snakes his fingers into my blow out and pulls my head back to deepen the kiss.

I'm all the way in love and my body is on fire. If I do nothing else, I must get the full experience. I need everything that his hard body and expert tongue are promising.

Chapter 18

Ethan

FUCK, I'M ADDICTED. KISSING TESS IS BEYOND ANY FANTASY I've ever had. I. Can't. Stop. It doesn't matter that we're still on stage or that I'm technically working. Hardy and I didn't plan on bringing Tess onto the stage. It's the professional wingman in him. I must admit, it was a nice touch. My dick gets harder by the second; Tess's moan almost takes me all the way there.

“Well, in case you didn't notice, Ethan's off the market, ladies. Now, you can pay attention to the men who are here,” Shannon announces from the microphone I dropped.

The unexpected PSA is funny enough to break us apart. I immediately miss kissing her and know that there's no way I can function for the rest of the party. Lacing our fingers together, I pull us quickly through the crowd to the elevator. I may look like a crazy man on a mission because I am. Another cannot exist with me not being inside of Tess. Every minute of the longing I've felt spill from my pores like sweat. The one thing you have to remember and understand is that I fell for her the moment I saw her. I used to think love at first sight was a crock of shit, but Tess proved me wrong. I've dedicated years to this moment. Tess is like the most delicious cheat meal you can fathom while being on a strict diet.

The elevator comes fast, but an older couple gets on with us. It's disappointing to have to share the space with anyone other than Tess, but I can't hide the smile on my face. It all started in an elevator, not this one, but close enough.

Tess steals a look at my profile. Her nervousness bounces off her, making it the cutest fucking thing. It took us a long time to get to the point. She's stuck with me. Our eyes meet when I look over at her. She smiles shyly at me.

"Hi," she whispers.

"Hi," I answer as she looks at me like she's never seen me before.

I stop caring about our company. My smile breaks bigger right before I grab her face and kiss her again. Lust shrouds us again as we create our own world. My dick begs to finally meet her and my willpower is depleting rapidly with every taste of her.

"Fuck, Tess. I've wanted you for so long," I confess near her ear. My lips trail from the spot under her ear and down her neck.

"Ethan, the songs...do they mean that now you..." she trails off, her eyes finishing the question she is trying to ask.

"Love you?" I peck her lips but cup her cheeks and look her in her eyes. "I loved you so long it hurts, Tess."

Her eyes get glossy. The elevator stops, allowing the elderly couple to escape. She giggles when one of them murmurs, "Thank God!"

I keep my focus on her. Once again, I find myself at Tess's mercy, but I'm even more vulnerable now than I was when she found me naked. "You've been the only fantasy in my head since we've met. I've fucked you in my mind so many times you should already be tired of my dick. It's like you're my favorite song, but I never get tired of having you on repeat."

"Damn," she sighs. The spark in her eyes tells me that she's back on her bullshit. She uses her ninja skills to push me against the wall of the elevator, then attacks me in all the right ways.

So fucking hot.

Her nails graze up my chest, guaranteeing that she'll get fucked on the spot. She looks up when the elevator stops, but

the doors don't open.

“Camera's off Mr. Cox. The traffic is rerouted,” the security guard says on the PA.

I hold up a thumb without acknowledging him any further. It pays to hand money to the right people. I don't give a fuck about the camera as long as I'm not interrupted. Quickly, I move her until she's facing the elevator's wall and I'm standing behind her. She groans when I snake my hand under the split to cup her wet pussy. The fabric of her underwear keeps my fingers from sliding inside of her, but she loves the pressure of me gripping her while I rub my hard cock on her ass.

“I know you like knowing that you can beat me up, but this is where I rule.”

Her shudder vibrates through my body and sets my nerves on fire like I've just gotten another hit of my favorite drug.

“Ethan...” she moans as she braces herself on the wall. I feel like a group of super fans are inhabiting my body. She has *finally* said my name correctly.

“Fuck, baby, that's how you're always supposed to say my name.” I cup her right breast through her dress while my other hand rids her of the material, keeping us apart.

“Please,” she pleads with me as the fabric rips.

Tess's dress is around her waist. She holds it in place like a good girl. My hard dick strains against my pants at the sight of her bare ass poked up ready for me. It juts out, hitting her ass cheek like it's been dying to smack it.

The in love part of me wants to look her in the eyes for our first time, but the horny part of me wants to watch her ass bounce as I fuck her.

“I had a plan, Tess. I wanted to savor the moment and make love to you, but I don't have it in me right now.” My fingers start working on her clit, helping her get to where I need her to be. We have to make this quick. “This,” she gasps when I penetrate her with the tip. “Will be quick and rough.”

We both grunt when I slam into her. Tess reaches back, digging her fingers into my scalp as I feed her years of sexual frustration.

“Yes, Ethan,” she moans, once again making me feel like I’ve never heard my name before.

I drop a hand on the wall to brace us. It feels so fucking good. Her pussy grips me like it knows it has found its forever dick. We don’t hide our pleasure. The sounds we make blend with the echoes of our skin desperately slapping together. Our breath is unsteady from our race to the end. I won’t go over the edge with her. I just need Tess to cum for me. Rolling my hips, I switch the pace and rhythm until I find the perfect one.

“Oh, fuck,” she groans; her head falls forward, but she doesn’t let go of my neck. She better always hold on to me.

“There are so many things I’m going to do to you tonight.”

There must have been something in my promise that resonated with her because her pussy bears down on me, holding me deliciously tight. I add pressure to her clit, rubbing her as she cums for me.

My dick protests along with Tess when I pull out, but we can’t hold up the elevator all night. It takes some maneuvering, but I’m decent when she turns around.

“You didn’t cum, did you?”

With a chuckle, I pull her close and drop a kiss on her forehead. “Oh, baby. Don’t worry, I’ll cum in your pussy several times before the night is over.”

Chapter 19

Tess

I'M STILL IN AWE AS I SHOWER. I JUST FUCKED MY BEST friend. No, wait, my best friend just confessed to being in *love* with me. Ethan and I are together now. My best friend is my lover. The world feels like it's moving in slow motion. I'm stunned. My nervousness and excitement fight to be the main emotion.

What if we fuck this up?

We were almost to the room when he got called back to the party to solve something. I didn't hear what he said because my body was still reeling from what he did to me; he didn't cum. I'm worried about the stamina I've heard rumors about when we were friends.

Can I handle him?

Shutting off the water, I dry myself some and wrap the towel around me. There is no sign of Ethan in the room. I hear the front door unlocking before I could venture into the living room. My heart jumps into my throat with each heavy footfall. I'm too overwrought to move as my nerves take over.

Discarded shoes skip across the floor, and Ethan appears as he removes his last sock. He's still in full tux, looking devastatingly sexy. His light blue eyes sync with mine, kicking my anxiety up a notch. I don't want to lose him.

"Ethan," I whisper, too scared to speak too loudly.

He shakes his head as he shrugs off his jacket. The shirt underneath is still halfway unbuttoned, giving me glimpses of

the hard chest underneath as he approaches. I'm mesmerized by him undressing piece by piece like he's the world's best stripper. His now bare chest, sculpted to perfection, rises and falls with each breath he takes. My eyes move down his chest to the V that disappears behind the underwear exposed by his open pants. His thick erection is etched into the fabric; I still feel the throb of it beating inside of me. This is overwhelming.

"No," he says as his pants hit the ground, leaving one layer of fabric between us. "You don't get to second guess yourself out of this. You're mine..." My breath hitches when his underwear hit the ground, giving me my first view of Ethan, completely nude, physically and emotionally. "And I'm yours."

The emotions swirling in his eyes are so intense; they distract me from the masterpiece that is his body. My pulse skips to a higher rate when he hooks his finger in my towel and makes it fall away, leaving me just as nude as he.

Ethan grabs the side of my neck and uses his thumb to tilt my chin up. I can't think with him this close, invading my space and clouding my senses. I inhale him as his naked skin grazes mine. I'm completely under his spell.

Ethan's kiss is rough and possessive, and fuck, I melt for him. My confusion dissolves, leaving behind the ache I've felt for him since I realized that I was pinning for him to want me this way.

My nails graze his biceps, pulling a moan out of him that makes me wonder how I've gone this long without trying to cross this line before. Now that I know his kisses, I can't be without them. I need more of him, more of this.

My juices leak, trailing down my thigh in anticipation of the full course his appetizer promised. Just the thought of his dick stretching my pussy again has my nipples achingly hard. As if hearing my thoughts, he dips and wraps his hot mouth around my hard flesh, pulling a needy whimper out of me. Ethan feasts on my breasts, switching between sucking and pinching until I feel close to getting off from nipple play. He's

just getting started and I already feel like he's marking me and branding my body with his.

I fall on the bed, not sure when I got there, but Ethan has my legs splayed, revealing my most intimate parts to him, as he kneels between them. The visual is enough to make my walls clench with anticipation. His eyes sparkle with desire. I know he can see how wet I am for him.

Ethan places a kiss on my clit like it's my cheek. It's a sweet gesture that makes me throb even more. I've fantasized about a moment like this more than I want to admit.

"Your pussy is fucking beautiful, Tess. Beyond all my fantasies."

The awe in his voice is almost enough to get me off. I see why he's such a potent drug, he has me climbing for a peak and he hasn't done anything yet. Ethan explores every part of me with my tongue, leaving not one lip or crease untouched as he teases me. I squirm, trying to get the friction I need, but his strong hands hold me open and at his mercy.

"Ethan, please," I beg as I tease my nipples to add an extra layer of sensation.

His sapphire eyes watch me tease me as his tongue continues to work. His mouth wraps around my clit, sucking hard and sending a jolt of pleasure through me. Ethan moans against my pussy like I'm the one pleasing him. That expert tongue of his dips inside, swirling like he's trying to get the ice cream at the bottom of a cone. The precise flick of his tongue has me quivering as I cum on his mouth. Ethan doesn't let up. Two of his fingers dip deep inside of me, prolonging my orgasm as he works to pull another one out of me.

"Damn," I mutter as I ride his mouth as much as he'll allow. I'm desperate for the chase and I don't care how that looks.

My chest is tight, as if the desire is going to suffocate me in a way only Ethan can create. By the time we get to the third orgasm, I'm gripping his hair and squeezing him with my thighs. There is a price for ecstasy, and I'm delirious with it.

He releases me from the death grip his mouth had on me and slowly licks his lips like my taste is a souvenir.

“You taste so fucking good baby, I could eat you for hours.”

My core clenches at the thought, but his dick steals my attention. He runs the head of it up my slit and smacks my clit with it. It looks like a fantasy dick that I’ve crafted just for my pleasure. I reach for it but he pushes me back with a hand on my shoulder.

“Only one part of you is going to be touching my dick right now.”

He steals my breath in one stroke, forcing my back to arch off the bed. He fills me more than he did in the elevator. The way his eyes close like he’s savoring the feeling of being buried inside of me adds to the ultimate feeling of connection. His feet are still planted on the ground and he walks his hands up the bed until he’s hovering over me. It’s a beautiful sight, seeing his biceps and chest muscles bulging. His abs ripple when he rolls his hips to tease my walls.

He’s a fucking beautiful sight. All the seductive energy I knew he had is one-hundred percent focused on me. His eyes are glazed with lust as he looks down at me.

“Learn this dick, Tess. Love every inch of it.” His words are emphasized, but the slow, hard stroke each roll of his hips delivers. “Because you’re not fucking allowed to let go.”

I pull my legs up, resting my feet on the edge of the bed as Ethan devastates my pussy. Each stroke is designed to deliver ecstasy while his gaze eats me alive.

He grabs me under my knees and pulls me hard onto his dick. I cry out from the combination of pleasure and pain, happily taking it all. My nails dig into his shoulders as I do my best to match his intensity. Instantly, I understand now how he was always scratched up. That reminder sparks a moment of jealousy so intense that my nails dig further into his skin than I intended. I fear Ethan is going to be mad, but his eyelids

flutter with pleasure and he rolls his head to the side like the feeling is euphoric.

He wraps his hand around my throat.

“Fucking mark me like you mean it.”

He arches his back, changing the trajectory of his thrusts and digging deeper. Ethan licks my lips when my mouth falls open while never missing a beat. His aggression and the light sheen of sweat covering his body shows me an Ethan I can only get like this. There’s something animalistic and possessive about the way he’s fucking me.

He bites my chin, causing the high I was chasing to break, flooding me with warmth as my pussy spasms, sucking Ethan in deeper.

“Fuck, keep that pussy hungry for me, baby.” He spits on his hand and rubs my sensitive clit, not giving me a moment to breathe. “I have so much to feed it.”

He pulls almost all the way out, then slams back into me, repeating the exquisite torture until I’m sure I’m about to pass out from another orgasm. Ethan lets out the sexiest groan I’ve ever heard. His movements slow some as I feel his dick jerks inside of him. I’ve never been interested in watching a guy cum, but I can watch him with his head back, mouth ajar, and Adam’s apple bobbing for hours. It’s a feeling I want to give him forever.

His hot sperm filling me both soothes and stimulates me until I’m shuddering with him again. It takes a lot to get him to cum, but I’m up to the challenge.

“I fucking love you, Ethan,” I finally admit. I feel lighter from the confession, and the way he beams at me makes it all worth it.

Chapter 20

Ethan

THE SATISFACTION THAT I FEEL FROM HAVING THE WOMAN I want is unlike anything I've ever felt before. Like a man possessed with a lust demon, I didn't let us rest until our bodies shut down. I made sure to take my time making love to her before we passed out.

Morning hits us and so does my hunger for food. She giggles when my stomach growls loudly in the otherwise quiet room. We're snuggled up with no secrets between us like I've always wanted. Leaning, I drop a kiss on each of her eyelids, then climb out of bed before I go any further.

"We're supposed to meet Hardy and Ericka at the breakfast buffet."

Tess pops up because I know she's interested in finding out if anything happened between them. Once we're groomed and dressed, we make our way to the on-site restaurant. Our fingers are intertwined as we talk about bullshit. I'm proud that we're blending the two sides of our relationship; this has been my desire since I met her.

We break apart to fill our plates and meet at the omelet bar. Tess requests everything to be loaded into her omelet like she always does. I tease her about how long it takes for her omelet to cook, but she's done before me. One of the perks of going first.

Whistling, I make my way to the table, but Ericka appears and nudges me out of the way, taking the spot next to Tess. Part of me wants to argue, but even I can tell she looks

exhausted. Her hair is thrown into a bun, the t-shirt dress is slightly wrinkled, and her flip-flops don't match her outfit. I mess with her a lot but Ericka is always dressed impeccably.

Ericka yawns big, drops her head on Tess's shoulder, and closes her eyes. I don't need to ask to know what happened. And just like he was summoned. Hardy appears, dressed neatly with not one hair out of place. His face breaks into an amused grin once he spots Ericka napping on Tess's shoulder.

Hardy motions for me to sit in what would have been Ericka's chair across from Tess. I shake my head in amusement but don't ask because I'm starving.

"You don't want to sit next to me, Firefly?" Hardy teases her as he takes a seat.

Ericka doesn't open her eyes. Instead, she raises her hand with her middle finger on display. The gesture makes Hardy chuckle.

"That's what got you in the state you're in right now," he points out.

Tess looks both amused and terrified. "Tess, keep Satan away from me. Beat his ass if you have to."

Ericka's request pulls a deeper chuckle out of Hardy, but he turns his megawatt smile on our server..

"Hello. I'd like green tea, a spinach, sausage, and cheese omelet, turkey bacon, egg whites, and sourdough toast with butter and strawberry jelly, please."

Susie smiles at Hardy's request but turns it down. "It's a breakfast buffet, sir. I can get the green tea for you."

I knew he wasn't going to get his own food when he sat down, but the server didn't know that yet. Yes, her job is to focus on our drinks and clear plates, but she hadn't met Hardy. He repeats his order as he slides a hundred-dollar bill across the table. Hardy isn't lazy, and he doesn't abuse the service industry, he just likes to see if he can get people to bend to his will. He doesn't mind spending money to get his way.

The longer she hesitates, the more he inches the money back in his direction. Giving in, she repeats his order as he smiles up at her and takes his finger off the bill.

“Perfect,” he tells her when she gets it right.

Satisfied, he sits back in his chair and crosses his legs and arms as he waits for his food.

“You do know it would have been faster to get it yourself, right?” Tess asks after she swallows a bite of her sausage.

Hardy shrugs with a smile. “What’s the fun in that?”

I laugh, but when Hardy and my eyes meet for the first time this morning, I’m no longer amused. To the world, he looks unbothered and relaxed, but I immediately know that something is bothering him. His smile isn’t as easy as I thought. There is tension in his shoulders, and weariness in his eyes. I don’t know a lot, but I know two things. His mood has nothing to do with Ericka and everything to do with the part of his life he doesn’t talk about.

Remember when I said I think Hardy is jaded? I still don’t know why. There is a three-year stretch of his life that’s a mystery to me. I don’t hold it against him, I just make sure he knows he can talk to me about it.

My expression must have told him that I’m here for him because he nods and turns his attention back to the server who just returned with his plate.

“You’re amazing,” he tells her in full flirt mode.

I don’t think she realizes that she’s blushing brightly and fluffing her hair, but there is nothing that will come from it. Hardy takes the toast, covers it with egg whites and turkey bacon, then pushes the omelet in Ericka’s direction.

“Eat up, Firefly. You’ll need your strength.”

“Like hell,” Ericka mumbles. “It’s morning and you’re a one night guy, remember?”

After a deep sigh, she picks up her fork. My amusement spikes when her eyebrows furrow angrily while she chews.

Hardy smiles at her while he chews the bite of his sandwich. He takes his time before responding because he likes to toy with her.

“And here I was, considering allowing you to take another ride. You still owe me one.”

Ericka’s sleepy eyes grow two inches in diameter. “I don’t owe you shit. I met your quota.”

“Quota?” Tess whispers to me across the table.

Hardy licks some of the jelly off his lips and looks at Ericka like she’s still naked. “That wasn’t a quota, Firefly. That was the minimum.”

Tess and I split the rest of the weekend between spa treatments, eating, and fucking; in no particular order. I don’t have the words to express how it was the best weekend of my adult life. I have one more surprise for her but am nervous to give it to her. Grand gestures are either epic or go epically wrong.

I keep her eyes covered as I move her to the center of the room.

“No peeking, baby,” I whisper from behind her. Her shiver almost wakes up my dick, but he’s not allowed in this moment. Maybe later. After waiting to build the suspense, I move around so I can see her face. “You can look.”

Tess’ excited eyes hold a shadow of confusion as she takes in the empty space.

“Where are we?” She turns slowly, taking in her surroundings. Her words are cautious. I know she gets it but doesn’t want to jump to conclusions.

“Jump, Tess,” I encourage her.

She stares at me for a moment, like she’s somehow able to read every thought in my head. I watch her full lips poke out

like she's debating about saying what's on the tip of her tongue.

"You bought a house," she says carefully.

"I bought *us* a house, yes." Her eyebrows quirk at my words, but the wheels are turning.

"And," she trails off as she leaves the room. I follow behind her with a smile on my face because I know what she's seeking. Tess power walks out the front door and towards the street; she stops and slowly turns. Her hands fly over her mouth as tears sparkle in her eyes. "You bought my dream home!"

"We," I correct again. "We're closing tomorrow. Every time we drove past it, you'd say you'll own it one day and now we do."

I catch her when she jumps on me, loving how excited she is about this house and our future.

"My God, Ethan. Where has this side of you been hiding?"

Tess cups my face and pepper it with kisses until I chuckle. "Right here in plain sight, Tess. I was just waiting for you to accept me."

I walk us back into the house, not caring that she's still wrapped around me. "Let's tour the house, baby. We have to decide what to change and keep before the contractors arrive."

I feel Tess' eyes boring into my profile. "Contractors?"

"Yes, we are about to make it our own, Tess."

Her eyelids flutter and the tips of her fingers rub the back of my neck. I know the mood has changed just as easily as anyone noticing the weather changing.

"Make it ours by christening it?"

The seduction in her voice makes my dick hard. It wasn't my intention, but it doesn't mean I won't act on the moment.

My lips cover hers in a teasing kiss that makes her sigh when I retreat. "Every fucking surface, Tess." I gather my willpower and keep walking. "But first, the tour."

We're in the bunny stage; fucking like our lives depend on our next nut and I'm not mad about it. It's great being able to fuck the source of my desire. It's like lust in its purest form. Addicting. It's almost an aphrodisiac knowing that she's just as hungry as I. We get through the first four bedrooms and two bathrooms before she jumps me in the empty master. I don't mind giving it up to her. Tess may have met me as damn near a whore, but now I'm her whore willing to fulfill every dirty desire.

Chapter 21

Tess

I'M IN DISBELIEF. I WOULD HAVE NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE moving into my dream house with Ethan. A house he'd purchased for us just because I love it. A home where we'll live as a couple in love. It's surreal, but moments like this make it that much more real. Ethan comes out of the shower, *our shower*, wearing a towel that rides low on his waist. With his damp hair in his eyes and this dewy body mainly exposed, he reminds me of every secret fantasy I've ever had about him. He's so sexy it hurts and he's mine.

I must say I'm impressed by my ability to compartmentalize. Now that I've been on the other side, I have no idea how I lasted as long as I did without touching him. Ethan's smile is flirty, but I can tell something is on his mind.

"What is it? Ethan Allen," I tease to relax him.

Ethan smirks, dropping into full charm mode. "Don't play with me, *Countess*, there are new ways I can punish you now."

I ignore him using my government name because his threat is beyond sexy and his near naked state doesn't help. Now that I'm not blinded by keeping him in the friend zone, I've noticed just how many little things he did to make me happy.

I was so busy focusing on *if* he was seeing someone and *when* that I didn't take stock in all the small intentional things he did for me. All the ways he built his schedule around being with me.

Aside from the intimacy and acknowledgment, Ethan and I have behaved like a couple. The real thing is amazing even

months later; I'm still shook by how perfect of a boyfriend he has been to me. Plus, the sex is by far the best I've ever had.

"I know that look, Tess," he whispers as he runs his finger up my leg. Ethan stops and looks me in the eye. "We'll get to that later."

My eyes stay glued to his as drops his towel, leaving him completely nude in front of me.

"Then why are you stripping?" My voice is thick with arousal, but I no longer have to hide it.

Ethan's slicked back hair enhances the paleness of his eyes as he chews on his lip.

"It makes sense to me."

"What makes sense?" I ask as he lowers himself onto his knees on the towel he just dropped on the floor.

His hands warm my knees as he grabs them and pulls closer to the edge of the bed. His fingers circle my thighs, but he's not in seduction mode.

"It makes sense that I'd be completely bare and vulnerable as the day you met me for this moment."

I want to interrupt him and ask another question, but there's something about the way he's looking at me that warns me to shut up and listen.

"Tess, I'm well aware that I lived over two decades before I even met you, but now I can remember a life without you in it. I don't want to imagine a future where you're not mine."

Ethan reaches under the bed and pulls about a box. I'm surprised that he managed to hide something somewhere that is obvious, yet a place I rarely look. My mouth goes dry. Not because the ring is stunning-which it is- I can no longer deny the direction that this conversation is taking.

"Baby, I want to be beside you and inside you for life. Let me love you and make love to you until my last breath. I'd be proud to call you Mrs. Cox."

My cheeks hurt from smiling, but my smile deepens as Ethan stares at me, waiting for a response. After seconds of silence stretch between us, he squeezes my hand.

“Well? Tess?” It’s cute how his voice cracks with apprehension.

“I’m waiting for you to ask me a question, Ethan.”

His signature smirk is back on his face as he leans in closer.

“Will you marry me, Tess?”

Just hearing the words fills me with a giddiness I’ve never felt before. It’s like the butterflies threw a parade and my heart is the drumline. I would have like the way I’d be proposed to at some point, but I never thought he’d be naked and delicious.

Somehow, it’s so Ethan to do the unexpected and keep me off guard and I love him more for it.

“Of course!” I exclaim as I watch him slide the ring on my shaky finger.

My excitement feels capable of breaking through my skin. I know I’ll never love anyone the way I love him. Grabbing his face, I cover it with kisses until he falls back and pulls me with him. We laugh as we hit the floor and while I’ll have to create a parent version of his proposal, it was perfect for me.

Our light kisses begin to linger and grow in intensity until I’m moaning his name against his lips. Ethan’s thumb hooks in my shorts and the lust is evident when our eyes meet again.

“Let’s consummate this engagement,” he suggests with another kiss.

“You don’t consummate engagements,” I correct him with a laugh, but the kisses he’s running along my collarbone assures me that he isn’t listening.

“New rule,” he finally responds, his breath floating over the nipple he just exposed. “We consummate everything.”

“Are you going to keep floating around the room,” Ericka jokes from her spot on the couch.

“He loves me,” I sigh as I join her.

“I’m aware.” Her tone is beyond bored. “He told the entire party that three months ago. You moved in together shortly after that. Honestly, I’m surprised that you’re surprised that he proposed.”

I move my spinach dip out of her reach since she’s not matching my excitement. Ericka isn’t exactly the jump-around-and-squeal type of friend. She stretches her little body while laughing.

“I should eat all the dip by myself,” I threaten her with a smile.

“I was happy for you the first two times we talked about it.”

My giggle escapes as I throw a chip at her. She plucks it off the lap of her light blue velour onesie and pops it in her mouth.

“Is that how you’re gonna act as my maid-of-honor?”

I swear she turned a little green as she weakly shook her head. “I’ll do my best to play nice.”

I break into laughter at the sight of her trying not to gag. I never had any plans of putting her in that position. Ericka isn’t exactly a fan of weddings and she’s not interested in being in a relationship. The two things don’t have anything to do with the other. Her issues with weddings are the amount of money people spend to impress others. She’s a fan of monogamy, just for other people.

“We’re not having a wedding party. It’s going to be an intimate destination wedding and vacation. Hardy is just as bad as you.” I waggle my eyebrows. “Speaking of Hardy.”

Ericka rolls her eyes and drops another chip into the dip. “What about him? He sees me, he pulls out his dick.”

I nod slowly. “Yeah, and you like it.”

She shrugs then takes a sip of her wine. “He’s amazing at what he does.”

My sigh displays my exaggeration. “Yeah, but he’s known for one-night stands. One.”

“If you think we’re a couple, that ring is getting to your head. We fuck, that’s it.”

“Did he initiate the second time, or did you?”

She thinks for a moment, trying to remember what happened. “He did. He sent me a text after one of his events.”

“You don’t think it means anything?”

Her eyebrows knit together as she considers what I’m saying. “That he likes to fuck?”

I swear she finds ways to make me want to cuss her out. “We know that about him. I’m saying in all his years of liking to *fuck*, he’s never returned to the same woman until now. That has to be significant in some form, no?”

She sits up straight, no longer trying to eat the dip. “Wait, so since we’ve been hooking up since the prom, you think it means he likes me?”

This time I’m the one who shrugs. “I don’t know what goes on in that man’s head. I thought you’d have a better idea since you see him so much.”

“Ew. You make it sound like we date or hang out.” Ericka groans. “I need to go talk to him and see what he’s thinking.”

Ericka gives me a side hug and grabs her purse on a mission to find Hardy. Ethan appears just as she’s leaving and she pushes him out of the way, then flips him off when he calls her a troll. I shake my head with a smile. Some things don’t change. Those two cannot get through the day without annoying each other.

Chapter 22

Ethan

HARDY AND I STARE AT EACH OTHER FOR A BIT. THIS IS A NEW part of our relationship. We share thoughts and feelings but often steer away from heartache and fears. I have no idea what he wants to tell me, but I'm sure it has something to do with how he disappeared right after "prom" about a month ago. I know it doesn't have anything to do with him hooking up with Ericka, it's deeper.

The thing he has avoided telling me since we met is hovering between us, but I'm still not sure he's ready to share. He's dressed simply in a graphic t-shirt and worn jeans, but that didn't stop the hot server from checking him out.

To my surprise, he didn't bite. Hardy never misses an opportunity, so I bring it up just in case he wasn't paying attention.

"Cindy looked ready to climb into your lap. She's hot."

He looks up from his burger and fries. "Who?"

I shake my head and take a sip of my beer. "Our server, brunette, green eyes, big tits."

Hardy blinks again with no recognition in his eyes. "Aren't you engaged? You shouldn't notice things like that."

I laugh, accepting that my friend is a million miles away. "Yeah. I'm happily engaged, which is why I'm pointing out that I noticed all of that before you did."

Hardy shrugs and sits back in his chair with his Jack and Coke in his hand. "I'm not in the mood."

His statement catches me by such surprise that my fry goes in the wrong direction and sends me into a coughing fit. Years upon years of friendship and I've never heard him utter that sentence or anything remotely close to it.

Once I can breathe again, I take a gulp of my water to ease the fire in my throat. Hardy watched from his spot that the least bit concerned that my life was in jeopardy.

"Not in the mood?" I croak now that I can speak.

"Yeah," he confirms with another shrug.

"Is this because of Erika?" I know that they're hooking up, but I didn't think it'd make him exclusive.

He snaps his eyes in my direction like I just cussed him out. "No. We don't have that kind of deal."

"And does that bother you?"

Hardy tilts his head and studies me like I started speaking a new language.

"Have you met us? No. She and I aren't those types of people. I'm no closer to getting with her than you were to getting with Sade."

Point taken. Sade and I were never going to work any more than Maya and I would have simply because another woman already occupied my head and heart. I belonged to Tess the moment I met her. If we were to follow Hardy's example, he'd have to have his own "Tess."

I refrain from arguing the semantics of his example and focus solely on him and what he's struggling to say.

"So if it's not about Ericka, tell me what's been weighing on your mind."

I prompt the next part of the conversation, although I'm sure I know how it's going to go. Hardy finishes his drink, then drops a fifty on the table as he stands.

"Good talk. I'll see you tomorrow?"

I nod and offer a two-finger salute. We've been doing this for a week straight. He invites me to lunch. I pick the place. I

wait for him to tell me what's on his mind. He leaves before we get anywhere. Hardy and I have been friends long enough for me to know that I can't rush his mind. He'll tell me what's bothering him when he's ready to tell me. The only thing I can do right now is take his calls and show up when he needs me.

Hardy drops his hands in his pockets as he strolls out the door without giving our server another glance. Whatever is going on in that computer he calls a brain must be epic for someone so pretty to be invisible to him.

Either way, I'll do what I have been doing; patiently waiting. I know it's not due to lack of trust or him not having faith in me. Hardy doesn't like to share this part of himself. If anything, his attempts to share mean that he really considers me damn near family.

My current mission puts Hardy's issues on the back-burner. It's not that I don't care because I do, it's just that there's nothing I can do about it until he's ready to talk. I shake my head, amused by the turn of events. For so long, Hardy and I were damn near on the same page, and now it feels like we're in different books. We've never been so far apart in our social status. I accomplished my goal of getting Tess to be mine, yet it feels like Hardy is even further from finding love. He doesn't have to find love, but I want him to be happy no matter what he chooses. I can think of a lot of things to describe Hardy, but 'happy' isn't one of them right now.

He used to seem happy with his life of whoredom and now I'm not sure, especially with how he ignored our server. Only time will tell, I guess. It's an overused statement, but it helps with so much.

Pulling out my phone, I call my love. I can't help the smile that forms when she answers.

"I love you," I tell her in lieu of a greeting.

Tess sighs sweetly, like she does when I make love to her. "I don't think I'll get tired of hearing that. Any luck today?"

"No, he's still working at his own pace."

“I hope he’s not sick or something.” I love that the concern in her voice is genuine.

“I doubt it. I get the feeling it’s about something from his past. He never really talks about the time before we met.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I hope he’s okay.”

I nod like she can see me. “We’ll see, my love. How about a destination wedding?”

Tess’s laugh, soft and breathy, makes my smile grow even bigger. I wave at the server on the way out since fifty is more than enough for our burgers and tip.

“Wow, you shift gears fast.”

“No, I can take my time when it matters.” I start my SUV and the sound shifts from my phone to the Bluetooth before she responds.

“Oh, is this your way of saying you’re on the way home and you’re trying to get some?”

I chuckle as I ease into traffic. “No, baby. I have many ways to seduce you. I’m just being honest. If I have to wait another three years to marry you, I will.”

“Oh Ethan, you won’t have to wait that long. How about a local wedding and no one follows us to our honeymoon? I want to go somewhere exclusive and clothing optional.”

I groan as I think about my future wife wearing nothing but my ring. “Damn, baby. Sold.” I pause for a moment, then call her name. “Tess?”

“Yes?” The breathiness of her tone suggests that she already knows what I’m about to say.

“Clothing is not optional when I get home. I want you to greet me naked.”

“Ask me nicely.” the arousal in her voice goes straight to my dick.

“Fucking strip now. You got five minutes.”

The line goes dead, and I adjust my erection as I punch the gas. I've just lessened her time. There are consequences for hanging up on me. Damn, I'm so stupid in love with her that it's even sexy when she challenges me.

I look forward to all of the challenges that makes us...us.

Epilogue

Tess

“DANCE WITH ME UNDER THE MOONLIGHT, MY LOVE.”

I look back from the balcony of our ocean view suite room. I've been stuck out here for at least an hour taking in the sight. It's magnificent. The black water crashes hard, creating terrifying yet amazing waves. It's mesmerizing. Since we picked a date, we've been doing a bunch of weekend trips to different destinations to decide where we'd like to spend our honeymoon. We started with the closer destinations in Mexico and we'll move to further locations with longer flights. Puerto Vallarta is our first stop. The beach and the view from the resort is all video, but this roaring ocean is its own attraction.

Ethan smiles at me as he approaches. He looks amazing, as usual, in his lounge pants. His skin pebbles underneath my fingertips as I run my fingers up his bare chest until I hook them behind his neck. He kisses me softly and smiles down at me.

I know that look. “What song is stuck in your head, sir?”

Ethan laughs. “All this time, I prided myself on knowing you better than anyone. I didn't realize you were learning me as well. I guess you took being my best friend seriously.”

“Of course I did, Ethan. Even when I thought you were a man-whore.”

He playfully rolls his eyes and starts swaying to the song in his head. Eventually, he starts humming, but I still don't quite catch it until the words form. Ethan starts singing the

words to “Make You Feel my Love,” and I can’t fight the stupid smile stretching across my face.

We dance, and he continues to sing it as he spins me. As much as I loved the public declaration of his love. I cherish the quiet moments when it’s just us. I adore his sweet moments like this. I kiss him the moment he is finished singing. We’ve had an amazing day, and this was the perfect ending.

“Do you love this place, baby? Do you want to put it on our list for honeymoon options?”

“Yes,” I admit. “This place is beautiful.”

Ethan knew I didn’t want to blindly pick a place and be stuck there for a week or longer. So fair, his idea not only works but gives us time away from everything outside of us. He was right. Tess’s advice did boost business and keeps me busy making new designs.

Ethan has moved from being the face of the Hooked parties and does more of the background planning. He’ll go to an event to keep the patrons from missing him but he’s not the host to every single party or outing they throw. Hardy is working on a compatibility algorithm to improve their app. The numbers suggested that Hooked was being used more for hookups than lasting relationships that will give them a better online presence. Ethan told me that Hardy can’t get it to work the way he wants, so he’s looking to outsource the code or collaborate with an algorithm engineer.

I’m proud of their delegation abilities. They are taking Hooked to the next level and I know they’ll be great. Hardy finally told Ethan some of his issues, but Ethan is keeping it close to the vest as we discussed. If Hardy wanted me to know what was bothering me, he would have told me. I’m just happy that he’s physically healthy.

Someone knocks on our door, pulling Ethan’s attention. “That should be room service.”

“Room Service?” I repeat with a tilt of my head.

He heads back into the room and answers me over his shoulder. “Yup. Room service.”

He opens the door to allow a guy with a cart entrance. They talk as he set ups the table. Once he's done, the table is lined with champagne, chocolate-covered strawberries, cake, macaroons. Steak, grilled vegetables, and mashed potatoes.

“What’s all this?” I ask him, although I have eyes.

Ethan’s blue eyes pierce me with all the love he told me he had to hide. “Making up for missed opportunities.”

“Oh, really?”

He reaches out his hand, waiting for me to grab it. “You have no idea how many times we’ve been somewhere together when I’ve been offered a couple’s package. Each time I’ve wanted to get it but understood that we weren’t a couple.” He holds the chair for me so I can sit. “Now, I want to do all of the couple things with you, Tess.”

“You’ll get tired of all the couple things,” I warn him.

Ethan sits across from me and leans on the table. His expression is serious, as if we’re discussing something life or death.

“I’ll never get tired of doing anything with you, Tess.” He grabs my hand, rubbing the back of it with his thumb. “I don’t know if you know or understand something. When I was in that elevator, I vowed to slow down. I wasn’t talking about a relationship or anything like that. I just meant that I wouldn’t sleep with neighbors or go out every night like Hardy was. I wasn’t looking for love or a commitment, just less chaos. That was until I saw you. The moment our eyes met, it’s all I wanted. From that moment, I put my energy into one goal; being with you, belonging to you.”

I dip my head because the intensity of his words, coupled with his serious stare, makes me feel shy for a moment. “Dang, Ethan. I feel like you proposed again.”

He chuckles and picks up the glass of champagne and passes it to me. “I’d propose every day if that’s what you need.”

Moments like this are so perfect that they scare me. I fear I’ll wake up and it’ll all be some lucid dream. I accept the

glass but rise from the table. I have an overwhelming need to touch him. The touch of anxiousness disappears when I lower myself into his lap. A soft sigh drops from my lips.

“What’s wrong?” He prompts.

I shake my. “Nothing. It just all feels too good to be true sometimes.”

Ethan takes my hand and places it on his chest where his heart beats steadily. “I know what you mean, but it’s true, Tess. What we have is very much real.”

His kiss is a tender expression of his love. Although it wasn’t meant to seduce me, I’m very much seduced.

“Now, you’re just trying to get me naked.”

His laugh is adorable, but I love the way he looks at me. “Well, future Mrs. Cox, we do have to test the clothing optional part of our trip.”