

A HOLIDAY NOVELLA

WHAT'S THE
magic word?

Midnight Drop

LEE JACQUOT

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A Holinight Novella

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A festive scene featuring a dark green bottle in the center, surrounded by gold and silver balloons, silver disco balls, and scattered confetti on a light-colored surface. The background is a soft, light-colored wall with falling white confetti.

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A Quick Note From the Author

Midnight Drop is a standalone novella in the Holinights series. None of these books need to be read in order.

It is a steamy, slow-burn, and sexy read. It is intended for mature audiences of legal adulthood age as it includes explicit consensual sexual scenes. It should NOT be used as a guide for kinks or a BDSM relationship.

The author is not liable for any attachments formed to the MCs nor the sudden desire to make a man kneel at your feet so you can spit a shot in his mouth.

Reader discretion is advised.

*To those who believe the grovel of a man should be at the feet of his woman.
;)*

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Brailery

CHAPTER ONE

“F uck, Spidey. Marry the hammer. And kill...” Cindy applies a thin layer of lip gloss over her crimson-painted lips before smirking at her camera. “Iron.”

The livestream chat explodes, hundreds of messages piling on top of each other so quickly they’re impossible to read. Only the crying and puking emoji stick out in any of the lines of text, but that’s no surprise. It’s always like this when we go live together. The most outlandish conversations and the highest donations.

I suck in a breath before putting on my hypothetical game face and bumping into my best friend, scooting her partially out of the camera’s frame. “Tony has the gadgets, Cin. The *toys*.” I emphasize that last word to remind her why he was even included in the list of prospects for the game.

She shrugs. “I want to be tied up with Spidey’s webs. Can you imagine the shibari that man knows?”

Our friend and manager, Mori, grins at us from behind the phone. She’s standing on the other side of the tripod, checking the stream on her iPad to make sure our engagement is where we want it. She’s also calling out any good commentary and questions for Cindy and me to respond to. “They want to know which one is more important to you. Toys or ropes?”

Cindy flips her white-frosted dreads behind her, the small shells in them clinking as they hit the faux eel wrapped around her shoulders. “Ropes. Think about it. He can tie you in literally any position. Upside down, legs

folded. Oh! Or on your knees, hands behind your back.”

She wiggles her eyebrows playfully, moving back in front of the camera to touch up her high-arched eyebrows.

My face heats, but I’m able to keep the glorious image of being tied to my knees, and the shiver it invokes, at bay. My reputation—the persona I’ve created in the cosplay world—is that my dominant personality is universal and unwavering, even behind closed doors. The unbothered and borderline bitch guise is one I adopted when I found out how cutthroat the community could be. When I realized sweetness gets you nowhere.

“I beg to differ. I want the toys. Imagine being overstimulated until I have to beg for it to stop.”

Cindy lets out a fake string of glittering laughter. “You. Beg? I’d pay top dollar to see that.”

I wink at the camera. “Who wouldn’t?”

Another round of messages piles up, almost all of them including the desperate face or heart-eye emoji, along with over a dozen donations flitting across the screen. Some range from two bucks to seven-hundred dollars, but all of which are accompanied by requests for me to utter the word, *please*.

I tuck a red strand behind my ear. “Thank you. But truly, there isn’t a number in this world that could make me plead for anything.”

As if all thirty-four thousand of our viewers were waiting for this moment, Arian’s name floods the comments.

Inside, my stomach churns.

Arian Kinkaid. The bane of my entire fucking existence. The popular cosplayer who runs in the same circles as I do and has the same shtick as well. Successful, arrogant, commanding, but also annoyingly hot.

Well, perhaps the irritation with his looks belongs to me alone, but the rest is true.

He’s widely known for his superhero cos, but also his dominating energy. He sucks the air out of any room he steps into, and like the damn sun, everything gravitates around him. The people, both fans and other creators, act as though *he* is what makes an event, and I think that’s what pisses me off the most.

That, and the fact that he copies the counterpart of any—and I mean *any*—of the characters I play. One time, I made content in a Sailor Moon outfit (which took me three weeks to create), and he made a video wearing Tuxedo Mask two days later. Or that time I did Daphne, and he was Fred. Then, there

was when I was so proud of the work I put into my Pikachu cosplay, and he backdoored and dressed as Ash.

The list goes on and on, and it's because of this that the community has somehow put us in a ship together and have been salivating for a collaboration between us. It's also led to the very reason we're getting ready right now.

The fans spoke, asked, yelled, then demanded, and two huge sponsors reached out with an offer I couldn't pass up. So now, he and I are hosting a New Year's party at Dendrop Estate, promoting a comic convention in the coming spring.

I'm grateful, and so damn excited about the opportunity, I'm just annoyed it has to happen with him.

Mori gives me a sympathetic smile before scanning through the comments for a suitable question. She and Cindy are fully aware of how deep my disdain goes for Kinkaid and only bring him up when absolutely necessary.

"Fans want to know what you're going as and if he will match you."

Keeping my mischievous grin intact, I finally back away from the camera. My tight yellow jumpsuit conforms to my body like skin paint. The zipper at my chest is pulled halfway down to my navel, exposing the white push-up that gives me an extra cup size. A white belt cinches in at my stomach, giving the illusion my hips are almost double what they are, but the ass and thighs I work incredibly hard for look amazing all on their own. White leather-heeled boots stop mid-calf, while my short red bob completes the look.

I'm the hottest fucking April O'Neil there ever was.

"As you can see, I'm just missing my microphone—"

"Or a box of pizza," Cindy points out.

I nod. "Or that."

"And Arian?" Mori prompts softly.

I take a big breath, my smile morphing into a knowing smirk. "My counterpart is keeping it a secret from not only the fans but myself as well. I'm excited we'll get to find out together."

One thing Arian's posse is known for is great marketing. They've decided to keep a lot of the exclusive event details under wraps and livestream the entire night. Can't say it's the worst idea I've ever heard, but also, being watched at an event where I'm forced to engage with Arian is definitely the

only downside.

Cindy puckers her lips at the screen in a farewell kiss. “Well, we have to get going. Thanks for joining us as we got ready. We’ll see y’all in an hour!”

I point to the camera. “Remember, if you’re going out tonight, get a DD or pay for a rideshare. Code for twenty percent off your ride is pinned in the stream with three different services.”

With that, Mori cuts the live and begins combing through the analytics. “Amazing turnout tonight. The mention of Arian alone really...”

Mori’s voice fades as I grimace, but I don’t respond. We both know the truth. He brings the crowd, the intrigue, and the money simply by showing up.

It doesn’t matter that sometimes it takes me hours to sew a costume, or a week to attach small shards of metal, or a month to glue on a thousand individual gems, I never get the traction he does. I mean, seriously, he could wear a cheap costume from a Halloween store, and people would flock, gassing up his already overfilled ego tank.

If I’m being honest, though, without the veil of jealousy, I can admit none of the costumes are pre-bought. It’s clear from the details in his up-close and personal videos that he puts in the exact same amount of work I do.

Still. I don’t like him, because he’s an arrogant showboat.

“You’re gonna be fine, B.” Cindy holds out a rustic gold nautilus to me.

I slip it from her hand and gesture for her to turn around. “I hope. I’m just a little nervous that he’s exactly what his persona is.”

It’s been two years since my one run-in with him. A run-in I haven’t told my friends about. A run-in he probably doesn’t even remember.

“You aren’t exactly like yours,” she points out, lifting her dreads carefully to the side for me to attach the necklace. “So maybe neither is he.”

He is.

“Well, considering we’re going to be filmed the entire time we’re there, I don’t think either of us will be able to come out of character. Which means I’ll be up close and personal with the beast all night.”

“Or Turtle.” She laughs, glancing over her shoulder to take in my costume. “I can’t believe he won’t even tell us who he is. I figured he’d be making videos left and right to build the hype.”

“I’m sure he’ll post them after.” I shrug, clasping the necklace and looking at Mori, whose face is still buried in the iPad. “Any idea how the stream will go tonight?”

Mori finishes whatever she's doing, then taps a couple of buttons before turning the tablet around to face us. It's a picture of a massive ballroom of sorts. It's fancy, sporting floor-to-ceiling columns around the circumference, marble floors, a row of tall windows, and crown molding at least ten inches wide. But besides a chandelier the size of a mini coop hanging down in the center, the room is empty.

"This is Dendrop estate?" I ask.

"Yep. And this wall right here"—she points to the top of the photo, where a blank wall is positioned above the windows—"is where the projection video will be here. It'll be a duplicate of his manager's phone. Danny's in charge of streaming."

Mori's cheeks round with her smile at the mention of Danny. They met at the same Con I had my run-in with Arian, and ended up talking and bonding over the tech aspect of cosplay. From what she's told us, they only speak from time to time about costume engineering, but I can tell she wants so much more.

"So only one phone will be recording?"

Mori nods. "Yes, and because the event is exclusive, creators have been asked to minimize the use of their personal devices. They want to show people actually enjoying the event and not on their phone, so only Danny will be recording. He has clear instructions to go where the most interest is."

"Which is Arian and myself?"

Mori nods again. "Yep."

Cindy bumps me with her shoulder. "Look at the bright side. All of his fans will see his hot-as-fuck counterpart and will probably follow your accounts as well. Look at it as exposure."

I harumph. *Exposure*. That's all I've been doing for the past month to rationalize why I agreed to this.

I'm relatively successful; I won't discredit what I've worked very hard to get, but I can admit I need to reach more audiences. *New* audiences. With more support and funding, my dream of having my own brick-and-mortar with outfit crafting classes would be a real possibility. Whether I want to admit it or not, Arian is a way to get there.

A stepping stone in my career.

It's one night. A few hours. Just under eleven thousand seconds. I can do this.

Who knows, maybe he'll even surprise me and be a complete gentleman

this time.

No matter how badly I want to be optimistic, deep down, I know the bitter truth. Two years isn't enough to change someone like him for the better. In fact, with all his continued success, it's likely poisoned whatever was left that was good or humble and completely eradicated it from his system.

Still, I try to lie to myself and promise that I'll make it through the night and it will all be worth it in the end.

But even my lie isn't strong enough to smother the fact that I'm more likely to suffocate in Arian's shadow.

Bailey

CHAPTER TWO

It takes twenty minutes for our rideshare to reach Dendrop estate. With every mile we drive, my heart beats a little faster, while every little tick of the car moving closer on the GPS map makes my muscles pull tighter. The fine hairs on the nape of my neck rise, and my skin tingles from the ever-present goosebumps.

Every sense is working on overdrive, so by the time we pull up, I'm barely able to suck in a fulfilling breath.

I'm nervous. *Anxious*. But why to such an extent, I have no idea.

It's not like I'm rolling up to Jason Momoa's house, or getting on stage with Billie Eilish. Arian is no one special. No one who should cause me to have such a profound reaction.

He's just a decent-looking guy (hot), with a healthy social media following (ten thousand away from a million) and okay costumes (some of the best I've ever seen).

The singular moment we shared two years ago has likely been wiped from his memory, and everything with the cosplays is probably nothing more than a coincidence.

But as much as I try to tell myself that, as much as I try to downplay it, my gut knows better. My heart still squeezes from embarrassment, while my soul continually burns from the residual anger.

Arian knows who I am. He remembers me, and every fucking outfit he makes is to spite me. To mock me and show the world how cosplay should be

done. Show *me* how he thinks it should be done.

Or maybe it's not, and I'm obsessing over something that doesn't even exist. Obsessing over a man who doesn't even know my name.

"Holy shit, this place is fucking huge." Cin's voice draws me out of my head. Her eyes are like golf balls, shimmering under the lamp posts illuminating the wide driveway leading up to a roundabout. "Way bigger than the pictures online."

I follow her line of sight until I see the monstrosity of a mansion. It's three stories, has a bleach-white stone exterior, and a vast expanse of boxwood bushes. It's straight out of a luxury magazine. Having always lived not too far, I knew the estate was used for the wealthy's weddings or fundraisers, but never did I realize just how extraordinary it is.

Goes to show the sponsors running the party have plenty of money and, if all goes well, a permanent spot for me on their payroll.

As soon as the car pulls up to the front, a valet opens the door. Cindy's the first one out, closely followed by Mori. They're so enamored with the view, they don't notice I'm still in the car. I take the moment to steel my nerves.

He's just another guy. This is just another party.

The lie isn't enough to trick my mind to stop racing or my heart from pounding. But it's enough to let me suck in a commanding breath and force my feet to move.

I need to focus on the important part—landing the gig. Securing paid sponsors and moving one step closer to my dream.

When the heel of my boot finally connects with the pavement, the hypothetical mask that's been stuck on top of my head shakes loose, and I'm able to yank it into place.

I am Bailey Rooke, and it's time I act the part.

The entrance to the estate is extravagant. Seven marble steps lead to massive oak doors that are thrown wide open. Light from within spills into the dark like a warm, inviting fire in the thicket of a frozen forest. Beckoning. Promising.

But I know better. What's beyond those doors and the hours ahead are instead more like an anglerfish, and what's going to happen is that I'm either going to eat or be eaten. Make or break my career.

Mori looks at me in her periphery, a sympathetic smile curving her lips. "Ready?"

I nod once. “As I’ll ever be.”

In unison, we begin to ascend the wide steps. When we reach the top, more of the mansion’s interior becomes visible, but before I can appreciate it or any of the creators filling the lobby, we’re stopped by a man with a clipboard and earpiece. His suit is all black, tailored to accentuate his bulky frame. His face looks as though it’s etched in stone, the artist chiseling every line to be as angry as possible.

“Names?” he asks, his voice sterile and bored.

Cin bumps my shoulder and whispers, “Oh, this is *exclusive*, exclusive.”

A genuine smile splits my face, my nerves uncoiling a bit, as Mori tells the man our names.

His eyes snap from his clipboard to us, then back down again. On his second take, he presses a thick finger to his ear and mumbles something too low for us to hear.

After a pause of him listening to someone on the other end, his gaze darts to me. He does a quick sweep before nodding. Though whether it’s to me, or the person on the end of the earpiece, I’m not sure.

“Yes, sir.”

The guard extends a hand toward the doors, and Cin’s brow furrows in return as we walk inside the lobby. “That’s not weird as hell or anything.”

“He was likely letting Danny know—”

Before Mori can finish her sentence, a vaguely familiar shaggy-haired man greets us. “I’m so glad you’re here. I was worried y’all would do the whole ‘late is on time’ thing.”

Lucky for Mori, the deep brown pigment of her skin doesn’t allow it to betray the blush I know is lighting up her face. “Hey, Danny.”

He beams, his pale complexion doing nothing to hide his. “Hey, you. You look amazing.”

Mori’s responding smile is somewhere between a smitten schoolgirl and a horny sorority chick. “You too.”

Cindy bristles beside me. “Hey, Dan, mind showing me to the bar before you get to drooling?”

I laugh, Mori curses, and Danny gives us a boyish grin. “Sure thing. But Bailey, I need you to come with me.”

My eyes flash, the sudden increase in my blood pressure reminding me why I’m here. Who I’m here to be with. “Right.”

Danny gestures to the door to the ballroom. “Inside, to the left, is the bar.

Mingle with the other creators, and I'll meet you in a few."

Cindy reaches out a hand and squeezes mine. "Knock him dead, baby."

"K.O.," I reply before turning to follow Danny down a hall tucked to the right of the lobby.

I hyper-focus on the back of his costume as we walk down the dimly lit corridor. It's simple, a black suit that doesn't quite fit perfectly, black shades rest on top of his head, and a small silver tube juts out of his back pocket.

"Men in Black?"

Danny nods, turning to look at me over his shoulder. "Yeah. I love cosplay, but like Mori, it's more on the technical side of things. The creation and engineering, ya know. Besides, the sponsors wanted the spotlight on you and Arian."

I decide to ignore the latter part of his sentence and focus on the first. "You and Mori, huh? Quite the duo."

The tips of his ears turn a deep shade of pink, and he shakes his head. "No, nothing like that. I—we just admire each other's work, that's all."

"I see. So you're hiding the fact you're attracted to my manager."

Danny stops and whips around, every muscle in his face pulled taut. "No! I'm not saying that either, it's just—"

I throw a hand on my hip, the earlier trepidation dripping from my bloodstream to channel my energy into being protective. Or maybe to be distracted. I can't be sure. "Just what? Why do you feel the need to be discreet with what's so obvious?"

I'm not sure why I'm so worked up. Well, I do, but I can't stop the word vomit from spilling all over unsuspecting Danny. "If you have a thing for my friend, she's owed the common decency for you to be outright and not string her along with pretty words or those slick little smiles."

He shakes his head again, his eyes wide with both surprise at my sudden attack and probably a bit of embarrassment. If they're already fucking and hiding it, that's one thing, but if he *is* crushing from the shadows, I want it to be known that I'm not okay with my friend being dragged along for the ride.

"Is that what you like? No chase? Just boring confessions?" The deep timbre of the voice doesn't belong to Danny and completely owns the crackle that shreds my nerves to feeble strings. It's a voice I still hear in my fucking nightmares. "Tell me, what fun is that?"

Clenching my jaw, I take a settling breath that does nothing and spin slowly on my heels, my expression set in annoyance. "I don't consider a man

who is incapable of expressing basic emotions *fun*. I consider him...”

My words trail as I come face-to-face with my opponent of the evening. I already knew he'd do something extra, but I'd secretly hoped it was the rat, not the sexy-as-fuck bad guy.

A metal facemask covers Arian's entire jaw, while a large helmet with spikes covers his head. Smaller, much more dangerous barbs are embedded in his shoulder plates that meet in the middle, where a purple fabric wraps around his thick neck. A gray shirt clings to his chest, happily highlighting every single dip and ridge of his muscular frame, while his bare arms make my entire body tense.

I shouldn't find his biceps that appealing, nor the horned metal attached to his forearms, or the white contacts covering his pupils, but fuck, I can't help it.

He's the dark shadow to my blinding light.

The villain to my hero.

The Shredder to my April.

In my high boots, he's only about a half foot taller, but his costume gives the illusion that he's towering over me. Even still, I somehow manage to keep my face neutral and not as irrationally irritated as I feel having to look up at him.

“I was just letting him know I wasn't okay with him stringing my friend along.”

His head tilts to the side. “Where's the challenge? The tension?”

“Two years seems like plenty of time.”

“Says you.”

I don't respond. Partly because I'm too focused on not letting this man ruin my night over something that doesn't have to do with either of us, but also because breathing is getting a little harder. Steadily, at least.

We're silent for what feels like the longest minute of my life, the air between us becoming thicker, and a strange new current ripples through the air. Every second becomes more weighted, and soon, I see something pass over him. A familiarity. A knowing.

It's almost like he—

“Arian, we were just coming.”

He holds up a hand. “It's fine, Danny. I got it from here. We'll be out as planned.”

I can't see him, but I know Danny is considering arguing. He shuffles on

his feet behind me, but Arian's eyes don't leave mine.

I'm stuck in his gaze, in the overwhelming gravitational pull that accompanies him wherever he goes. It's been a long time since I felt it. So long, I forgot how much I was affected by it.

Dammit.

Get yourself together. He's just another guy.

I repeat it three times before Danny finally mutters something to Arian and passes beside me, leaving us alone in the dim hall. It's that same moment I gather my composure, and I'm able to yank myself from the quicksand that is Kinkaid.

Glancing behind him, I take in the passing cosplayers and their costumes, trying in some way to slow my racing heart. This is why I'm here. For the love of the community and my passion for the craft. I'm not going to give that up because I'm holding a damn grudge.

Mind made up to let it go for the night, I look back at Arian and hold out a hand. "We got off on the wrong foot. My name is Bailey."

His eyes narrow, sweeping down my body with such a quick survey I almost think I imagine it, before he huffs like I've told a joke. I almost question him, but then he grips my hand, and electricity skitters up my arm from our connection. "Long time no see, Bai. How's that ankle of yours holding up?"

My chest squeezes. My soul rages.

He remembers.

Bailey

CHAPTER THREE

TWO YEARS AGO

I'm so nervous, I think I'm about to vomit.

Saliva is already pooling into my mouth, and my eyes have begun to water preemptively.

As my gaze flashes to the mirror, I examine myself for the eighteenth time. The blonde wig is set perfectly, parted to the side, and secured under a black band. My makeup is light, with only a few coats of mascara and a light blush. The olive sports bra and matching leggings fit like a glove, while my ass looks great, split in two by the thick black thong giving me a little chafing.

It's not the most extravagant cosplay in the world—there's no debating that—but it's what I can afford right now. It also helps that the character makes me feel like a total badass and not at all nervous that I'm about to attend my first convention as a coser.

I take three breaths before my two best friends slide through the open door of my bathroom.

Cindy is covered from head to toe in the perfect shade of Avatar blue, while Mori is the best Velma I've ever seen. They're both gorgeous. "Y'all look great."

Cindy flips her dreads over her shoulder and smiles, her bright teeth a stark contrast against the paint. "I know. And you look damn good yourself."

She pops me on the ass playfully as I shake my head.

“Don’t start, B. Don’t go getting inside that big head of yours and telling yourself otherwise. You are Bailey fucking Rooke, and you are a bad bitch.”

A smile cracks across my face. I’m not what you would generally call self-conscious. I believe even on bad days, and despite any superficial flaws, I’m still beautiful. But cosplay isn’t about being a pretty face. It’s about the character and our commitment to play the part. It’s about the effort and detail we put into our outfits. It’s about standing out from the crowd and making passersby *ooh* and *aah* in astonishment.

My Sonya Blade may be spot on, but it’s basic and definitely not what I planned to wear to my first event.

Fate had other plans when it gave me a double flat tire, a higher-than-expected electricity bill, and a sale at H&M I couldn’t possibly pass up all in one month. I mean, I *really* needed those new work clothes. And all three things combined meant the Sailor Moon outfit I planned wasn’t gonna happen. Not if I wanted it to turn out how I had imagined. And if I know one thing about the cosplay world, it’s if you’re not gonna do it right, don’t do it at all.

So I didn’t. I settled.

Still. I look decent. I feel okay. And I’m trying my best not to let the little setback inject my joy with its negativity.

“Say it, B.” Cindy takes a step into the bathroom, her brows lifting in seriousness. “I gotta hear it.”

I scoff, rolling my eyes. “I’m Bailey Rooke, and I’m a bad bitch.”

My words come out lamely and without an ounce of feeling.

Mori leans against the doorframe and crosses her arms over her chest, that handy iPad tucked beneath an armpit. “She’s gonna make you do it right.”

“Damn right, I am.” Cindy’s hand falls on either side of my shoulders, and she shakes me a little. “I know you’re nice—a sweetheart, if you will—but Sonya Blade is no Little Bo Peep. And neither should you if you’re gonna be able to withstand the dark side of cosplay either.”

Mori nods. “We’ve all been going to Cons together for years. You know what people say, and it’s not always flattering. If you already have doubts in your head, anything crappy someone says is going to get to you.”

“Facts. The words find the cracks that already exist and finish the job of crumbling you to dust. It’s like when a pebble chips the windshield, and it seems like every single one after that hits the same damn spot.” Cindy

smacks her lips in the mirror before she slips my phone from the counter. “This is going to be your first post. Don’t be shy and sweet. Be *that* bitch.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek and let their words soak in. They aren’t encouraging me to be arrogant, but rather confident. Not an asshole, but an unphased coser.

My eyes flit to the mirror. It looks silly and probably sounds even worse, but I lift my chin and arch my brows. “I’m Bailey Rooke, and I’m a bad bitch.”

The sentence sounds much different now. Commanding. Strong. I like it, but I like the airiness that expands across my chest even more.

“That you are!” Cindy’s smile is bright and wide as she lifts my phone. “Now. Let’s take your first picture as a cosplayer and upload it before we go.”

With a newfound shield, I pose and take a picture.

I don’t think any of us expected it to get the traction it does. Not from the public, not from the other creators I’ve followed for years. And especially not from Arian Kinkaid.

“Are you sure it’s him?”

Mori nods, scrolling down the endless pictures and videos of none other than *the* Arian Kinkaid. “Unless someone else manages his social media accounts and engages for him.”

My face flushes with a band of heat, regardless. I feel damn near giddy, and it only makes it even better that I might actually see him today.

As luck would have it, the popular creator lives in a city not too far from mine and is expected to be at the event. Though, for some unknown reason, he has yet to confirm or deny if he’s coming.

Something about that both frustrates and excites me.

I mean, it’s not like I came to see him, but if he does show up, I promise myself that this time, I’ll have enough confidence to say something. I have so much respect for him, and he’s been such a fundamental part of my journey, I’d love to tell him.

Mori, Cindy, and I grab our lanyards from the front check-in desk and enter the event. It doesn’t matter how many times we’ve been to different Cons, I always feel like a kid on Christmas. Wonder is thick in the air, the

possibility of magic and surprises weaving through the tight spaces. And that intense feeling—that pure unbridled joy—is tenfold as a cosplayer.

The number of heads that have already turned our way and made comments is in the dozens.

“I feel like I’ve had five shots of espresso,” Mori utters low, so only Cindy and I can hear her.

I nod. “At least.”

“Keep your heads, ladies. This is just the start. Let’s do some rounds and window shop before we go to the Supernatural panel. Y’all know I can’t be late for daddy Crowley.”

We agree and begin our stroll. The booths, the shops, the other creators, and the art are all in abundance, and it only makes sense that after a while, we all become occupied by various things we want to explore.

For Cindy, it’s an artist who draws caricatures within a five-minute window. For Mori, it’s a technology booth that goes over the mechanics of tracking algorithms. And for myself, it’s the sign for the restroom.

I tell them I’ll be right back, though they’re so transfixed they barely hear me, and disappear down the hall. Luckily, there isn’t a huge line yet, and I’m able to get a stall right away, but then, like the asshole fate is as of late, voices give me pause.

“Did you see her?” The first voice is scratchy and hoarse. It’s vaguely familiar. “I mean, seriously, what kind of friends are they to let her come here like that?”

Ouch.

These are the conversations Mori mentioned earlier. The attendees who talk shit and get under your skin.

“Shitty ones,” a higher voice responds, turning on the faucet. “And then, when we told her how cute she was, she fucking thanked us and got all shy. Like, bitch, if you’re not going to be in character, you might as well play dress up at home.”

Oh. You have got to be shitting me.

“Yep. She won’t last long, especially if she thinks spandex and a thong are enough to be a Mortal Kombat character. Be fucking for real.”

I think the other girl replies, but I don’t hear it. All I’m able to focus on is the small crack in my wall. The tiny, minuscule insecurity I thought words of affirmation was enough to patch closed.

Frustration and something eerily close to embarrassment squeezes around

my throat, choking out a quiet sob.

Why do I care what they think? Why does it matter?

I don't know why. And it shouldn't.

But I do, and it does.

I should have saved up more. Got more creative with what little I could come up with. I shouldn't have settled. Should have listened to Blade's lines in MK until my ears bled. Something. Anything. That way, I could make up for what I'm lacking.

But I guess it's too late now. Maybe I can just take off the thong and grab a hoodie at one of the booths.

Decision made, I wait until the girls are gone before I shove from the stall and quickly wash my hands. When I push the door open, I'm too blinded—either by anger or the slight glaze of unshed tears—and walk smack dab into a rock-solid chest and lose my balance. My right foot comes down wrong and my ankle nearly folds in half.

Strong hands catch me before I have a chance to fall, and when I glance up, I'm met with the deepest brown eyes.

“Careful there, B.”

My mouth feels like cotton, and my ankle throbs. It's *him*. “How do you know my name?”

The man with the strong jaw and wispy dark hair looks exasperated. “I think everyone does. Sonya Blade, right?”

Neck hot, I swallow. B as in Blade. *Duh*.

But I can't even use any energy to be embarrassed. He sucks the air from around us, absorbing it into his skin and watching as I lose the ability to breathe. No person should have this effect on anyone else. But damn, I see what all the fuss is about.

“Are you alright if I let you down?” Arian asks, his eyes darting behind me as if has much better places to be.

I clear my throat, my eyes suddenly burning. “Yes. I'm fine.”

He hesitates, though I'm not sure if it's because he doesn't believe me or because he wants to say something, but in the end, uncurls his hand from my arm and lets me regain my balance.

For two seconds, I consider saying what I promised I would, but the tightness of his features makes me reconsider. Maybe another time. “Thank you.”

“Sure.” His head tilts slightly before he takes a step to the side. “I'll let

you get back. I'm sure you have plenty of creators to meet, lots of pictures to get."

My brow furrows the tiniest bit, and I give him a tight smile. "What do you mean by pictures to *get*?"

Arian adjusts the gold armor on his shoulders, and it's now I realize he's Aquaman. It's outfitted superbly, the emerald gloves, cape, and leggings the perfect shade. And his gold accents, like the belt, armor, and trident, look like they cost more than six months of my rent.

It's annoyingly flawless, exactly like his smug smile I decide I'm not sure I like.

He shrugs. "Well, that's what the guests do, right? Take pictures of their favorite cosplayers and shop at all the booth—"

"I'm in cosplay," I interject. "You literally just referred to me as Sonya."

The years of admiration I have for him slowly slips, replaced by frustration.

Arian lifts a single eyebrow. "Spandex doesn't equal cosplay. Especially when you're walking around being friendly with everyone and not acting in character."

I open my mouth to say something, say anything, but he shakes his head.

"Blade isn't friendly."

Fire sparks in my gut. "First of all, I'm not being friendly." *Lie*. "I just got here." *Thirty minutes ago*. "And I haven't had the chance to do anything." *Like tell you that, before five seconds ago, I thought you were incredible*. "So what if I'm looking around at booths? Am I supposed to just walk around all mean and—"

"Stop. This is painful. You're asking what a cosplayer would do in character? I mean, seriously? Are you so new to the community that you didn't care enough to research the craft whatsoever?"

My jaw unhinges, and a vicious blush radiates across my entire body.

"Let me guess..." His eyes do a more thorough sweep of my frame, and suddenly, I feel a lot more exposed. More exposed than I did sitting in a stall, listening to those girls. "You watched one anime or saw some guy dressed up as a nostalgic character you liked and said, 'Oh, hey. I'm hot. I bet I could do that.'"

It's as if I've been punched.

Did I meet Cindy and Mori in the manga section after I saw a single ad of *one* line that made me run out and buy the entire series? Yes. Did seeing

Arian a year later in a spandex suit make me go, *Holy shit, that's sexy, I wanna see it in person?* Also, a resounding yes.

But it doesn't matter what brought me here. The fact remains, I'm in love with the community more than this asshat can ever understand, and he doesn't get to make me feel like shit about not being perfect my first time out.

The second I part my lips to reply, though, he turns and gives me his back. "Do yourself a favor next time and spend an hour doing actual research before putting on your workout outfit and ordering a wig, then calling yourself a cosplayer."

Then, he walks off. Leaving me in the barren hall with nothing but my shredded dignity and fresh tears.

Arian

CHAPTER FOUR

I've always thought Bailey was gorgeous, but when she's angry?
Fuck. She's downright delectable.

It takes entirely too much effort to retain my passive expression and act as if I'm completely unaffected by the woman standing a few small steps in front of me.

Bailey's outfit is perfect, like every one before it, and I use the second she glances behind me to appreciate it fully. Her jumpsuit fits her too well, conforming to curves I've fantasized about more than I probably should. The zipper in the middle extends from her neck to navel, and a white belt I wouldn't mind wrapping around her wrists cinches her waist. Then there's the thigh-high boots, leaving plenty to imagine.

Now, I won't lie, her perky tits and round ass are a fucking delight, but it's the placement of her hands that has my cock twitching. They're positioned on her hips with a new authority she didn't possess the last time we ran into one another. With a power that was missing.

Looks as though she found it.

I've been debating for over two months if I was going to let her know I remember her from our first encounter right away. Let her know that small moment has lived with me every damn day since. But in the end, I decided against it. Decided it was best to keep my mouth shut and see if it was possible to start fresh.

So, why did I change course at the last minute and mention our first

introduction? I have no fucking clue. But the look on her face makes it worth it.

Bailey doesn't dignify my question with a response and instead stares me down, a dominating undertone staining her voice. "What's the itinerary for tonight? Mori asked Danny over a dozen times, but he insisted I would have it when we got here."

I smirk, hiding the full-blown smile tugging at the corners of my lips beneath the metal plate covering my mouth. I've watched her videos over the years and have progressively seen her take a new role—a new persona—and up until this moment, wondered if it was all a facade. A mask for the masses.

Glad to see it isn't.

The strong ones are so much more fun to break.

My head tips back. "In a few minutes, we'll continue down this hall to a set of spiral steps that takes us to a balcony overseeing the party. We'll enter through there and go down—"

"Like a wedding?" Bailey scoffs, and my hand twitches to smack her on her ass for interrupting me.

"Call it whatever you will, buttercup, but we descend together. After that, we'll welcome the guests, and the viewers on the livestream before starting the evening. One of the sponsors has a drinking game setup in the lounge area right outside the dance floor that we're expected to play a few rounds of."

She shakes her head. "I'm not getting drunk."

"Then don't lose," I say simply. "After that and a little dancing, a taco truck will pull up in the back for us to eat, and lastly, the countdown to midnight."

"Sounds simple enough."

"It is," I agree.

Bailey eyes me suspiciously, the hazel color somehow shimmering even with the dull lighting of the hall. "And there's nothing you're leaving out? No midnight kiss or anything stupid like that?"

I hold a hand to my heart in mock offense. "You wound me, Bai."

She rolls her eyes.

My feet propel me a sudden step forward, small enough she doesn't start, but large enough there's less than a foot of space between us.

Just being in her bubble makes my body hum with a delicious current.

She blinks once. It's slow and meant to display her disinterest, as I let my eyes drift over her face. I'm not sure if I believe she's completely unbothered

by me or if she's a good actress, so I push. Just a little.

"You're saying you wouldn't kiss me if given the chance."

Her face stays as set as stone while she holds my gaze. "Absolutely not."

I linger in her space for a moment longer to see if I can spot the bold-faced lie. See if she has even the smallest tell. But there's nothing. Not a millimeter of her pupils expanding, no hitch of her breath, or a balance of weight on her feet.

She's not lying.

My chest tightens.

It's true I wasn't the nicest person when we first met, and though I can't blame anyone but myself, I was in a bad place.

People sometimes forget etiquette, and that day was particularly bad. I was so focused on a newcomer in green, I didn't notice fans encroaching on my space. Didn't notice the dozens of pictures that were taken when I wasn't looking—when I wasn't in character—because I was staring at *her*.

Who is she?

Have I seen her before?

She's fucking beautiful.

I was so lost in thought with creating a road map in my head to get to her, that when an asshole said something I now can't even remember, it set me off. Made me break my connection with the woman in green and say shit to him I immediately regretted.

I'm not really known to be a sweet guy, not someone people would consider a gentleman, but I know better than to insult a fan. To be shitty to the people who simply want the experience they paid for. And I took it out on her.

I've wanted to apologize since that day but haven't been able to.

It didn't take much for Danny to find her socials because, as coincidence would have it, he'd already seen her page. But it didn't matter because she blocked me on all her accounts. I figured messaging her off anything else would be considered fucking creepy, so I did the next thing I thought might get her attention.

When she made a video creating a costume, I made one with the counterpart.

In some way, I'd hoped she'd notice the trend, notice what I was doing, and say something, even if it was in confrontation. I just wanted to talk to her. To properly apologize. But the fans seemed to notice what I was doing

first and started to ship us together with nicknames like Ariley or Baiyan. It wasn't my intention, but I can't say I'm mad about it.

It got us here. It got me a few breaths away from her, watching as she struggles to keep her demeanor angry and her hands tightened into fists.

How is she more gorgeous with flared nostrils and pinched eyebrows?

I soften. She has every right to be pissed off, and my apology is long overdue. "Look, Bailey—"

"Whatever you're about to say, don't," she snaps, taking a quick step backward.

Surprise washes over me like cold water, and I straighten my spine. "Why not?"

"Since you remember me, then you can recall what a complete dick you were. And if you're about to apologize or something..." She trails off, uncurling her hands and stretching her neck as though trying to compose her next line of words. "I don't want to hear it. The past is just that. This is one night that has the potential to seriously change things for me. I'm not gonna let you or my indifference toward you fuck that up."

Indifference.

My mind wraps around the word and tears it up letter by letter. I'm not sure if I should be vexed by her instant rejection, but I damn sure respect it. Still, my intestines twist.

"So you don't want to hear what I have to say?"

"Nope. Not really." She shakes her head, a bored expression falling over her face. "And even though everything you said was shitty and a complete assumption, there is one thing that stuck, and I took it to heart."

Bailey turns back around and continues down the hall, toward the spiraled set of stairs. My feet don't hesitate to follow behind like a fucking lost puppy. "And what was that?"

She's quiet as she takes the first few steps, and when I don't think she's going to say anything, she turns to glance at me over her shoulder. "I am hot, and I can do this."

And with that, she walks the rest of the way up, leaving me with both a hard-on and the burning desire to *show* her my sincerest apologies instead of saying a damn word.

Brailery

CHAPTER FIVE

Holy fuck.

My heart knocks into my ribcage as I stand at the door that leads to the upstairs balcony. I can feel the burn of Arian's stare scorching into my skin, and with each step he takes to join me, it only intensifies.

I don't regret what I said by any means, but that small, sweet part of me that still remains after years of transformation aches. It yells at me to turn around and hear him out. Listen to the apology I know he has and make amends.

It's just a shame the crueler side of me doesn't give a single fuck. Not right now, at least.

My feet are light, my lungs full. Every nerve in my body sings in unison at the liberation that sweeps through me.

He deserved every word—worse, if I'm being honest—and he needed to hear them. Needed to know just because of his status, or his looks, he's not above common decency.

Maybe that's what I've really been nervous about this whole time. It wasn't about seeing him again, but following through on what I've waited years to say. For finally being able to show him that I know what the hell I'm doing and I deserve recognition.

The patter of my pulse slows to a comfortable pace by the time Arian catches me.

“Just as a heads up, if you weren't aware, I'm the villain. My demeanor

tonight will be—”

“Natural?” I scoff, lifting my chin while keeping my eyes on the white-paneled door in front of me. “I know who Shredder is, Arian. You can say I might have actually done my research this time.”

He clears his throat, and I swear the air around me gets warmer. My clothes feel a little tighter. It’s like static electricity has spread its fingers out, coiling around me, and at any second, the smallest thing will start a reaction.

“I just didn’t want you to be surprised by anything I say while the cameras are on us.”

I smirk. “Right. Well, as you know, April isn’t a pushover. She’s strong-willed, independent, and won’t bow down to a guy too scared to get his pretty face scratched up.”

“So tonight is going to be a never-ending battle?”

Shaking my head, I finally glance up at him.

I wish I hadn't. I’m met with a softness in his eyes I wasn’t aware he could possess, and for two seconds, I forget. I forget under the tight band of tension, the weighted air, and unspoken words. But when those two seconds pass, I drag my teeth over my bottom lip and force myself to regain control over my nerves in hopes of stopping my skin from tingling. “My intentions are now, and have always been, to act accordingly with my character. I’m simply giving you fair warning like you gave me. A common courtesy.”

His eyes flash, and for a moment, he looks genuinely hurt. “Bailey—”

“And now, the hosts of the evening, Arian Kincaid and Bailey Rooke!” Danny’s voice booms from a speaker from the other side of the door, popping the suffocating bubble surrounding us and signaling our grand entrance.

But Arian doesn’t move. His eyes stay pinned to mine, effectively holding me hostage. We’re stuck, staring one another down, an inviable lasso tying around us to keep us in place. At least, it does until I remember.

Remember what he said, how he made me feel. The potential tonight has for my future.

It’s that reason alone I’m able to step forward, opening the door and walking out onto the small balcony landing.

Finally inside the ballroom, I’m able to appreciate both the venue and the turnout. Like the picture Mori showed us, it’s massive, even with the many bodies occupying the space. A huge chandelier hangs from the center with a large disco ball strung from the middle. Expanding out, on either side, are hundreds of balloons, all gold, black, and silver, held up by a thin net. There

are also long silver tubes along the many columns around the perimeter, which I assume are the confetti cannons that will go off at midnight.

A display of the livestream is exactly where Mori said it would be. It's currently filled with an oversized picture of me staring off to the right at the display.

When Arian appears next to me, I break my gaze from the screen and look down at the crowd. There are over a hundred creators in attendance, and every single one of them has their eyes trained on us.

Once upon a time, I would have been sick to my stomach with nerves. Would have been terrified I was going to fall down the steps or do anything to make a complete fool of myself.

Not tonight.

Instead, my head is held high, confidence streaming through my veins, and my focus is on nothing but the prize. The end of the year will bring the beginning of *my* year.

Arian pauses on the step beside me and lifts a hand. The room quiets immediately. I have to place a hand on the banister to keep from rolling my eyes. And from ignoring the strange tingle at how he commands the room.

“In unison with ProCos and Cirq Play, we would like to welcome you and thank you for celebrating your New Year with us.” He clears his throat, and this time, when he speaks, his voice is much lower. Grittier. “Tonight, the sweet Miss O’Neil will delight you with her hospitality while I try not to rip anyone to shreds. Especially not her.”

His eyes flit to me in his periphery, the inclination clear.

It sends a shiver down my spine and a tightness in my core I immediately shove away. Instead, I smile at the crowd. “Let us hope he behaves. But if not, no worries. Donatello has shown me more than a few ways to use a stick and where to shove it.”

A round of laughter and sporadic applause echoes through the crowd while the chat at the side of the stream explodes. I don't bother trying to read any of it, beginning the descent down the stairs.

The DJ, dressed as Joker, starts the upbeat music, and the lights dim, signaling the start of the party.

Danny appears at the bottom of the steps, an iPad in his hand. It's only now I realize a small drone is hovering near me, its small lens trained in my direction. I smile and give a quick wave as I reach the bottom step.

“Hello, everyone. Thank you all so much for being here tonight. I can't

wait for you to see the incredible cosplays everyone has created, and for you to get a sneak peek of what to expect in March at MagiCon here in West Port. At some point during this evening's events, a flash sale will be popping up for tickets, so make sure you're keeping an eye out."

With that, Arian steps down, his front pressing lightly into my back.

I bristle at the contact, but not from discomfort.

What in the hell is wrong with me?

"Must you really spell it out for them? Can they not figure it out when it pops up on their screen?"

I give the camera a tight smile and think of what April's response would be to Shredder's condescending questions. In the end, I choose to say what Bailey would say to Arian.

Turning enough to break our touch and place a hand on his arm, I pat it twice. "Not everyone is an asshole who wants people to miss out on a good thing."

He grunts, his eyes cutting to me. "Not everyone deserves a good thing."

"Oh, there's no arguing that," I tell him, dropping my hand, but letting my nails rake rougher than necessary along his bicep. "But I can promise it's not them who doesn't."

His eyes narrow, understanding taking over. Then, even though I can't see his mouth, his eyes reveal the smirk beneath, and I imagine him saying something stupid like, *touché*. It coaxes an honest smile from me, which surprises me. I catch it quickly before turning around and walking toward the other end of the room, willing the little ember of whatever the hell it is in my chest to flicker and die.

I don't have time to feel anything toward Arian except disdain.

As I weave through the crowd, I get stopped quite a few times. Some by acquaintances I've made over the years, and others by new-to-me cosplayers. They're all incredibly kind, telling me how much they enjoy the setup of the evening and the idea behind the party, or simply to compliment my outfit.

Each person fuels the fire to my confidence, and by the time I make it to the lounge area, I feel as though I'm floating on cloud nine.

A large, U-shaped white leather couch is positioned not too far from the bar. It seats over a dozen people, with plenty of space in between. There's a long oval table in the middle that houses a row of empty shot glass, a container of ice, a set of water bottles, napkins, and three bottles of Jack Daniels.

My eyes find Cindy, who's sitting at the end in deep conversation with Mori.

"Everything okay?"

They both break apart and nearly tackle me as they stand in unison.

"How was your first meeting with him?"

"Is he the jerk you thought he'd be?"

"He looks fucking hot."

"Everyone won't stop talking about how amazing you two look."

"Please tell me you're going to sit on that man's face."

I hold up my hands and glance over my shoulder to make sure Arian isn't within earshot. When I see him farther back, speaking with a pair dressed as Peter Pan and a shadow, I spin back around.

"He's exactly what I expected." I shrug, gesturing for them to sit. When they do, I flop down between them. "Arrogant and chauvinistic."

Cindy's eyes flash behind me. "God, I bet he's great in bed."

My skin prickles. "Because he looks good?"

Mori shakes her head. "Those are usually the selfish ones."

I point. "Precisely. And something tells me Arian would flick the left labia for five minutes and ask if the girl came."

Even as I say it, I know it's a lie. I'm not sure how, I just do. Something tells me Arian would not only know exactly where the clit is located, but if a woman came, and how many times.

Shaking my head, I push away the random thought that only pisses me off more than he has. "Anyways. Tonight should be a breeze. We have to play this game, dance together, eat tacos, and, at last, the countdown."

"Oh, they have tacos?"

"Yes. The best part of the night, if you ask me." It's a well-known fact that I could live off tacos for the rest of my life and never complain. I turn to Mori. "Have you checked any of our accounts?"

She nods frantically, a smile blooming over her face. "Yes. It's already looking great. When you and Arian went back and forth, numbers spiked. I've also been reading some of the comments on the livestream, and they're really interesting."

"Interesting? How so?"

She bites on the corner of her lip and exchanges a quick look with Cindy before elaborating. "Well, naturally, people think it's hot you're going toe to toe with him, but then they are also saying how great you two look as an ite

—”

“Can I have you sit back here, Bailey?” Danny appears in front of us, a grumpy Arian standing close behind. I’m not sure why my heart rate spikes, but I attribute it to him almost overhearing our conversation about his possible lack of ability in bed.

“Why?” Cin asks, her eyes slowly dragging down Arian’s frame. It’s slow and appraising, and something snaps at my chest, making me nudge her. She shrugs when she makes eye contact with me.

Danny lifts a shoulder as he taps a few buttons on his tablet to change the trajectory of the drone that’s floating in the middle of the dance floor. “There’s more room for her and Arian, and allows the camera a few different angles.”

Of course, we have to sit together.

I blow out a sigh before pushing to my feet and sparing my friends one last look. Mori has the smallest hint of sympathy in her eyes, whereas Cindy wiggles her eyebrows.

Rolling my eyes, I shuffle to the back of the couch, trying not to collapse when I sit. I’m already so exhausted.

Arian sits closer than necessary, draping an arm over the back of the couch. He reclines, spreading his legs wide, causing the outside of our thighs to touch.

I sit up a little straighter, the disgust on my face for my character, while the annoyance from me.

He huffs, inclining his head so that his voice is only meant for me to hear. “Before tonight is over, I promise you’ll forgive me.”

Turning an inch to peer at him over my shoulder, I scoff. Arrogant asshole. “Doubtful.”

He shrugs. “One way or another, Bai.”

It’s hard to ignore the way I like the way my name rolls off his tongue. “You know what? If you think you can accomplish it, go right ahead. I mean, it’s not like I’m impartial to seeing you on your knees.”

Again, I see the smile in his eyes as he relaxes into the leather. There’s a promise creasing the edges and foreign heat licks at my spine.

I don’t know what I’ve just gotten myself into, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little too excited about it.

Bailey

CHAPTER SIX

“So here are the rules to the game,” Danny announces to us, as well as the drone hovering near him.

“I’d think it’s fairly self-explanatory, is it not?” Arian says from beside me, a droll expression in his white eyes. “Take the card, do as it says or drink.”

“Well, yes—”

“Then let’s start.” Cindy snatches a shot glass from the table. “I’m thirsty.”

Danny shakes his head. “Alright, but let me introduce everyone to the players.”

He starts with the person closest to his left, which is Mori. I don’t miss the way either of them looks at one another, their expressions softening.

“Why do you have such a strong opinion about them? Don’t want your manager fraternizing with the enemy?”

I roll my eyes, refusing to look at him. “No. It’s exactly what I said earlier. If he’s interested in her, he should tell her. I don’t want my friend being strung along.”

“So that’s what you prefer? For someone to be forthright about their feelings?”

I nod. “Yes. It’s a waste of time to do anything else. If you want to be with someone, tell them. If you only want to fuck them, tell them. If you dream of traveling the world and popping out a football team, t—”

“Tell them, yeah, I get the gist.” He sighs. “But as you said, that’s *your* preference.”

My brows furrows, and I allow myself to look at him. His eyes flicker to mine, and a spike of something I can’t identify shoots through me. “Elaborate.”

He lifts a hand as Danny introduces him, but keeps his voice low. “It’s clear they have something going on. And maybe they like how it is. Maybe this is their way of exploring whatever it is they want. Not everyone jumps balls in.”

I bite on the inside of my lip before smiling at Danny and the camera when he announces me. After he moves to the Queen of Hearts sitting a little ways down, I glance at Mori again. She’s currently looking down at her iPad, presumably watching the stream and going over analytics, but every few seconds, her lashes flutter as she steals quick glances at Danny.

It’s cute. Sweet. Something I haven’t been in years. And not just because of the man sitting next to me.

In bed, I used to enjoy being the more submissive type. The one who was the pleaser. I mean, I can’t even begin to describe how many times I had sex without finishing, but felt good about serving my partner. Shit thought process, I know, but that’s how I was. It was how I felt.

But then, two years ago, something happened. A switch flipped when I ran into Arian. I became angry. Bitter. I started thinking about all the different ways my sweetness was affecting other parts of my life. How much I was accepting it without it ever being beneficial to me.

After I thought long and hard about every aspect, I realized I didn’t want to be nice anymore. At least, not in ways where I had the potential to be used, hurt, or disappointed.

But that’s what I want for *my* life, and it was unfair of me to judge Danny. It’s clear they’re both smitten, and that’s great.

A tightness stretches over my chest with the need to apologize.

“Oh, um.” Mori’s voice catches my attention, and I realize she’s drawn her first card. “It says to confess the weirdest porn you ever watched or drink.”

As if on cue, a waitress in a glittering red gown arrives with a tray full of a variety of drinks.

“I need to know, darling.” A popular cosplayer known for his accents leans forward. He tips the hat of his Prince Naveen outfit. “Something as

precious as you must have the most delicious desires.”

Mori’s lips disappear beneath her teeth briefly, her gaze flashing to Danny. “The weirdest porn I’ve seen is more along the lines of gross.”

“Which is?” the queen drawls.

“Two girls and—”

“That’s not porn, you poor soul.” Cindy leans forward and snatches her card off the table. “Drink.”

Mori’s lips part twice, but then she thinks better of it and grabs the apple martini in front of her.

“Show everyone in the room your bank account or take a shot.” Cindy lets out a cackle before gripping the Jack Daniels bottle on the table and tearing off the top to pour a shot. “A lady never exposes what’s under her dress—or tentacles.”

I laugh, watching her take back the liquor before puckering her lips and shaking her head.

The next few players each draw a card and proceed with the game. I listen and laugh along with the group, but slowly, my focus begins to wane. A heat blooms on the side of my face, and gradually moves down the length of my body. At first, I try to ignore him, try to tell myself he’s doing it just to annoy me, but after the next three players go and my face is all but searing, I give in.

“What?” I snap, but keep my voice low enough for only him to hear.

“Is there a problem with me looking at you?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Bec—” I don’t get to finish my sentence because Danny calls Arian’s name to pull the next card.

Arian hesitates, presumably because he thinks I’m about to finish my explanation, but then Danny clears his throat. He sighs and leans forward to grab the card with the speed of someone who has no energy left. When he turns it over, my eyes scan quickly over the text.

My shoulders sag in relief. Some of the cards have included using other players, and I have the distinct feeling that he wouldn’t hesitate to pick me, should he get one.

“Confess one of your greatest regrets or take a drink. Easy.” He flicks the card back on the table before relaxing on the couch. “A couple of years ago, anger got the better of me, and I insulted a fan, then immediately after, was

an asshole to a pretty girl in green.”

I cover my mouth with my fist to fake a cough. “*Liar.*”

He lifts one shoulder lazily. “I’ve never seen the appeal of lying. The benefits don’t outweigh the outcome, and it only ever gets people in trouble.”

“So you consider your interaction with me to be one of your greatest regrets?”

Arian’s white eyes flash to mine. “My only, if I’m being completely honest.”

I clear my throat, failing to ignore the ripple in my stomach, or the sudden charge in the air. Still, I push, wanting—or maybe hoping—to expose his lie. “So you’ve never made a mistake you wish you could take back?”

“Your turn, Bailey,” Danny says over the music, a little louder than necessary, and I wonder vaguely if he’d already called my name.

I swallow around the knot suddenly lodged in my throat and slip a card off the stack.

DO A TRUST FALL WITH THE PERSON YOU TRUST LEAST IN THE GROUP OR DRINK TWICE.

Arian releases a huff of dry laughter. “Go ahead and take a sip.

My brows snap together. “You don’t think I’ll do the challenge?”

He laughs again, this one much louder, as if I’d just told him a joke. “We both know you won’t.”

“Ah.” I slap the card on the table. “Reverse psychology. You’re saying that because you actually want me to. But see, I trust you about an ounce more than I trust Mr. Naveen over there.”

I don’t know why I say it. Why I think it’s a good idea to poke the bear. But also, why not? It’s not as though he should mind.

His head tilts to the side. “Why would you let a stranger catch you?”

“*You’re a stranger.*”

Knowing someone through the lens of videos and social media doesn’t constitute as actually *knowing* them.

“I’m not a stranger, Bailey.” He shifts in his seat as I stand. There’s a clear challenge in his eyes, and it sends a thrill of excitement through me. “Don’t.”

I lift a brow. “Or?”

He remains silent.

That's what I thought. Smirking, I turn to point to the prince. "Him."

The creator nearly jumps to his feet. "Oh, darling. I wouldn't dream of letting you fall."

We maneuver on the other side of the couch, and I put my back to him. The drone appears at our side and watches as I cross my arms. Before I push my weight back on my heels, my gaze flickers to Arian.

He's not looking and instead cracks his neck.

I'm not sure why I thought this would bother him, or why I even *want* to bother him, but the soft ache radiating over my chest as I fall into the man's embrace isn't lost on me.

The people on the couch clap, while some whistle as we return to our seats.

Arian doesn't speak, and I don't look at him, but the air is much thinner than it was before. More stifling.

The next person takes out a card. "Confess what you love more. Giving or receiving? It doesn't specify whether it means sexually or not, but that's what I'll assume. I'm going to say..."

The woman's voice trails as all my attention diverts to Arian, who is leaning forward. "I don't like that you view us as strangers."

I huff. "Why do you care?"

"Because I do." He says it simply. Like it should be common sense. "Tell me what you want to know."

My head turns to look at him. "What if I tell you I don't want to know anything?"

"I like that you want me to work for your forgiveness."

Though I can only see the white contacts, I can make out the sincerity. But even still, his words and apologetic face don't negate what he made me feel back then. "Why do you need me to forgive you?"

"Because." He readjusts, his gaze never leaving my face. "It wasn't only that I took out my anger on you. I also blamed you a little for the mistake I made with the fan."

"Me?" My brows lift in surprise. "What did I do?"

"Nothing." He shakes his head. "Literally nothing. I saw you when you first—"

"Arian."

Both our heads snap to his manager, both of us equally annoyed we keep

getting interrupted.

“She picked you.”

My eyes flash to the woman he’s pointing to. She’s dressed like Wonder Woman, a broad smile painted across her face as she holds her card up.

CHALLENGE: UNZIP ANOTHER PLAYER'S PANTS WITH YOUR TEETH OR TAKE THREE SIPS OF YOUR DRINK.

Something ugly and green blooms in my chest. I don’t care, not even in the slightest, but we were clearly in the middle of a conversation. Plus, we’re hosting this party together because the fans want to see us together. Not him with someone else.

“Sorry, dear.” Arian reclines. “Elastic band.”

She visibly pouts while I relax. “Fine. Guess it will be you.” As she turns her attention to another creator, Arian continues as though no one interrupted us.

“Forgive me. Let’s start over.”

“Because?”

He hesitates. “I’d like to get to know you.”

“Why?” I’m not trying to be difficult on purpose, but I have to admit, it feels a bit empowering to have someone like him make such an effort.

“Do you always ask so many questions?”

I nod. “Yes, especially when the answers aren’t very adequate.”

“I’m adequate in the ways that matter, Bai. Now, what do I need to do?”

I shrug, saying the first thing that comes to mind. “Get on your knees.”

His brows lift momentarily before he nods, sending a jolt down my spine. “Here, or would you like to come in a place with a little more privacy?”

My jaw unhinges while a large part of me aches to call his bluff. “I was kidding, Kinkaid.”

“I’m not.”

My face heats, something new and intoxicating swirling in the small space between us, but luckily, Danny calls Arian to draw again before I can formulate a response.

He reads the card quickly before laughing. It’s much deeper than before. Throatier. My core tightens.

“Challenge. Let the person to your right give you a shot, or take two.”

His eyes flash to me before he reaches over and grabs a shot Danny is quick to pour. He hands it to me and strips off his mask.

“On my knees, right?”

Arian

CHAPTER SEVEN

I run my thumb along my bottom lip as I stand, staring down the bridge of my nose at Bailey. Her eyes are wide, her pouty lips parted, shock clear in every line on her face.

She's so fucking adorable.

Maybe that's why I can't keep any decision I've made since seeing her. Every time I think I know what I'm going to do, or what I'm going to say, she bats those damn eyelashes, unknowingly presses her leg closer to mine, or simply looks my way.

She's wrapping me around her little finger, and I don't think either of us understands just how much.

A moment passes before Bailey composes herself and rises to her feet, her nerves gone, and in its place is the woman she portrays for her fans. Dominating. Fearless.

It's the same woman I've become enamored with. The one I want to possess and be possessed by.

"Down," she commands, a brow arching as if she dares me to challenge her.

Without a word, I sink to my knees, my focus so stuck on her captivating gravity, the whistles and cheers from the growing spectators are nothing more than muted background noise. But it isn't just me who can't look away.

For what could be two seconds, or two hours, we remain perfectly still, a thousand silent words passing between us, the air becoming denser with

every breath. My hope is that she's beginning to understand what I'm willing to do to have her forgive me. Just like I'd do anything to steal her screams. Swallow her every moan. Do the things I've fantasized about for longer than I'll ever admit.

And I think she does. I think she sees it, because, for a moment, her mask slips. It reveals the woman who was dressed in green spandex and had run into me. Those big hazel eyes were completely enthralled and transfixed, wanting nothing more than to stay locked in my hold.

I want her to look at me like that when my tongue dives inside her cunt.

When I'm so deep inside her, she can't catch her breath.

After another beat, Bailey's finally able to break our connection and glances at someone behind me. I'm not sure what happens, but one side of her lips curls, and she nods before taking the shot herself.

I'm momentarily surprised, but then she drops the empty glass and does something I wouldn't be able to prepare for, even with an advanced warning.

She grips my chin firmly with her finger and thumb, angles my face, and then dips down, stopping only a few inches from my mouth.

My blood soars, my pulse thrumming in my veins so powerfully, all I hear is whooshing through my ears.

Anticipation and lust surge down my spine, and it takes the entirety of my self-control not to grab either side of her face and close the minuscule gap.

But then, one of her fingers leaves my chin and taps my bottom lip, prompting me to open. Her eyes bore into my fucking soul and snatch it from its dark hiding place.

Her reign over me forces me to do as instructed immediately, parting my lips.

Her pupils flare, but it's the only tell as her mask slides back firmly in place. In the next second, her mouth opens, and the liquor flows from her mouth to mine, not a single drop wasted.

Never in my life have I been more turned on than in this singular moment. The act serves in more ways than she can possibly imagine and brands me with a new sort of desire.

When she's done, she straightens her spine, wiping the back of her hand over her mouth before tipping my jaw closed. "Swallow it."

Again, I do as told, my throat bobbing hard as I swallow the liquid. My entire body heats, but only part of it is from the whiskey.

Bailey taps my nose once. “That’s a good boy.”

If I wasn’t hard before, I’m fucking stone now, and how I’m able to refrain from throwing her over my shoulder and taking her upstairs to the private rooms is a goddamn miracle.

And she knows it. She can see it in the heat of my stare and the tick of my jaw. In the strain of my muscles when I rise to sit and in the rigidity of my posture. But instead of saying anything, she smirks and leans forward for her turn to grab a card.

This woman.

“Tell the person closest to you a secret you’ve never told anyone, or finish your drink.”

Bailey huffs as she tosses the card back down. Her fingers play along the edge of what looks to be a cosmopolitan, lost in deliberation. After a second, she leans toward me to whisper in my ear.

“I’ve never had an orgasm I didn’t assist with.”

My entire body sings with that one sentence, and when she tries to back away, I grip her around the wrist to pull her back to me. With the way we’re positioned, no one can see my face, so I press my lips to the shell of her ear.

“I would love to rectify that horrific secret.”

I can hear her smile. “I’m sure you would.”

“You misunderstand, Bai. The only thing I’ll be able to think about now is making you come all over my fingers. Or perhaps my tongue. Whatever you’ll allow.” I squeeze her wrist a little tighter. “Nothing else.”

She reclines, and this time, I let her, releasing her hand in hopes she can read the truth in my eyes. When she sees it, I know without a shadow of a doubt she’s considering my offer.

“You’d want something in return. They always do.”

My eyebrows draw together. “I just told you what I want, and I don’t lie.”

Her eyes flash. “I don’t even know you.”

An exasperated sigh works from my throat. “Ketchup goes in the fridge, cats are actually awesome pets, and fruit doesn’t belong on pizza.”

Bailey smiles, and for the first time, I think I’m seeing a real one. It reaches her eyes, which have two of the smallest crow’s feet. The sight alone is enough to make my heart ache. “Those are superficial facts. What’s something more meaningful?”

She wants to know more.

My stomach damn near flips. “Humans deserve basic rights regardless of

literally anything, composting isn't only for people with a garden, and keeping the water running while brushing your teeth is one of the most wasteful things I've ever seen."

"And something you don't tell people, but let them figure out as they get to know you?"

I smile, watching the edges of her hard exterior chip away. It's a delicious victory, especially because I know she's trying her hardest to continue to dislike me. "I hate when I cut my toenails, and they flick me in the eye, shoes should come off at the door, and I'm terrified of geese."

"Geese? Did they chase you as a kid or something?"

I shake my head. "Worse. I took my little brother to feed them, and there were signs posted about how they shouldn't eat bread. So we went and got lettuce. At first, they didn't like it, but after the first few had a taste, they became fucking addicts. They started nipping at me for not feeding them fast enough, and then when we didn't have any more, I had to put him on my shoulder and run. And then, yeah, I guess they did chase us after that."

She bursts out with a genuine laugh. The sound acts like a balm to my soul.

"How old were you?" she asks between hiccupping breaths.

"This was two years ago," I deadpan.

"Oh shit." More laughter, and my heart reaches out for hers. "I'm sorry."

I shrug. "Me too."

When she comes down from her small bout of laughter, her glossy eyes fall on me. They're much softer than they were before. A weighted pause passes between us, and after a moment, she decides something. "I wasn't lying about the secret I told you a minute ago, but I have another."

My head tilts. "Oh?"

She sucks the corner of her lip into her mouth to chew on it as she deliberates whether she wants to tell me. When she releases it, her words rush out. "You changed my career that day."

My brows tick together. "How so?"

Bailey sighs. "You were right back then. Not about me not doing research or just randomly deciding to do cosplay 'cause I thought I was hot', but about being new and too nice. Right before I ran into you, I overheard some people saying basically the same thing, and I realized I needed to either have tougher skin, or do better at committing to my character. I did both."

My chest pulls tight. "Bailey. I'm sorry I was an asshole. You looked

amazing that day. Hell, as soon as I spotted you, I couldn't keep my fucking eyes off of you."

She grins. "No need to butter me up."

"I'm not trying to. I mean it. You don't have to have an expensive or elaborate costume to have a great cosplay. And I made you feel like you did. That's the worst thing someone who's been doing it for a while could do to a newcomer."

She swallows, her head bobbing in a nod, though I'm not even sure if she's aware she's doing it.

"Arian, we're going to take a break." Danny's voice cuts through the intimate bubble Bailey and I have found ourselves in, reminding me we were playing a game.

Bailey's eyes flit from mine. "Oh. Okay." She turns back to me. "I'm gonna catch up with Mori and Cindy real quick. Meet on the dance floor in fifteen minutes."

I start to smile until I realize it's what I told her was on the itinerary, and not simply because she wanted to dance with me. The notion weighs heavily on my shoulders. "Yeah. That works. I'll check in with Danny to see how the streams are going."

When she stands to go, I have to stop myself from reaching out to her. But I *don't* stop myself from watching as she meets up with her two friends and disappears into the crowd.

"Holy shit, man." Danny collapses onto the couch next to me, tapping something on his iPad to make the drone fly and hover over the dance floor instead of us. "What the hell was that?"

I finally pull off my helmet, running a hand through my hair. The cool air should feel nice, but it's still oddly suffocating. "What do you mean?"

Danny scoffs, looking at me as though I've lost my mind. "Did y'all forget there were ten other people around? I was sure you were about to fuck her right here on this couch. I thought she hated you."

"You're being a bit dramatic, Dan. And I'm hoping I can change that last part."

"Hell, I think you already did."

I ignore him, not wanting to get my hopes up until I hear the words from Bailey's mouth, and nod to the device in his hands. "How are we looking?"

"Ridiculous. There have been hundreds of donations, thousands of shares, you hit the million mark on following and—"

“What are they saying about Bailey? How’s her stuff looking?”

Danny starts to open his mouth but shakes his head. “The same. Her numbers are great. People are dying for more screen time of you two. Especially after that shot.”

I smirk as I recall her dominating me. I’ve never had the urge to submit to anyone, but with her, I would get on my knees every fucking day. Let her order me to do what she wants, when she wants it, and how she wants it.

Then, I’d have her on her back so I could split her in two.

Bailey

CHAPTER EIGHT

It takes a few minutes to weave in and out of the people dancing, mostly because I keep getting stopped and praised for the stunt I pulled with Arian. Every time someone mentions it, my core tightens, and a feeling I shouldn't be experiencing grows heavier between my thighs.

Recalling the look on his face, the loud pounding of my heart, and the quick movement of his chest makes my entire body feel as if it's on fire.

It was so euphoric. *Liberating*. I'll likely replay that moment every day for a depressingly long time, hoping, *wishing* I might experience something like it again.

My stomach folds when I realize I might never.

That power. The exhilarating dominance. And the thought that it wasn't only about taking control, but that it was *with him* has my heart aching.

By the time we finally make it through the crowd and to the other side, where the tables are set up around the perimeter, my pulse is thrumming aggressively in my throat. Luckily, Mori's quick to try to distract me.

"Long story short, you're killing it. Follower count is up twenty percent across all platforms, and two companies have reached out for possible marketing partnerships."

Excitement floods my system. "Seriously?"

She holds two fingers up. "Scout's honor."

"You can't do that because you were never in the Girl Scouts." Cindy bumps her with a shoulder. "But also, she's being serious. Most of the

comments are asking why they've never heard of you before."

"Is anyone using my code to buy tickets for MagiCon?"

"Forty percent, which is insane when you realize that before, Arian was always raking in around ninety-five."

"Woah." I push out a steadying breath, but it does nothing to calm my raging pulse. "Anything else?"

She and Cindy exchange a brief look before Mori clears her throat. "They want more content of you and Arian together."

Same.

The thought slaps me out of nowhere, and I internally berate myself. *It was one moment, that's all. Don't make a mountain out of a molehill.* "Okay, well, we'll be back together in a second."

Mori nods, but her lips thin. "Right, but they've been mentioning midnight in particular."

Midnight? But before I can even ask, the answer hits me. "For a kiss?"

She nods.

"Not happening."

Cindy rolls her eyes. "Why not? You were damn near on top of each other during the drinking game. I figured you forgot all about disliking him so much."

Ha. Forgot definitely isn't a word I would use. Avenging my two years of anger? Realizing I enjoy dominating him? Noticing he's maybe not so bad? Remembering why I once admired him?

Maybe. Perhaps.

For the first time, I consider telling them why I was initially pissed off at him, but decide against it. It wouldn't matter because I'm not even truly mad anymore. I mean, how can I be when he's trying so hard to earn my forgiveness? For us to start over.

"It's kind of complicated," I tell them, turning to put my back to the table. "But we're definitely not kissing."

My eyes drift over everyone on the dance floor, catching on the colorful sparks of light bouncing from the disco ball. Each person my gaze connects with is lost in their own element, dancing and laughing, enjoying themselves without a care in the world. The video above shows the innermost part of the dance floor, where there's a small group dressed as villains having an odd sort of dance off.

Even with so much happening, the comments in the stream mostly

revolve around Arian and me. Asking where we are, when we'll be on the dance floor, and if we'll be in charge of the midnight countdown.

I'm conflicted, but about what, I'm not even sure. Besides fixing my long overdue issue of needing a hands-off orgasm, Arian doesn't want anything else, but a simple *all is well, I forgive you*. But I don't think that's all I want, and if I give in and like it—I mean, *really* like it—I'll have an entirely different problem to deal with.

Indecision tangles in my chest as my eyes find him on the other side of the room. He's talking to Danny and a woman in a suit, all of them with serious expressions on their faces. Then, as if he can feel me watching, Arian's gaze snaps straight to me.

He holds my stare for a moment until Danny hits him on the shoulder. Even then, he smirks and winks before giving Danny his attention.

A blush warms my cheeks.

"B."

I turn back around to Cindy. Her head is tilted to the side, she and her plastic eel staring at me with the same knowing look.

"If you don't fuck that man, or at least get a little freaky with him, I'm pretty sure you're gonna regret it until the day you die."

I arch a brow. "Why? Just because he's hot?"

"Duh," she and Mori chime in unison. "But also, the tension between y'all is disgusting, and neither one of you is concentrating on anything else. So get it out of your system so you can focus. You're here for a reason, remember?"

"I am focused," I argue, but in the back of my mind, I wonder vaguely who the woman Arian was talking to is. She looks familiar, but I can't quite place her. "And speaking of tension, why aren't you saying anything to Mori? She and Danny are so much worse."

"Actually..." Mori sets her tablet down. "I think he's going to finally ask me out tonight."

"Ask you out?" Cin clarifies. "So y'all haven't been sneaking around all this time? *Jesus*. Years of waiting, and what if the dick is bad?"

"Cindy," I hiss, but she merely shakes her head.

"Don't *Cindy* me. Two years is too long to wait and find out if the sex was worth it. Can you imagine the dry spell?"

"Who said she's not dating other people while she—"

"I'm not." Mori's voice is barely audible above the music. "I've been

living off battery-powered boyfriends.”

“Wait. What?”

I hold up a hand, my mind flashing back to what Arian said earlier. “You know what? I think it’s sweet. And he seems like a great guy, I’m happy for you.”

Cindy’s eyes bulge from her head. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am. If she’s okay with it, then we should, too.”

A shimmer passes over Mori’s eyes. “Thank you, Bailey.”

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I, ladies?” The low timber of Arian’s voice causes goosebumps to ripple down my arms.

I don’t turn around. “We’re in the middle of a conversation, so—”

“Girl, stop. You were talking straight gibberish about how two years of celibacy is acceptable if you like someone you’re not even with.” Cindy throws her hands up, clearly exasperated. “I mean, who does that?”

I’m quick to swivel and grab Arian’s arm. “Dance with me?”

He follows behind without hesitation. “Yes.”

“Great.” I lead him through the crowd, which annoyingly parts for us now that I have Arian in tow, and stop just outside the circle of villains still having a dance-off.

When I release his hand, he lets it slide to the small of my back. I consider saying something about it, but decide otherwise when I admit to myself I like the feeling of his hand there.

We’re quiet for a minute, watching with the masses as Hook and Venom go toe to toe, their moves getting more complicated the longer they alternate back and forth. But after Hook goes down in a split and Venom flips over him, I yell over the music.

“Who do you think is going to win?”

For a solid minute, I continue to watch the men, and it isn’t until they’re done that I turn to see why Arian hasn’t answered me. I find his eyes are already on mine, an unreadable expression playing on the edges of his face.

It sends a strange sensation over me. “Everything alright?”

He nods, running a hand over the small, exposed part of his face as if to gather himself. “Yeah.”

My heart twists. “I thought you don’t lie.”

“I don’t *like* to lie.”

My stomach drops an inch. “What’s wrong?”

He shakes his head. “I’m lost in thought, love. That’s all.”

I try my best to ignore the way that word jumbles my insides. I also try not to read into it, as I'm fairly positive he doesn't even realize he's said it. "Alright. Well, if there's anything I can do or if you want to talk it out..."

His lips twitch. "That's awfully kind of you."

Rolling my eyes, I forgo watching the villains and position both my hands around his neck. "Mention it again, and I don't even think getting on your knees will be enough to make me forgive you."

His fingers dig lightly into my back in a way that feels almost possessive. "So you forgive me?"

"That's not what I said."

"But you implied it."

"No, I mentioned you being on your knees not being enough to get you forgiven."

The slower tempo of the music guides Arian's feet as he pulls me closer to his chest. "Did you like me like that? Down, and telling me what to do."

I'm grateful for the low lighting, so he can't see the blush creep up my neck. "Maybe. Did you like being *told* what to do?"

He doesn't hesitate. "By you? Absolutely."

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as he moves me across the floor, our bodies pressing closer together. His hard, ridged front feels too good against me, and I end up forgetting my next comment in lieu of simply enjoying the moment. Enjoying him and how, in only an hour's time, it feels as if I've known him so much longer.

How, in that same amount of time, he made me realize more about myself than girls' nights, Cosmo, and seven failed relationships.

We skirt across the floor, hand in hand, until the beat changes, switching to something faster, but more sensual.

Arian changes our connection without a misstep, gripping either side of my hips to turn my back to his front. I lift my arms on instinct, draping my hands around his neck as I roll my body, letting the tempo guide me.

We move together in tandem, his hands roving over my frame, while I use him for support, slowly grinding my ass against him. My body hums as it gets familiar with his, every step we take leading us to somehow closer than we were the step before.

I'm vaguely aware of the crowd beginning to form a circle around us, of the whistles and words of encouragement. Because the longer our bodies stay attached, almost fused together, the rest of the world melts away.

There's only Arian and I, and the steady beat of the music.

And this growing feeling.

This understanding.

As much as I try to fight my attraction—our connection—the harder it fights back, tearing my preconceived feelings, dislikes, and negative thoughts to complete shreds.

"I haven't told you yet." Arian's lips find my ear, sending a delicious shiver down my spine. "But you look beautiful."

He releases my hips to twirl me back around. I'm breathing heavily, sweat beading at my temple. "Thank you."

His eyes drift over my face before she shakes his head. "I was a fucking idiot."

The corners of my lips twitch. "I can't argue with you there."

"No, you can't." We continue to move, only now it's much slower. Less concentration on sticking with the tempo and instead just remaining close together. "I meant what I said about it being one of my greatest regrets."

My hands tighten around his neck, and I ask him what he wasn't able to answer earlier. "Haven't you ever made a mistake you wish you could take back?"

"Nothing close to how I felt that day."

The warmth that spreads through my chest is intense. So much, a burn radiates behind my eyes.

This man is trouble, and already, even with my thousand blockades, he's climbing over them with ease and knocking each of them down.

I drop my arms, despite every fiber in my body telling me to hold on tighter. "Will you excuse me?"

Arian hesitates, a line creasing in the middle of his forehead. It's clear he wants to protest, ask me what's wrong, but in the end, he nods once and takes a step backward. I give him a tight smile and ascend the stairs toward the balcony.

Remember. This is just another party, and he is just another guy.

But even as I think it, I know that's not true anymore. And neither is this strange feeling growing too big and too fast to ignore.

Maybe Cindy's right. Maybe I need to get him out of my system so I can focus on what matters.

And maybe that all starts with a quick little O.

Arian

CHAPTER NINE

It takes me less than a minute after Bailey disappears up the stairs for me to get my head out of my ass and go after her.

I've already made enough mistakes with her to last a lifetime, and I don't intend for there to be another one.

Taking the steps two at a time, my heart pounding in my ears the entire way, I replay the last ten minutes in my mind. Her shield was crumbling, piece by piece, and it scared her. I could see it. See her hesitation and the questions. The fear and contemplation. I get it. I understand.

We didn't start off on a good foot, and she has every reason in the world to be skeptical about my intentions. Every reason to think I'm an asshole who's going to fuck her over.

But what I want from her is far from what she assumes. Has been since the moment I laid eyes on her.

Once I'm on the landing, I push open the door and enter the dim hallway. It's vacant.

Dammit.

Running a frustrated hand through my hair, I rush down the hall, descend the spiraled steps, then continue until I'm back in the lobby. The ladies' restroom line is long. So long, I know she couldn't have gone through it in the thirty-second head start she had.

Where is she?

"If you're looking for the April, she went up the elevator." My eyes

flicker to the doorman standing guard in the lobby. His expression is nothing short of gargoyle stone, and when I only look at him, he nods behind him. “There’re private restrooms in the bridal suite on the third floor.”

“Thank you.” I barely utter the words before I’m jabbing the button on the elevator doors. It only takes a second before they slide open, and I’m inside, pushing the number three, impatience swirling in my bloodstream.

My leg bounces as I wait for the elevator to rise. When it finally does, I’m out in the hallway before the doors have time to fully open. A sign on the adjacent wall points to the bridal suite. When I get to the room, I find the doors open.

Inside, it’s what one would expect. Chandelier lighting, long leather couches, round white ottomans, and glass tables. The east and west walls are set up in individual mirrored stations. At the back are black frosted doors, which are also ajar. I cross the room and have my hand wrapped around the knob, when the door is pushed from the other side.

“Oh!” Bailey squeaks, jumping back and pressing a hand over her heart. “Holy shit, you scared me.”

“Sorry, I just—” My grip tightens on the handle. When I can’t find the words—something that never happens—I clear my throat and readjust my weight on my heels.

Her eyes drift over my face briefly before her hand drops to her hip. “You apologize a lot.”

“That’s the thing, I don’t.”

She arches a single eyebrow. “Then why have you done it so much tonight?”

“Because I wan—I need you to forgive me.”

“Tell me why.” Her tone lowers as she steps forward, entering my space. “And don’t lie to me, either.”

A sharp pain ripples through my palm, the metal of the doorknob whining under the pressure of my hand.

Because I want you.

Have for two years.

Because even when I didn’t know anything about you, you still occupied my thoughts. So much so that not a single woman has appealed to me since.

My mind continues to flit down the fifty reasons, trying to land on one that doesn’t make me sound like I’m out of my damn mind.

Because your smile makes my fucking chest ache.

Because your passion and dedication drive me to do better.

Because you're the perfect height for me to hold and be able to rest my chin on your head.

She rolls her eyes and scoffs. "You're trying to think of a reason."

I shake my head. "I promise I'm not."

"It shouldn't take you this long." Her voice is impatient.

"I'm trying to think of something appropriate." When the words fall out, I realize how they sound. "I mean—"

"Here's what we'll do, Kinkaid." She takes another step forward, effectively shutting me the fuck up. Her eyes are hooded by her thick lashes, her eyebrows arched as if she's about to scold me. "Instead of telling me *why* you want my forgiveness..."

She trails off, her fingers playing with the tab of her zipper as she considers her words. My blood runs hot, my cock swelling as she absently runs her tongue along her bottom lip.

"Tell me what I can do."

Her eyes flash, and suddenly, it's as though a flip has been switched. The woman who spit a shot into my mouth is back and in full control. She slowly tugs the zipper of her jumpsuit down.

"You're going to *make me* accept your pathetic attempts at an apology."

My eyes widen, but I somehow refrain from moving, my feet stuck in the plush carpet as she finishes talking.

Bailey drags her teeth over her bottom lip. "You're going to make me forget what you said that day."

She stops when she gets to the thick white belt on her waist. She quickly pops it open before continuing to pull the zipper down leisurely, exposing deep, tawny skin, inch by fucking inch, until breathing is harder than it should be.

"Make me forget that mouth of yours is used for anything other than making me feel good." Bailey releases the zipper before slipping the red wig off her head, letting her dark brown curls cascade over her shoulders. It frames her dangerous curves, leading my eyes down a path I suddenly crave to explore with my tongue.

My body vibrates with the suffocating desire to reach out and touch her. I have about thirty seconds left of this self-restraint.

As though she can sense my willpower waning, she turns her back to me, glancing over her shoulder. "Let's see if you can manage."

When she turns her head, the invisible rope around me snaps, and I'm on her before my next breath.

My hands grab her hips, spinning her around and walking her backward into the nearest wall. She sucks in a sharp breath but doesn't say anything, simply watches—waits—to see what I do next.

I lift both of her arms above her head, locking them in place by her wrists with one of my hands. The other tips her chin up. "Tell me what to do, love. I want you to command my every move."

The pretty brown mixed in her irises is nearly washed away under her growing pupils. "Touch me."

I smirk. "Where?"

"Everywhere," she breathes. "I want to still feel your touch when I wake up tomorrow."

My blood soars, and I have to bite my tongue from telling her that after this, I doubt there will ever be a day I haven't touched her. "Yes, ma'am."

With that, I take free rein. My hand slips from her chin, and skirts along her collarbone with a teasingly light pressure, before dipping down to the valley of her breasts. I play along the edges of her white bra, watching in pure bliss as the goosebumps rise over her flesh.

She's able to stifle a moan in her throat as she attempts to keep her expression neutral, but her body betrays her. Her muscles tighten, and the smallest arch of her back gives away her growing need.

I continue my exploration, keeping her wrists firmly locked above her head as I lean closer, stopping right before our lips touch. "You can't hide from me, love."

Bailey's tongue sneaks out and slides along her bottom lip, but because of how close we are, it whispers across mine. "It's not me who's hiding."

My cock strains against the confines of my briefs. "I'm not sure what you mean."

She huffs, a knowing grin spreading over her face, those eyes of hers turning a sinful shade darker. "You're being soft. Gentle. Like you're worried you'll scare me off again."

"Maybe I am."

"You shouldn't be." She readjusts, pushing her tits into my hand that's still hovering over her. "Especially since this is just to rectify my horrible secret."

Secret?

My brows draw together in confusion, but then it hits me square in the chest.

Downstairs, I told her I could give her an unassisted orgasm. That's what she's expecting. Nothing more. Nothing less.

How had that slipped my mind so quickly?

I nearly laugh at myself. The answer is simple.

Because that's not all *I* want.

She is.

Her entirety. The good, the bad, the fun, the boring. I want it all.

Because although I still have so much to learn about her, my soul sees this woman and fucking burns. It has been for over seven hundred days. And for her to think I'll be okay letting her go after this is...well, she's incredibly mistaken.

But for now, I'll oblige. I'll let her experience everything I feel and hope it will be enough to give her a glimpse of what rages just beneath the surface.

Releasing her wrists, I'm quick to take the belt from her waist. "Turn around."

Her eyes flare, but she does as told, spinning to give me her back.

I'm careful as I tie her hands together, thankful the material is polyester and not leather. When I've secured the knot, I tug on it, guiding her to a large white ottoman a few feet away.

"Sit."

Bailey looks at me over her shoulder, her eyebrow quirking in defiance. "Missing a special word there."

One side of my lips curls. "*Please.*"

It's the first time I've ever had to utter the word, and I make a vow to pay her back tenfold.

She must read the thought as it crosses my mind, because she bites into her lip and slowly sits on the edge of the ottoman. As she stares up at me through her thick lashes, all I can fantasize about is slipping my cock through those pouty lips.

"Legs up and spread apart." I gesture toward the ottoman, and add, "Please."

She runs her tongue along the inside of her cheek before she complies, scooting back to give herself enough room to haul her legs up. For a moment, I let my eyes rake over her body greedily, soaking up every curve and dip, memorizing every freckle and faded mark.

“Perfection.” My voice is barely above a whisper, but I know she’s heard me because a sweet blush creeps over her nose.

Still, she finds the commanding tone she adopted over the years and levels me with a look a lesser man would falter under. “You’re taking too long, Kinkaid. Are you stalling because you can’t do it?”

I release a low chuckle as I maneuver around her, positioning my body behind hers on the wide ottoman. I skim my nose along the length of her neck, smiling when she extends it to give me better access. “Careful, Bai.”

“Or what?” Her words are breathy.

I nip her flesh, then glide my tongue over the marks. She hisses as I fucking melt, letting the clean taste of her skin sear into my memory. “I don’t make empty threats, so if you’re curious, continue to push me.”

“Big talk for someone who—”

Her speech is cut short as the little control I had slips, and I bite down at the curve where her neck meets her shoulders. I trail both hands around her waist, one lifting to pull the bra from her breasts, and the other slips down to the hem of her underwear. I’m quick to ball the feeble fabric in my fist and yank, ripping it from her.

Her composure breaks as she yells out.

I chuckle onto her throat. “Tell me, love. Are you already wet for me?”

“No,” she breathes.

“Now who’s the liar.” I tug on her hard little nipple, closing my eyes when she finally gives her first unrestrained moan of pleasure. It’s sweet, dripping over me like fucking honey. My entire body tenses, unrivaled need driving me when I slide my hand between her thighs. I’m careful not to touch her where she craves her most, instead waiting for her to direct me.

She doesn’t waste a second. “Make me come, Kinkaid.”

I smirk, dragging my index finger through her soaked slit. “Yes, ma’am.”

Bailey

CHAPTER TEN

In the past five minutes, I have learned dominance is not something I can consistently maintain. Not when I'm as needy and as desperate as Arian's made me.

Everything about him feels incredible. His mouth, those hands, the fit of his body against mine. All of him is everything I wanted and nothing I expected, and he's barely even touched me.

My impatience grows, the band of tension squeezing around me becoming almost unbearable. I shift, twisting my bound hands and pushing closer to him.

"Hmm, I don't know what I like better." Arian presses hard kisses along the side of my neck, his finger playing at my entrance with not a care in the world. "You making me bend to your every whim, or being on the edge of begging."

I nearly growl. "I am not begging."

He smiles against my throat. "Oh, but you're close to it."

"No. I'm not." It isn't a complete lie, but if he doesn't do something more, I'm likely to lose my sanity. "And I won't. You will never hear me say ___"

"Please," he finishes, chuckling low in my ear before he nips the lobe. "Yeah, I've watched your stream. Listened to your little gimmick."

My heart flutters. "You've seen my streams?"

"Every single one."

“I have you blocked.”

“Uh huh,” he mumbles as he trails hot kisses down my shoulder. “You do.”

I chew on my bottom lip.

Don't read into it.

It's nothing.

Focus on why you're here.

What's at stake.

Get him out of your system and leave.

It takes two steadying breaths before I'm able to find the persona I've worked so hard to create. The woman I became so I wouldn't feel so easily. So I won't get *hurt* so easily.

Finally, I grab the reins on my composure and push out the words. “Use those fingers to fuck me before I have you untie me so I can show you how it's done.”

“Hmmm. All work and no play...” Arian's hand stops playing mindlessly and positions over my entire cunt, his two fingers stroking my entrance. “...makes Bailey a—”

“Satisfied girl,” I hiss as he finally slides his fingers inside, while his other hand traces over my nipples. “*Fuck.*”

“Oh, love.” Arian's forehead falls against my shoulder as he strokes my walls at a delicious pace. “You're so fucking wet. So fucking tight. It's a shame I won't feel this perfect little cunt wrapped around my cock.”

A too-enticing image of Arian slamming into me invades my mind and makes me whimper. Or maybe it's the way he's curling his finger to hit the perfect spot. Either way, my body is becoming hard to control.

My hips shift of their own accord, flexing and rolling with every thrust of his hand, searching for the needed friction. He's purposely avoiding my throbbing clit, and I'm wrung so tight I know it won't take much to push me over the edge.

That's when it hits me. When I realize what he's about to do. I can't even say I'm mad.

Instead of seeking a quick end, I relax into him, spreading my legs wider. If this is the only time I'll get him, I want it to last. I want to enjoy it until I'm trembling and shaking, crying for release.

“Atta girl,” Arian whispers, though the playfulness in his voice has disappeared, and in its place: strain. “Open up for me. Wider.”

I do as instructed, letting my legs fall as far as my jumpsuit allows. But I guess it isn't enough for Arian because he grunts in frustration. "Pull your knees to your chest."

When I do, he uses his unoccupied hand to push the bottom part of my suit over my knees. Because of the angle, and the fact my suit is still around my shoulder, it restricts all movement. My knees fall open in a butterfly pose, and the cool air sends shivers up my exposed center.

"Much better," he murmurs before letting his other hand glide down my stomach. "Time to have some fun."

Now completely unrestricted, Arian fucks me with his fingers. He drags them in and out at an mind-melting pace, curling and twisting as he does.

My head falls back, the pretense I was somehow still in control evaporating under the growing pressure low in my stomach.

"What I wouldn't give to taste you. To swallow every drop of your orgasm only to keep going and wrench another one out of you."

I groan at the visual, my eyes closing so tight spots of light fill the darkness. The longer he continues, the more I wonder if once will be enough. If I'll be content with so little of him.

My heart and cunt squeeze in tandem, the conflicting emotion wreaking havoc on my body. But then he finally, *finally*, presses his thumb to my clit, and all coherent thoughts fade to nothing.

Electricity flickers through my nerves as he circles it, his finger still working my pussy. Again and again, he keeps the same tortuous pace, and soon, I can't even focus on keeping my breathing steady.

Moan after moan spills from me, the pressure becoming all-consuming. I can't think. Only feel.

I'm so close.

"Don't you dare fucking stop, Kinkaid," I manage to force out, though I'm not sure how commanding it is.

His fingers somehow move faster and curl harder than before. "Missing the magic word there, love."

I scoff, but it's weak, lacking any true annoyance.

"You know what? Don't bother." He flicks my clit harder, making me squeal. "Keep it. I'd much rather hear it when you're begging me to fuck you."

My lips part, but nothing comes out, my orgasm coiling so tight I almost choke out a sob.

“Because I *will* fuck you, love. And when I do, this perfect little cunt will swallow every single drop I give her.” He stops moving altogether, and when my eyes snap open, he whispers into my ear, “Now, come for me.”

Then he pinches my clit.

I combust, my nerves shredding as the blaze of my orgasm rips through me. Fire pulses in my veins as Arian thoroughly fucks me with his fingers, his pace not slowing in the slightest.

With my hands bound and my legs restrained by my suit, all I can do is take it. Submit to the overwhelming power rushing over me, and pray I make it out in one piece.

In and out, again and again, he continues until I’m whining his name. I’m stuck between it being too intense and not enough, and my body—I—don’t know how to process it or what to do.

But before I find out, he slows to a stop, sliding his fingers from me in one fluid motion.

I slump back, relaxing into him completely, finally pulling in something close to a lungful of air.

“You did good,” he whispers in my ear, slowly guiding my legs on the floor. When he’s sure they’re secured, he quickly undoes my belt, releasing my hands.

“I have to admit,” I breathe, my face still flushed as I sit up, “you did better.”

He chuckles behind me as he stands. “Secret rectified?”

I glance over my shoulder at him. “Guess so.”

“Glad I could be of service.” His lips pull thin as he gives me a weary smile. “Let me get you a towel.”

My chest constricts when he passes me without another word and disappears into the ensuite restroom. He’s upset. No, that doesn’t feel right.

Sad?

Let down?

Disappointed?

I shake my head. Those aren’t accurate either. I chew on my bottom lip as I replay what just happened. What we did and how he made me feel. Not only sexually, but...physically. We were so in tune. Fit so well.

And there was what he said at the end...

I blow out a breath. Perhaps he thought I would give in, and we could have a quick one-night stand?

The notion that this is all it was makes my shoulders heavy. I mean, in reality, I'm no better, only wanting this to get him out of my system. But why am I so despondent he felt the same?

I swallow around the thick knot in my throat and stand before fixing my bra. I'm quick to yank the zipper of my jumpsuit up and reattach my belt. It takes a few seconds to put my wig back on, but a brief look in the mirror at one of the makeup stands shows it's good enough.

I need to go. Get some air and think about what the hell I just did. The box I opened and how I'm going to make it the rest of the night as if I didn't fall apart for him.

Without another thought, I'm through the doors and in the elevators, the guilt at leaving him twisting my stomach the entire way down.

"Where have you been?" Cindy yells over the crowd as I return to the table. The music is much louder now, the dance floor vibrating from everyone bouncing.

"Upstairs," I answer, ignoring the dull ache in my ribs. "The line to the bathroom was too long."

Cindy's eyes narrow as if she wants to say something but instead juts her thumb behind her. "Food truck is here. Wanna grab something?"

"Absolutely." I glance around and find Mori missing. Before I can even question where she is, I notice the two iPads on the table. One is in a familiar lavender case, while the other I've only seen a few times tonight. "They moved up their date?"

Cindy laughs. "So it seems. They got me controlling this damn robot, so can you get me two shrimp tacos?"

"Of course."

"Thanks." Cin starts to wave me off, but then puts a hand on my shoulder to stop me. I pause, my brows scrunching in confusion until she tucks a stray hair under my wig. "Better."

A blush creeps over my face. "Thanks."

She simply grins. "'Bout time. Tell me about it over food."

I huff, shaking my head as I agree, and walk to the back of the building toward the large glass doors.

Luckily, the line for the truck isn't crazy long, and I'm able to order, grab

one of the little red table buzzers, and get back inside fairly quickly. I continue to look out the window, and, in an attempt to distract myself, read the menu seven times. It does an okay job keeping my mind preoccupied until a simple tap on my shoulder makes me gasp.

“Miss Rooke?”

I twirl around, coming face to face with the woman I saw Arian and Danny speaking with earlier. She’s all business, and not in a cosplay way, but her smile is warm and genuine.

“Hi, yes, I’m Bailey.”

She holds out a hand I shake. “Hello, we spoke on the phone. I’m Lauren with ProCos.”

My heart leaps into my throat, and I shake her hand a little too eagerly. “Of course, hello. How are you?”

Her smile widens as she drops my hand. “Wonderful, this is an incredible event. Amazing turnout.”

I nod. “Yeah, seems everyone is really enjoying their time.”

“Oh, absolutely. And from what Mr. Daniel Oshire has already shown me, sales and projections are through the roof, thanks to you and Mr. Kinkaid’s work. I’m excited to get back to the office to see real numbers.”

My body heats at the mention of Arian. “Thank you again for asking me to help host the night. It’s been a blast.”

She nods. “I need to thank Mr. Kinkaid for being so adamant we ask you. He was absolutely on the money. The people love you. And your work? It speaks for itself, really. Incredible.”

My brows furrow. “What do you mean, he was adamant?”

She blows out a breath. “To be completely honest, we were only looking for one host, but then he said he wouldn’t even consider it without you doing it with him.”

Lauren shakes her head, her smile expanding as if she isn’t making my entire body melt into the marble beneath our feet.

“He requested me.” It’s a statement, not a question, and I’m saying it more to myself than her, but she answers me, regardless.

“Yes. Oh, and the taco truck. He needed tacos.”

My stomach flips, pulse fluttering with awareness.

“Anyway, I know you have an event to get back to, but I wanted to touch base with you first and let you know to be on the lookout for a call from my office. We would love to work something out and get you on our team.”

I've barely had time to process what she's said before she's shaking my hand again, and then excusing herself for a phone call. My heart lives in my throat as I find Cindy through the crowd, my eyes glossing with tears. Our eyes connect, and I nod frantically. Years' worth of work, thousands of hours put into learning the craft, hundreds of videos, and working our way for the right people to notice. It all paid off.

She wants *me*. ProCos wants me.

A small voice in the back of my head whispers, *and so does he*.

Countdown to Midnight

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Arian

I tried. That should be good enough to put my obsession with her to rest, right? I mean, I apologized, tried to be a gentleman, and showed her the smallest glimpse of how I could make her feel.

But it clearly wasn't enough, or at least, not what she wanted, because she bailed before I could even clean her up.

A heavy sigh works its way from my lungs as I glance at her from across the dance floor. I was so sure we could start over. And maybe that's my fault. My judgment was clouded by arrogance. I forgot that just because I waited for her, just because I wanted her, didn't mean she even thought of me for a second after I left her in that hallway two years ago.

Danny emerges from between a Kim Possible and a Cruella, his tablet damn near glued to his face. I can't say I'm particularly eager to hear anything else about numbers or profit, but maybe it'll serve as a distraction to the annoying twist in my stomach this sixth bottle of water can't shake.

“How is everything?”

Danny gestures to the couch without a word, and I turn to follow, sparing Bailey one last look as she steps on the dance floor with her friends.

The twist tightens, and I stifle a groan at the memory of us not twenty minutes ago on that same floor.

When we get to the couch, Danny slumps into the hard leather and pours himself a shot from the liquor bottle we left during the game. “Why are women...how can they be so...I want to better understand...”

“Do you plan on finishing any of those questions?” I sit down next to him, nudging his shoulder lightly. “What happened?”

He sighs, shaking his mop of hair, and takes down the shot. Slamming the glass on the table, he blows out an even more exasperated breath. “I get why they don’t trust us. I do—really. But after all this time, after proving myself time and time again, you’d think I earned a little bit of it, you know. Shown I’m not just some fuckboy, but a goddamn man.”

I can’t stop the depressing laugh that works its way free from my throat. “I get it—”

“No. Your situation is different. You were a complete dick to Bailey, and you’ve been trying to figure out how to make it up to her. I only told Mori I needed a little more time.”

“First of all, you’ve had enough time.” Maybe Bailey was right about him, and I didn’t notice. “And secondly, two years of subtle apologies don’t count?”

He guffaws. “Fuck no, not when you don’t ever plan to tell her about them.”

Now it’s my turn to shake my head. “It would defeat the purpose.”

“A cause can’t be supported if no one knows about it. I mean, people wouldn’t even know who she was if you didn’t do all that shit. You literally made her.”

Anger snaps behind my ribcage. “Don’t say that. *She* made her fucking career. She’s more talented than all the people in this room. She only lacked exposure.”

Danny holds up his hands in surrender. “Okay, I get it, sorry. I’m projecting.”

I wave him off and run my hands over my face, blowing out a breath. “It doesn’t matter. At least it wasn’t all for nothing. Lauren finally got a chance to see her, so I’m sure they’ll offer a sponsorship.”

“Still, I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

I nod. “Yeah, you too.”

We sit in silence for the next few songs. Danny focuses on flying the drone around while I try—but fail miserably—to ignore the sixteen times I see Bailey on the screen.

She looks content. Happy, even. She dances with her friends, her arms lifted in the air as her hips roll with the beat. Even when I distract myself with the other cosplayers who come and speak with me, I keep her in my periphery.

After what feels like a fucking eternity, Danny shifts. “Are you ready for the promo piece?”

“Guess so.”

“Alright, I’ll go get her while you put your mask and helmet on.”

We both stand and split up. After I’ve gotten my costume pieces put back in place, I meet him and Bailey at the top of the balcony’s stairs. Her eyes dart to me briefly before she turns to Danny.

“Alright. To make sure I have this right, we’re going to announce MagiCon, then you’ll put up a pause screen for people to shop the sale, and then we start the countdown?”

It’s already midnight?

I glance at the stream to determine how long I’d been sitting on the couch.

An hour.

“Yep. They won’t be able to hear you when the screen is on pause, so don’t try to entice them to buy after you see it flip to the ad.”

We both agree and get in position next to one another, letting Danny tap a few buttons to bring the drone close to us. The entire time we wait for it to fly over, I have to fight the urge to look at her. Stop myself from reaching out and trying one last attempt to get her to consider giving me—giving *us* a shot. Because I know for a fucking fact, she feels what I feel. Even if only physically, the pull is strong. Overpowering. And though the line she drew by leaving me in the restroom is clear, I can still feel it.

I swallow hard as Bailey waves to the camera, thankful the only thing anyone can see is my eyes.

“Thank you so much for joining us tonight. The other creators, as well as my host and I, have had an absolute blast. Because of all the incredible engagement, positive energy, and celebration of the new year, we would like

to give a special thanks to all of you!”

Her eyes flash to me again, prompting me to step forward. I do so begrudgingly, only part of my attitude coming from playing my character.

I wave a hand around as if I can't be bothered. “I think it's foolish, but Red here thinks we should give you a fifteen-minute flash sale for tickets for MagiCon. During this time, tickets purchased will come with a free upgrade, including two wristbands of your choice. So choose wisely, because once you pick, you can't change your mind.”

Bailey bounces on her feet, sliding in front of me. “Fifteen minutes starts now, and remember to use my name as a referral when checking out. Or...” She trails off, scooting over enough that the stream can see a little bit of me. “This guy, if you want.”

Danny taps a few more buttons before giving us the thumbs up. “All good. I'll be right back for the countdown.”

It isn't until the screen flashes to the sale, and Danny's gone, that Bailey finally turns, giving me her undivided attention.

“Can we talk?”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bailey". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized initial 'B'.

Arian's gaze does a quick sweep of my face, and although I can't see any of his features, the tightness around his eyes is a direct hit to my heart.

For the last hour I've been on the dance floor, I've been thinking. Planning. Making decisions. Mori was quiet when she came back from who knows where, only focused on data and pushing me to network.

I did, making more connections than I ever have at any Convention, but the entire time, I couldn't help but steal glances at Arian. He lingered on the couch, barely engaged in any of the conversations with people who went over to talk to him. I'm sure they thought it was him simply being in character, but now, face to face, I don't understand how they couldn't see the strain. The

frustration.

“I—um. Want to apologize,” I start, clearing my throat and standing up a little straighter. “For the miscommunication.”

His eyes narrow a fraction. “Miscommunication? I’m pretty sure I told you I was going to get you a towel, so...”

Guilt and embarrassment sit heavy in my stomach. “If I’m being completely honest—”

“That would be nice.”

“Kinkai—Arian.” I level him with a firm look, but my voice softens. “I was under the impression it was a one-off thing. You gave me an offer, and I accepted. I figured that was that.”

His head tilts to the side. “You didn’t think anything changed in between the game and in that suite?”

“I don’t know, and that’s why I left.” *Lie*. “Kinda.”

Arian’s eyes flash behind me before he removes his helmet and runs his fingers through the tousled strands. My hands itch to do the same. “What do you mean ‘kinda’?”

“For a while, I didn’t like you. I was angry and pissed off that my idol turned out to be a dickhead. But tonight, I’ve been forced to see the other side of you, and was able to admit a few things to myself and...”

I don’t mean to let the heat in my nose expand behind my eyes. And I damn sure don’t mean to admit the next part. But I do. I push the words out and decide no matter what comes from it, at least I put myself out there. At least I tried.

“After meeting you, I changed my persona and not only became more successful, but more confident. It also made me want to help out other creators and people new to the community. The videos we make are great, but I wanted a place where everyone could come and get hands-on advice. Network. Talk to other people and not have to worry about being judged for how little or how much goes into their ’fits. You inspired me with that moment. And while I was still mad, I really wasn’t. I was holding on to a grudge for nothing. And after you apologized, I don’t know. I think I realized I still liked you after all, and crossing lines would make things...” I trail off, swallowing roughly.

“Complicated,” he finishes.

I nod. “Yes.”

My heart gallops in my chest, my entire body thrumming with both relief

and trepidation. It isn't as if I just confessed I was madly in love with him, or something outlandish, but it feels that way. Like I've displayed my most vulnerable parts to him and have to wait to see if he shelters or shreds them.

"Thank you for telling me that." Arian inhales a deep breath before taking a step forward, putting a hand on the banister. "And look, I don't want things to be complicated between us. I meant what I said about that day being one of my biggest regrets. While I'm glad it inspired you in a few ways, it shouldn't have happened like that."

Thanks. I think I say it out loud, but when he takes another step toward me, and my body tenses, I can't be sure.

He's only a few inches away, his head inclined too close. "And for the record, I am very interested in you, so nothing about what we did complicated anything. Only confirmed it."

My head feels dizzy. "Confirmed it?"

He doesn't answer, he simply lets his eyes drift over my face, both curiosity and fire lurking in his gaze. I wish he didn't have those damn contacts on so I could see. So I could *know*.

And that mask. My fingers burn to snatch it off his face.

Fuck, why does everything before this moment feel like such a waste of time? Like if he could have just gotten on his knees and apologized in a different way two years ago, we would have been able to walk down a different path?

Arian's throat bobs with his swallow, his eyes flickering to my lips. When he looks back to my eyes, the entire world could be on fire, and neither of us would notice. Neither of us could care.

Finally, I allow my hand to lift, reach up, and grab the damn piece of metal over his mouth.

"Are we ready for the countdown?" Danny's voice is nothing but nails on a chalkboard, forcing me to drop my hand.

Arian's gaze lingers on me for a moment too long, before he finally looks at Danny and nods once, stepping back to put on his helmet. "Let's get it done."

Danny's eyes flit between us before he taps on his iPad and brings the camera around. "You'll start the countdown, but then I'll pan out to show the balloons and confetti drop."

"Got it," I say, fighting the weird gravity of looking away from Arian. I take my stance next to him, tucking a stray hair behind my ear.

“Great. You have a few minutes. I’ll replace the chat with the countdown.”

With that, Danny stabs the iPad a little harder than necessary, and the stream’s chat on the projection disappears. In its place is the New York countdown. The cosplayers below all start to cheer, and a few servers leave the bar with trays of champagne. By the time a woman makes it up the stairs to us, there’s one minute left.

Arian clears his throat and lifts his glass to the small drone as he inches closer to me. “We appreciate everyone being with us tonight, and we hope we see you in a few months at MagiCon.”

I beam, my heart nothing short of a hummingbird in my chest. “Watch both of our socials for any other announcements in the meantime, but until then, we wish you the very best New Year. Remember to be kind, safe, and never stop creating.”

The crowd below chants in unison when the clock hits thirty. Arian and I join in, and when it reaches ten, Danny and the drone descend the stairs. The view on the video pans out, and as soon as Arian and I are no bigger than an inch on the screen, he turns toward me.

“Ten.”

His helmet comes off.

“Nine.”

He puts his drink on the banister.

“Eight.”

He slips the glass from my hand and places it next to his.

“Seven.”

A hand slips around my waist.

“Six.”

I shuffle forward, my heart in my throat and a tingle settling between my thighs.

“Five.”

His eyes search mine, looking for something, but what I don’t know. All I can focus on is how suddenly there isn’t anything standing in the way of me kissing this man.

“Four.”

He leans in, his face only a few inches from mine.

“Three.”

My hand slides between us, grabbing the metal plate at his ear.

“Two.”

I rip the mask from his face and throw it somewhere behind me.

“One.”

Our lips smash together.

“Happy New Year!” everyone bellows, but I barely register it.

All I can do is feel the overwhelming power of his lips pressed against mine and the euphoria screaming that everything about this is right, and as it should be.

Bailey

CHAPTER TWELVE

One minute, I'm kissing Arian as if the world is on fire, and the next, he's hauling me out of the back of the party. I'm currently sitting in the passenger seat of his Camaro, trying to text Mori and Cindy while Arian continues to kiss me every two seconds.

He keeps one hand on the wheel, while the other grabs anything he can reach. My thighs, my breasts, my throat. Weaving effortlessly on the fairly vacant roads, he turns and shifts gears with ease. At every red light and stop sign, he squeezes any part of me, prompting me to slide closer so he can kiss me, even if only for a second.

It's like he's starved for me, has been for longer than I could possibly understand, and now that the wall has been breached, he's doing everything to break it down completely. Keep it from sliding back in place.

My heart swells as he releases my mouth for the umpteenth time, turning on a street illuminated by Christmas lights. I glance at my buzzing phone just before he pulls into a parking garage.

Cindy: Girl, don't worry about that. We're gonna party for a little bit then get a rideshare home. His manager said he's going to shut things down around one. Have fun ;)

I blow out a breath, relieved she isn't mad I bailed, but the guilt still sits heavy on my shoulders. I send another message promising to treat them to brunch tomorrow before dropping my phone in the middle console. When I look up, I realize he's already pulling into a spot.

“This is your place?”

Arian nods, shoving the car into park before gripping the back of my neck and pulling me to his mouth. He kisses me until I’m breathless, his tongue diving into my mouth and stealing every little whimper. My core is tense, and my pussy clenches around nothing, the emptiness overwhelming me.

I grip his shirt, yanking him impossibly closer, hoping he can feel the unspoken command. I need him. Now. More than I’ve ever needed anything—*anyone*—and I damn near want to kick myself for leaving him in that suite.

He groans, pulling away from me despite the soft cry I let out, and puts his forehead to mine. His chest rises and falls unsteadily, eyes burning with a hunger I’ve never been on the receiving end of. “Do you trust me?”

I laugh, though it’s faint and laden with lust. “Enough. Why?”

He smirks, reaching forward and pinching my nipple through my jumpsuit. “This elevator leads up to my penthouse on the top floor. No one else has access.”

“Okay.” I draw the word out, needing him to explain why we aren’t already in it.

“I won’t make it the thirty flights.”

My entire body is engulfed in flames of arousal at his desperation. “Maybe you won’t have to.”

Eyes flaring, he kisses me hard. I melt into him, my thoughts focusing on nothing more than climbing on top of him and relieving the terrible ache that’s only getting worse with each passing second. It takes every ounce of control I have to break away from him and put a hand on his chest. “Out of the car, Kinkaid. *Now.*”

He smirks, then grips the handle, and is out and around the hood to open my door before I’ve taken off my seatbelt. Grabbing his extended hand, I rise from the car. He holds my hand as he leads me to the elevator, not dropping it even when he quickly taps a small card from his keychain onto the reader.

The doors slide open immediately, and in my next breath, I’m pushed against the elevator wall, Arian pressed flush against me. He swallows my surprised gasp before kissing along my jaw and down the column of my neck. I finally allow my fingers to tangle in his hair, while the other hand clutches his shoulder for support as he works his way down.

“Headed to your knees again, Kinkaid?” It’s a joke, but when he hits the button to close the door behind us and smirks something both devilish and delicious, I know he didn’t take it as such.

“Strip.”

Even though the deep tone in his voice leaves little room for question, my eyes widen, and I look around. “Here?”

His brow furrows. “Are you asking me to repeat myself, love?”

A tremor works through me, driving straight into my already throbbing clit. “No, I’m just—”

“Still not naked. You have till I count to three, Bailey.”

I jerk back, both intrigued and turned on by the sudden switch in demeanor. “Or what?”

Arian’s head tilts, his lips forming a straight line. “Then the next thing out of your mouth needs to be our safe word.”

Excitement winds around my limbs, and I bite down so hard on the inside of my lip, that the distinct taste of copper hits my tastebuds. I begin the great debate on whether to comply. “Aren’t there cameras?”

Arian shakes his head. “No.”

“Down then, pretty boy.”

A smile tugs at one side of his lips. “When that fucking jumpsuit comes off.”

I roll my eyes. “You sure you want to do this? I’ve already been satisfied tonight, so I think I can hold out longer than you can.”

He steps forward, closing the already miniscule space between us. His warm breath coasts over my nose as he peers down at me. “Pick a word, Bailey.”

“So antsy,” I breathe, heart pounding like it’s trying to get to him. “What’s the rus—”

My question ends with a gasp when Arian jerks my zipper all the way down, breaking it completely off.

“Because, love.” He rips the jumpsuit from my shoulders.

“I’ve waited too long for this.” Arian lowers on one knee, grabbing me around my left calf and lifting, resting my boot on his thigh. He unzips it quickly before tossing it behind him mindlessly.

He’s waited for me?

“Thought about it even longer.” His voice is much lower, almost guttural, as he lowers my leg before doing the same thing to my second boot. When they’re both off, he stands.

Thought about me?

“And every second I’m not inside you is fucking torture.” With that, he unties my belt and yanks the suit down the rest of the way.

The admission shatters any remaining protection I was stubbornly holding on to, and that, accompanied by the look of pure desire etched on Arian’s face, as he examines me almost fully exposed, causes a gaggle of goosebumps to flood my skin, my nipples tightening painfully in my bra. I want it off, want his mouth trailing hot kisses across them.

Arian has the same idea, nodding to my bra. “Off.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Then take it off.”

A nerve in his jaw ticks. “You never gave me a word.”

“I’ll need one?” I’m more excited than I should be at the prospect.

He shrugs, dropping to both knees this time before staring up at me. “I’m not a gentleman. And with you and that damn mouth, I plan to make that beautiful cunt of yours very sore.”

Arousal flares in my core. “New Year.”

He chuckles as he wraps his arms around both of my thighs. “Little on the money, no?”

My lips part to tell him it’s all I can think of with his face so close to my pussy. That I can barely breathe right, let alone think of a quirky, meaningful safe word. But I don’t get the chance because he tightens his grip and lifts, hoisting me onto his shoulders.

I release a sharp gasp, my hands searching the elevator walls to find some type of stability. Though it doesn’t matter if I did because, in the next second, Arian runs the flat of his tongue up my slit, and all rational thought disintegrates.

He groans into my cunt, his fingers digging into my flesh. “Fuck, you taste so good. Too good.”

My head falls back with a soft thud against the wall, a moan slipping free as he licks me again. And again. And again. Over and over, he devours me, his tongue moving in ways that have my insides twisting and my hips rolling, the pure desire to have more driving my every move, my every word. I groan with bits of praise, finally dropping one hand to grip his hair.

“That’s it. Just like that,” I moan, tugging tighter at his roots. “You’re doing so well. Don’t you dare stop, Kinkaid.”

His hands tighten in a punishing grip as he fucks me with his tongue. My eyes roll back, my body ignites, and soon, I’m shaking.

“*Fuck, Arian.*”

He chuckles against me before curling his tongue around my clit and sucking it into his mouth. I scream out, his name nothing more than a desperate whimper leaving my lips.

I can feel him smile against my thigh as he presses a soft kiss to it. “Would you like to come now, love?”

I nod frantically, the pressure already building deep within me. If he does that one more time, I’m a complete goner.

“And what’s the magic word?”

Like ice water over my head, I scoff, looking down at him. That face of his buried between my thighs is enough to make my entire cunt pulse, but not enough to make me say please. Enough to make me beg.

“Do it now, Arian. Be a good boy and finish what you started.”

His hands lose their grip on my thighs, and I think my heart breaks a little. “Say it, Bai.”

I shake my head, standing firm. “No.”

My legs tremble as he starts to unhook me from his shoulders. He’s going to call my bluff.

“Kinkaid, so help me if you don’t—”

The smile he gifts me as he secures me to the floor and stands gives me pause. My breath is unsteady, my heart pulses in my pussy, and my entire body burns. And he has a fucking smile on his face. “Arian”

White eyes flash to mine as he pushes a button behind me and taps his card again to get the elevator to wake up. “Yes?”

“You’re fucking kidding me, right?” My voice is so needy, I almost don’t recognize it.

“It’s cute you think you’re in charge here.” He shakes his head. “You had your turn. It’s mine now.”

My eyebrows snap together, but I’m not able to say anything before the elevator shoots up, and Arian’s back on top of me, his mouth stealing whatever comment I had on my tongue.

My own arousal hits my tastebuds, and somehow, my frustration fades into something else. Something worse. No one has ever denied me an orgasm. Never taken away what I worked hard to get. And while I should probably be pissed, I’m even more turned on.

I’ve never been desperate. Never needed to come so bad, that tears sprung to my eyes, or had to use the word *please*.

But I think that’s what I want...

To be pushed to the brink. To be so out of my head, sobbing with the overwhelming need that I crumble.

That I *beg*.

Arian doesn't stop kissing me until the elevator stops and the doors slide open to a warm apartment. He puts out a hand and gestures for me to enter first.

I make it two feet. Get to admire the sleek black marble, dark brown leather, and inhale the deep, earthy scent. I don't get to soak in the glorious view of the floor-to-ceiling windows or the hundreds of fireworks lighting up the night sky.

Because when I lift my foot to take the third step, Arian's voice is a demand I immediately comply with.

"On those pretty knees of yours, Bailey." He walks up behind me, finally freeing my breasts of my bra. "I've got precum dripping down my cock, and you need to clean it up."

A New Year

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Arian

When Bailey sinks to her knees, I will my blood to slow down so I don't finish before we start.

She bats her thick eyelashes, her gaze focused on me as she lifts my shirt. She's so fucking beautiful, a tightness pulls across my chest. I want to scoop her up in my arms and throw her on my bed before making her take every inch of me.

Fuck the power play, fuck the begging. I just want to sink into her. *Finally.*

But the smirk on her face is enough to make me pause.

"What?"

Her eyes flit down to the bulge in my pants. "You have a zipper."

My brow furrows. "Is that a problem?"

She shakes her head, deftly flicking her thumb to unbutton and unzip my pants. "You told that woman during the game your pants were elastic."

A genuine smile spreads over my face, and I hook a finger beneath her chin. “Because your mouth is the only one I want next to my cock.”

The corner of her lips twitch, but she says nothing as she finally frees my erection. She sucks her bottom lip into her mouth as she takes in my girth.

“Don’t worry, love. We’ll make it fit.” I chuckle, carefully slipping the wig from her head. Her dark brown curls flow over her bare shoulders and chest, and I obey the instinct to grab a handful and wrap it around my wrist. “In that smart-ass mouth, in that tight cunt, and in that virgin ass.”

Bailey’s eyes flare, confirming my shot-in-the-dark assumption.

A groan works from my throat as I flex my hips forward, placing the head of my dick at her lips. She parts them immediately, wrapping a hand around the base of my shaft. I watch, so completely enamored, as she opens, letting her tongue slip out that I almost forget.

“Bailey, I’m clean.”

She pauses for a moment, her commanding mask slipping, but in the next blink, it’s gone, and she licks down the entirety of my cock.

My head falls back, my nerves igniting at the warmth of her tongue while my hand tightens in her hair. “*Fuuuck.*”

“Uh huh,” Bailey tsks, sucking the head of my erection into her mouth briefly before releasing it with a wet pop. My knees almost fucking buckle. “Eyes on me, Kinkaid. I want to see what you look like when *you* beg.”

A shot of arousal shoots through me as I force my gaze down. Her large hazel eyes shimmer, the fireworks outside lighting up the side of her naked skin in bursts of vibrant colors. It’s a visual I’ll remember for the rest of my damn life.

She’s a work of art. Gorgeous. Breathtaking. A fucking goddess.

And she’s on her knees *for me.*

My heart spasms as she slowly blinks up at me, her saliva making my dick glisten as she runs her tongue against it to give her hand enough slip. My eyes flutter, but I keep my focus on her, not willing to look at anything else.

“Atta boy,” she breathes before finally sucking me down her throat.

A deep groan rips from my chest as she takes me all the way, her hand covering the last few inches. When she pulls back, her hand squeezes and twists, sending my blood scorching through my veins. Again and again, she sucks me to the back of her throat, rotating her hand with a swirled stroke.

The air grows thin as she continues, her warm mouth enveloping me, cheeks hollowing out as she moans around me.

She feels too good. Too right. And with how long it's been and how badly I fucking want her, I know I won't last for much longer.

"You're playing dirty, Bai." I tighten my fist, drawing her mouth out to the tip. "Lose the hand."

Her eyes narrow, defiance tightening every small feature of her face. She wants to tell me no. Probably wants me as delirious as she was in the elevator. It's cute she thinks she can compare.

"Lose. The hand." The deep tone in my voice leaves no room for debate, and as soon as she drops it—though with hesitation in her eyes—I smile. "Since this pretty mouth of yours is occupied, tap me on the leg twice for the safe word."

She groans around me, her lashes fluttering when she shifts on her knees, trying to give herself some friction where I know she's throbbing. And I let her. For the next few strokes of her mouth, I grant her some relief. But when she falters, and her breath hitches, I pull her hair so she's forced to look up.

"I'm going to use this mouth of yours like it's my own personal toy, and then I'm going to fuck that tight cunt until one of us breaks."

She whimpers, and my dick twitches on her tongue.

"Nod that you understand, Bailey. I don't want another case of miscommunication."

She lifts her hands, gripping the backs of my thighs through my pants that are still around my hips, and nods twice.

"Perfect."

The minute restraint I clung to snaps, and I drive into Bailey's mouth like it was made solely for me to fuck. My strokes interchange between shallow and deep, but each time, I pull all the way out before pushing past her lips and back inside.

Pretty little gags echo in the space around us as she takes me, her breathing sharp when I allow her short breaks to suck in the air.

It isn't long before tears well in her eyes, tumbling down in quick succession. I slow enough to stroke her cheek, gathering some on my thumb. "Do you know how fucking beautiful you are with my cock in your mouth? How perfect?"

I lift my hand and lick the salty tear from my thumb, watching as her determined expression wavers. As strong as she is—as dominating as she is—she's still a sweet girl at heart. She aches for the praise and recognition of her hard work. I intend to give her that and so much more.

After tonight, I intend to have her utterly and thoroughly addicted to us. To what we could be.

“This mouth is mine, Bailey. For as long as I fucking tell you, do you understand?”

Her eyebrows tip inward, doe eyes rounding before she nods again.

I hum my approval. “Now suck my cock like the obedient girl I know you are.”

Her lashes flutter as another tear tips over the edge. With her body trembling below me, her own orgasm so close, I know if she keeps rocking, she’s bound to ignite when I do.

I smile. *She can take one more close call.*

Returning to my quick pace, I fuck her mouth with abandon. Filling her so fast and deep, she can’t do anything but hold on. Over and over, I hit the back of her throat until finally, heat blooms up my spine, my impending orgasm threatening to take me under.

I yank on her mouth, forcing her to release me. “Are you on contraceptives?”

Chest heaving, she nods, her eyelashes fluttering with another stolen orgasm as she takes my outstretched hand to help her stand. “Yes.”

“Good.” Impatience drives my hands to her waist, and I lift, coaxing her legs to wrap around my hips. “I need this perfect little cunt to milk my cock. How does that sound, love?”

She swallows, her lips parting. “Perfect.”

I smile. “That’s my girl.”

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bailey". The script is fluid and cursive, with a large, looping 'B' at the start and a long, sweeping tail on the 'y'.

Arian kisses me fiercely while walking through his apartment and into his room. The way he works my mouth is wild and unrestrained, his need seeping through with every flick of his tongue and nip of his teeth. I’m

completely consumed by him. Intoxicated by his every touch. Nothing he gives me is enough, while at the same time, it feels like too much.

My hands greedily yank at his clothes that, up until this point, turned me on but now only serve as a barrier.

He finally breaks away to toss me on the end of the bed, a vicious smile splitting his face. “So fucking needy.”

I roll my eyes. “After being denied two orgasms, I think it’s a miracle I haven’t lit anything on fire yet.”

Arian chuckles, the sound low and gritty. “Patience is a virtue.”

“Take them off now, or I’ll—”

“Careful,” he purrs, finally stripping from the metal spikes on his shoulders. “I might like it when you threaten me.”

My insides quiver, but I stay quiet, anxious he’ll try to deny me again, and I’ll have to throat punch him.

As if he understands his slight upper hand, he takes his time to remove the rest of his clothes. First, the shoulder pads hit the hardwood floor with a thud. His cape follows, pooling behind him. Then, he clutches the hem of his shirt with one hand, slipping it over his head in a singular, fluid motion. His broad chest and abs that were not so discreetly hidden under his tight shirt make my pussy throb. My hands tingle to reach out and run down the hard ridges. To slide my tongue along every dip and commit it all to memory.

My fingers dig into the soft comforter beneath me, the overwhelming arousal fighting to take the reins of my control. Thighs squeezing together, I grip his pants and shove them the rest of the way down. “Better.”

Arian smirks, shaking his head before lifting a hand to cradle one side of my face. “You’re going to be trouble for me.”

I scoff, gripping his hand before falling backward, forcing him to come down on top of me. “Is that going to be a problem?”

He swallows hard, dipping down to kiss me softly. “Not at all.”

“Good. Now take care of me before I do it myself.”

Without another word, Arian grabs a pillow from behind my head and nods to me as he stands. “Lift.”

I do as instructed, flexing my hips upward, allowing him enough room to shove the pillow under me.

Arian’s eyes rake down my frame, followed by his hands, both lighting a path of pure fire in their wake. While my heart thunders in my chest, and my mind is driving on pure lust, I see it in his eyes as he moves. The tenderness.

The appreciation. There's something more propelling him. Something more than sex.

Of course, I could be reading it all wrong, but when he finally gets down to my thighs, I'm shaking.

"You're going to watch this pretty cunt of yours swallow me inch by fucking inch." He presses the head of his cock to my entrance, pulling a whimper from me.

"*Arian*," I hiss, the little patience I have wearing incredibly thin.

"Shh," is all he gets out before he finally presses inside me.

Our eyes lock at where we're connected, and as he warned, he sinks into me maddeningly slow. He fills my pussy completely, the fullness of him both perfect and intense. The slight sting of the stretch quickly gives way to melting pleasure, and it isn't until he's fully seated that I finally throw my head back with a moan.

"*Fucking* hell, Bailey." A tremor runs through him and his grip on my hips tightens, a bit of his mask slipping. "Goddamn."

"Again," I demand, my voice annoyingly weak.

His eyes connect with mine, and suddenly, he's everywhere. In my cunt, under my skin, engrained in my mind. I'm so lost that when he gives me a wicked smile, I nearly forget what I'd just said. "Yes, ma'am."

He draws out to the tip, then sinks in again, this time only a margin faster. My hands slip above my head to grip the sheets while his find my knees. Without a word, he spreads my legs apart until the muscles in my thighs resist. The position leaves me incredibly open and exposed, and I've never been more turned on.

Perhaps it's the position, but it could also be from the carnal fervor etched in the fine line of his face. But either way, my blood flushes through me fast, and my walls clench around him.

"Tomorrow, I'll take my time. I'll explore every part of you and won't leave an inch not kissed." *Arian's* eyes flash to mine, his words making me whimper involuntarily. "But tonight, I'm going to use you. I'm going to fuck you without an ounce of the infatuation I feel, and I'm not going to stop—"

"Until one of us breaks. Got it." My hips roll forward, the eagerness slipping through. "Then do it."

He shakes his head, sliding out to the head of his cock again. "Fuck, I can't wait to spank you for that mouth of yours."

"Not if I don't spank you first."

The only warning—if it can even be called that—I receive is the widening of his smirk before he slams into me.

The scream of surprise I release fills the room, and before I can register the delicious spike of pain, or the overwhelming pleasure, he drags himself out and drives into me again.

My entire body spasms when he does it another time, this one harder than the last. My lips part to say something, anything, but all that comes out are incoherent moans. Over and over, he slips out slowly and barrels into me like he's trying to rip me in two. Each thrust hits a spot I didn't even know existed, and when a low pressure I've never felt before builds somewhere incredibly deep, I gasp.

“Already, love?” he groans, gripping my knees with such force I know it'll leave marks. “I've only just started.”

“Fuck—” I can barely breathe, let alone insult him, my insides burning so viciously, I'm about to combust.

“Me? Okay.”

The next time he buries his cock inside of me, his hands slip up and fold around my waist. Somehow, in one fluid motion, I'm flipped and straddled on top of him. My hands wrap around his neck, whether to steady myself or find an anchor, I'm not sure, because Arian captures my mouth in the next second.

His kisses are deep and commanding, his tongue sliding against mine to take complete control. I become lightheaded and delirious with a desire. My every thought and feeling are nothing but Arian and this inescapable net he's caught me in. I'm powerless against it, and something about that makes me feel free. *Craved.*

My nails dig into his back as I deepen the kiss, and it isn't until Arian lifts me by my hips and slams me back down on his cock that I abandon his mouth. “Oh my God, Arian.”

He trails his lips along my jaw and down my neck, tightening his grip and bringing me up again before dropping me. He doesn't wait for me to try to match his rhythm or allow me to do anything. He's in complete control, using my body to fuck himself. It's like I'm nothing but his toy, made for him to use as he sees fit.

Euphoria washes over me at what that thought does to me, and Arian sees it.

“You feel it, don't you, love?” He impales me again, beads of sweat

forming on his brow. “How this cunt was made for me?”

My teeth catch onto my bottom lip to stop the admission from seeping out. But it doesn't matter, we both know the answer. Having only truly known this man for one day is enough for me to admit he's the best I've ever had, and I'm not giving this up anytime soon.

He smirks. “Keep your secret, but your body's already admitted the truth.”

Arian lifts me a few more times until, finally, that overwhelming sensation comes back with abandon. “Stop and I'll kill you.”

“Say the magic word.”

“Arian.” A tightness pulls across my chest when I realize what he's doing. What he's continuing to do. He wants to be the one to finally break me. The first to hear me beg. To say please.

But I want whatever this is. My first run-in with him changed me. Not just my career, but fundamental parts of me. It made me realize if I wanted something, I was going to get it. Arian is no different.

I grab his chin between my fingers, our eyes crashing like ships in the night, only debris and fire in our wake. “Make me come now, *Kinkaid*.”

His tongue sweeps along his lip before he smiles. “Yes, ma'am.”

In the same motion as before, he flips us around again until I'm on my back. One of his hands secures me in place at my collarbone, while the other lifts my right leg.

He powers into me harder than before, and in seconds, pressure binds me tight, expanding and erupting through my body with such ferocity, I cry out. But Arian doesn't stop. He plows into me until I'm spent, air almost impossible to suck in.

Leaning down, his pace slows slightly. “Let me fill this pussy, Bailey.”

I thread my fingers through his hair and tug. “Magic word?”

Those white eyes flash, but he doesn't even hesitate. “*Please*.”

My heart cracks open, my voice a mere whisper. “Yes.”

His responding smile is so mischievous, a shiver runs through me. “That's my girl.”

Arian

In one night, Bailey has become my own personal drug. I'm floating in the clouds, completely high on everything that is her.

It's taken more self-control than I knew I possessed to keep from coming a dozen times over. Both her tight, warm cunt and the look of pure bliss on her face threatened to do me in too many times to count. But now, with her sated and my sheets wet with the evidence, I give in to my body's demands. To the desperation to fill her until she's dripping, only to wipe her clean and fuck her all over again.

Dragging my cock out, I return to a slow pace, taking a second to regain my breath, and roll her nipples between my fingers. She mewls, twisting beneath me.

"I love how responsive you are. Even satisfied, this pussy still wants me to fill her." I pluck the hard peak, watching goosebumps scatter over her flesh. "God, you're perfect."

My heart does something foreign in my chest, while my cock twitches inside of her.

Fuck, I'm in trouble.

But in the next second, I decide I don't care because her eyes lower and she lifts her hands high above her head and spreads her legs. "Come for me, pretty boy."

My blood soars, scorching my veins, and I grip her hips and lift her. My strokes become forceful, driven by her moans and faltering eye contact, and when the fire finally burns down my spine with my release, I spill everything inside her with a guttural "*fuck.*"

The orgasm rips through me, and with each spasm of my muscles, I lose control over my damn body. It isn't until I place a steady hand on either side of her head, and I feel my cum seeping out of her cunt that I finally stop moving.

She laughs, the sound soft and breathy. "Who would have known?"

I don't have to ask her to know what she means. "I did."

Her eyes search my face for the hint of a joke, and when she comes back empty, her smile becomes bashful. It's the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen, and I almost don't want to pull out of her. But I know if I don't, she'll get too sleepy for everything else I have planned.

When I draw myself out, she hisses and squeezes her eyes shut.

"Let's get you cleaned up." Scooping her in my arms, I carry her to the ensuite bathroom. I flip on the light above the shower before setting her at the edge of the tub.

After ensuring she's fine, I turn on the water, and grab a couple of towels from the linen closet. When I return to her, I can't help but cup her face in one of my hands. She leans into my touch, and my heart swells. As she blinks up at me, I smirk. "At the risk of your claiming miscommunication again, that was not the last time you'll be in my bed."

Her eyes narrow, but a smile tugs at one side of her lips. "Well, lucky for you, I'm in a forgiving mood, so maybe."

"That's too bad, I'd hoped you would make me work a little harder." I tilt my head to the side, letting my fingers thread through her hair. "I had at least a dozen different positions I wanted you in before you finally said you forgive me."

Bailey's mouth drops open with a scoff, but when she tries to lean away, I tighten my hand in her hair. She hisses before arching up, the pain dissolving into pleasure.

"I'm only kidding, love." I release her hair before tugging her to stand, positioning her arms around my neck. "But I still owe you a nice slap on the ass for that mouth."

She presses her lips to mine briefly, biting on my bottom lip and dragging it through her teeth. "And I owe you for almost making me beg."

This causes a deep laugh to rumble from my chest. "What do I get when I finally earn that word?"

She smirks. "Guess you'll have to find out. But spanking first."

This woman.

I kiss her once more before placing her in the bathtub and cleaning us both. After we're out, Bailey finds herself bent over the counter, with my cock sunk in her heat, and my handprint on her round ass. But it isn't then she finally gives me what I want. It's when we're in the shower and I've got my tongue in her cunt, the shower head pointed at her clit, and my thumb

propping her tight ring of muscle that she says it. And she doesn't just say it, she fucking sings it, over and over and over until we're both finally broken, nothing but limbs, beating hearts, and burning flesh.

"Bailey."

"Hmm," she murmurs, all but asleep now after I changed the sheets and pulled her to my chest to rest.

"Happy New Year, love."

She smiles, her hand finding mine and threading our fingers together.
"Happy New Year, Kinkaid."

Epilogue

January 1st, 12:25 a.m.

CosScoop: Credible sources say Bailey Rooke and Arian Kinkaid were seen leaving the New Year's party just after midnight

January 10, 09:36 a.m.

CosScoop: Bailey Rooke is the newest member of the ProCon family.

January 27, 11:15 a.m.

CosScoop: Fans of the Ariley ship are rejoicing this week as sources see them leaving the grocery store Saturday night.

February 2, 1:34 p.m.

CosScoop: Click the article below to learn more about Bailey Rooke and how she's made a name for herself in recent weeks.

February 24, 7:19 p.m.

CosScoop: Rumor has it, our favorite, and arguably the hottest cosplayer out there, may have just been swept off the market. Click here to find out who Arian Kinkaid is dating. You'll never believe it!

March 13, 7:34 a.m.

CosScoop: MagicCon is days away, check out what Arian says are the most unique cosplays he's looking forward to seeing this year.

March 29, 10:54 p.m.

CosScoop: Power couple of the Cosplay world. Arian and Bailey step out on the scene after their official announcement as a couple. His Lex Luthor outfit was a daring contrast to her Superwoman.

April 7, 3:52 p.m.

CosScoop: New trend by Arian Kinkaid. Wearing less is more: How creating cosplays doesn't have to always break the bank.

April 27, 6:26 a.m.

CosScoop: Bailey Rooke's announcement has brought excitement and cheer to the cosplay community.

May 19, 11:45 a.m.

CosScoop: Bailey leaves brunch with Mori Daniels and Cindy Wallace. The community wants to know if the frequent visits to various bakeries are inspiring an idea for a cafe in CosDreams.

June 25, 8:07 a.m.

CosScoop: Bailey Rooke's grande opening is today. Here's what's inside and why we think it's only going to be a matter of time before she's able to start an entire franchise.

Bailey

“I told you this would calm you down, love.”

The warmth of the hot mocha spreads from my throat to my limbs, heating my entire body and claiming my racing nerves. Of course he was right; there hasn't been a time he wasn't. Whether it's tying me to our bed and fucking me senseless or surprising me with flowers on a rainy day, or even just bringing me snacks while I rewatch *The Office*, this man always knows how to Zen me the fuck out.

“Everything looks incredible. There's a line out the door, and all classes are full, with a ten-month waiting list. I mean, seriously, Bai. It's all perfect.”

I take a deep breath before glancing out of my office window at the dozen people standing outside. Some of them are already dressed, while others look like this is their first time seeing a cosplayer, and it makes my heart swell.

When I woke up on that New Year's Day, Arian and I exchanged numbers and went our separate ways—like any good one-night stand—but he was at my place the same night. We fucked on every surface, and I learned that the life-altering orgasms he gave me weren't a unicorn experience but an every-time event.

After we cleaned up, I ended up on the kitchen counter, and he taught me how to make banana bread, something I'd never tried due to my nut allergy. And kisses me every five minutes, whether on my lips, hands, shoulder, or cunt. Again, the next day, we said our goodbyes, and didn't see each other for almost sixteen hours.

But the next time, I showed up at his apartment, a cosplay of Leeloo from *Fifth Element*, right after she finished baking under my trench coat. This time, the sex was slower, littered with more exploration of each other and our preferences. Turns out, he's a fan of getting on his knees for me and tying me up, while I love having my pussy spanked and enjoy being edged.

That time, we only made it ten hours before he was back at my place, flowers in hand with a classic VHS player and a stack of vintage movies. He

enjoys black-and-white horror films while I love rewatching the romantic flicks of the eighties.

I'm not sure if it was somewhere between him painting my toenails or explaining how fishing line is one of the most overlooked elements in a cosplay costume, but I fell in love with him. An annoying amount, if I'm honest, and in the six months since, my life has forever changed.

After a lot of hard work and my best friends by my side, I turned my dream into reality. With my new sponsorship, came a lot of traction and plenty of money. So much so, that when Arian surprised me with finding the perfect building I'd been searching high and low for, it only took one phone call to land the place. And another few weeks to have everything designed to start ordering.

CosDreams is a place where people can come, both new and experienced, to network, create, shop, and imagine. It's everything I wanted and so much more. And thanks to Arian, it became a reality sooner rather than later.

"Hey," he whispers, bopping me lightly on the nose. "This is it. Everything you busted your ass for."

I nod, tears burning the brims of my eyelids. "I'm terrified."

"Oh, you should be." He kisses me once. "This is going to be so incredibly successful that you'll have to open these up everywhere. And we all know you don't do heights, so the plane ride will be a little terrif—"

"Shut up." I playfully shove him in the chest before taking another long sip of my mocha.

He's right. This is going to be amazing, and make cosplay so much more accessible to so many people. And I cannot fucking wait.

I place the cup down and squeal when Arian taps me on the ass. "Let's do this."

He opens the office door for me. "Let's. Then we'll celebrate with dinner at Lui's."

My stomach flips, already growling from thoughts of my favorite Italian cuisine. "God, I love you."

Arian smirks, dropping the key to the front door in my hand. "I love you more."

November 4, 3:13 p.m.

CosScoop: Bailey and Arian have the cosplay wedding of the century. [Click here](#) to see the first pictures from the martial event.

Acknowledgments

Thank you, my reader, for filling your time with the stories in my head.

As always, thank you to my hubs who made this book possible with wrangling the kids and cooking me yummy meals. To my kids for always walking in when I'm writing the spiciest scenes. And to my incredible alphas and betas.

M.L. Lily, Felicity, Alexa and the amazing, fantastic Mackenzie

Y'all are the effing bomb and I hope you never leave me! Thank you for putting up with me being so last minute and needing everything done in one day. Like seriously. I love y'all.

Cat....GIRL! My anime BESTIE, You fucking killed this. AS ALWAYS. Thank you!

The next Holinight Novella is coming in March...

About the Author



Hey there! My name is Lee. I like to think of myself as a bibliophile who belongs to the Ravenclaw house.

I write romances that can sometimes be sweet and spicy or deadly and kinky. I'm a firm believer in happily ever afters and men who always make sure their woman is satisfied first.

When I'm not writing, I'm drowning myself in a good book, losing track of time on the Nintendo Switch with my kids, and laughing or *yelling* at one of my husband's practical jokes. (He likes to leave fake spiders and roaches around.)

Also, something important to note. I live off Chai and Dean Winchester.

Visit me on Instagram or TikTok to find out about upcoming releases and other fun things!
@authorleejacquot



Also by Lee Jacquot

I wrote a couple other books!! Check them out here!

Holinnight Novellas

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Liberty Falls

Hollows Grove

Cupid's Peak

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Labor Day Chronicle

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The Divine Corruption Series

Chances

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Secrets

DC 4

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King of Ruin (Book 2)

The Emerald Falls Series

The Masks We Wear

The Masks We Break

The Masks We Burn