



BELLE
AURORA

FRIEND-ZONED

THE FIRST IN THE FRIEND-ZONED SERIES

Friend-Zoned

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Chapter One

My name is Tina

Rawr Raaawr.

Damn, forgot to replace the batteries on the doorbell sensor again, I think
Now, instead of the regular Ding Dong most doorbells have mine sounds like a cat in heat.

“Good Morning, Ladies.” I smile and look over to greet my first customers of the day. “My name is Tina. If you need any help with anything, just holler.”

When I see them smile and nod back at me I go to my table of sweaters which have become a bit of a mess from the day before and commence re-folding.

Most people wouldn’t do this with a huge smile on their face but, what can I say?

I take pride in my work.

Rawr Raaawr.

I start speaking cheerfully before I see who comes through the door, “Good Morn...Oh, it’s just you! How’s it going?”

I see my not so cheerful worker girl Mimi walk through the studio and straight to the staff room without so much as a nod.

Oookay then.

This is not unusual for Mimi. She is super surly in the best way. You can ask her anything, anything at all and she’ll only give you a straight answer.

Everyone needs a friend like her.

She emerges from the staff room, walks across the studio and straight out the door again.

I see her turn left and smile to myself. I know she'll only be a few minutes but will come back with the best Good Morning greeting anyone can get.

Re-commence sweater folding.

Five minutes later I hear the god awful doorbell again and Mimi walks over to me carrying the elixir of life in her dainty hands. I take the cup from her and sip.

Mmmmmm, Caramel Latte. I love you, Meems.

She takes her place behind the counter and logs into the register.

She looks over at me and asks, "What are you smiling at, Atomic?" Surly as ever.

She calls me Atomic because of my surname. I laugh and shake my head at her. I see her lip twitch as she looks over her day's to-do list.

I guess I should introduce myself. My name is Tina Tomic. Actually, my name is Valentina Tomic. But the only time I ever get called Valentina is when I'm in trouble.

I manage Safira Boutique. Actually, scratch that, I own Safira Boutique. None of my workers know this. They all believe I'm the store manager because this is what I have led them to believe. Safira Boutique is my pride

and joy.

I bought it two years ago. The building was in pretty good shape but I put some money into renovating. I made all the fixings more modern and added a small kitchenette in the back which holds a fridge, microwave, small two-burner stove, and a sink to wash our dirty dishes. I also had new signs put up and a brand spanking new front counter put in. It's very modern, shiny black with a high back; this hides our register and computer. There is also a super tiny change room at the back of the store. The store room was in good condition but the overall wiring needed to be re-done. This cost me a packet, but it was *totally* worth it.

Safira's is a narrow building but is long; it looks small from the front but is surprisingly deceptive.

I had it repainted a deep blue color because Safira means Sapphire in Croatian which is my ethnic background.

The store front window holds two mannequins; I change their outfits every week.

I love doing this.

We carry many types of clothing items for several occasions. Clubbing and party clothes, cocktail dresses, formal occasion wear, sexy sleepwear (ooh la la), and a crap load of accessories. Our accessories are our main seller. We have clutches, necklaces, bracelets, bangles, costume jewellery, rings,

and hair accessories. The reason these are our main seller is because they don't cost a lot, so after school hours we are packed with high school and college girls who, unfortunately, can't afford our clothing but go nuts over the affordable things.

I love my job.

Safira has three workers; myself, Mimi, and Lola. I work full time, 9 to 5. Mimi and Lola get three to four shifts a week depending on how busy we are. We'll soon add a fourth to our trio.

My BFF Natalie is coming to live in New York!

Excited, you ask?!

Who, me?

Noooooo... I'm freaking ecstatic!

Although born and raised in California, I moved to New York two years ago. Natalie has been my best friend pretty much all my life. So when I moved away, it broke both our hearts. I had my reasons for moving. She understood why I left Cali but declared she couldn't live without me because she says "Cali sucks without you".

So, this week I'll have a moving truck arrive at my apartment. I'll pack the second bedroom full of her stuff and next week my BFF will not only be living with me but also working with me.

Totally awesome, if you ask me.

Mimi interrupts my thought by nudging me. “There he is again. Damn, that boy is fine. And I mean *fine* with a capital F.”

I look through the shop window, past the mannequins and my heart stutters. This is not the first time I’ve noticed him. And Mimi is right.

He is fine.

Super fine.

So fine he should be on a billboard or a book cover somewhere. But something about him bothers me.

Two weeks earlier...

Great. Just great.

A traffic jam and I have approximately six minutes to open the store. No way am I going to get there on time and this ticks me off. I open the store at nine a.m. and pretty often there are already customers waiting for me.

Ten minutes later I have my car parked at a public parking spot because I can never get a space by my store and I don’t have parking spaces under or behind the building. I’ve tried taking the bus a few times but found I value my sleep too much to get up an hour earlier than I have to if I take my car.

Four customers are waiting on me. Three of them are smiling when they see me running towards them. One of them is scowling at me and it makes her pretty face oh-so ugly.

“I am so sorry. There is a traffic jam down the street and I was stuck. I hope you haven’t been waiting long.” I unlock the door and they follow me inside.

I open the staff room door, literally throw my bag onto the kitchenette counter, and run back to the register to log on.

The scowling woman is waiting for me.

I smile and say, “Good Morning. My name is Tina. How can I help you today?”

She flicks her nails at a garment on the counter and replies, “This dress is awful.”

She has a great Jersey accent.

My smile falters and I respond, “I’m so sorry you don’t like it.” I’m trying to be sympathetic but it’s kind of hard when she’s looking at me like I forced her to buy it.

Her elbow is resting on the counter, she looks closely at her nails and says, “Yeah, well, I wanna refund.”

I look closely over the fabulous dress, smile and say, “Okay, let me see what I can do.” The tags have been removed and there are stains on the hem.

Uh oh. Great.

Shit just got serious.

I hate confrontations; they give me hives.

I clear my throat and say, “This dress has been worn ma’am. I can’t give you a refund or exchange. I’m sorry but our policies are clear. They’re on the walls and receipt.”

Her scowl re-appears. She would be so pretty if she smiled.

She leans forward and hisses right in my face, “This is BULLSHIT! That dress cost me THREE HUNDRED DOLLARS!” I know this. The dress is one of our most expensive pieces and is fab-U-lous. I really want to ask her if her daddy actually bought it but she continues. “It looks like a goddamn potato sack!”

I feel the flush rising up my neck and I so badly want to scratch at it. I say quietly, “Like I said ma’am, there’s nothing I can do.”

Her lip curls and she spits, “I wanna speak to a manager.”

I nod and respond, “I am the manager.”

She smiles almost cruelly and says, “Then I wanna speak to the owner.”

I stare her right in the eyeball and I’m thankful none of my girls are working.

I say in a firm voice, “I am the owner.”

Her face shifts into something even uglier than her scowl. I don’t know how to describe it, but if looks could kill, I’d be six feet under. She snatches the dress out of my hands and storms out of my store.

Rawr Raaawr.

Damn it.

Crap! Forgot to get batteries for the doorbell. Again.

I look out the window past the mannequins, and the She-Devil is walking across the street to a man standing with his back to me. He looks big. Not fat but built. She-Devil talks a mile a minute pointing towards Safira. The man is obviously talking back to her because she stops talking and starts pouting. Then she stomps her foot. Yes, actually stomps her foot and pushes her chest out while pouting up at his face. I can almost hear her whining. She walks off and the man turns towards Safira and shakes his head slowly. What a spoiled brat!

It takes me a second to notice the man.

Oh. My. God.

Angels must have broken out in song when this man was born. *I* feel like breaking out in song.

He is so handsome.

I'll admit I can't see his face very well from across the street but I can see enough of it to see he is hot. As in *hawt*. And the rest of him is just as impressive. He's tall, probably 6'2" or 6'3", and has gorgeous olive-toned skin. He's dressed in suit pants and a shirt. He has broad shoulders and great arms; I can tell from the muscle definition I can see through his shirt.

He has a face made of straight angles and his lips have a natural pout to them. His hair is styled in a masculine faux hawk, shaved at the sides, longer on top, and spiked up and to the left side of his head. I can't see his eye color from where I am, though.

This makes me sad.

I want to walk up to him and hold his face in my hands just so I can get a good look at him, but that would be rude. And I'd probably get arrested after he called the cops on me.

The only turn off I can see from my vantage point is that he's smoking.

He looks angry, too. His lip is curled as he looks into Safira's window.

I'm scared he'll come in here and yell at me trying to get his girlfriend's money back for the fabulous dress she's ruined. I just know my neck is red, I can tell from how much it's itching.

Please, please don't come in here and yell at me, Mr. Large Man.

Like an answer to my silent prayer he throws his cigarette butt onto the pavement (another turn off—litter bug), steps on it, and walks into a building I was told by my girls is a very popular nightclub.

From the front of the building it doesn't look like much. The large double doors are the typical ones you'd normally see at a club. It also looks narrow. Not quite as narrow as Safira but still narrow for a club. The sign atop the door catches my eye.

The White Rabbit.

The sign is white with a whimsical feel to it. The words are written in black and it all looks very plain but artsy.

What a strange name for a club.

I'm confused.

Why would he be at a nightclub during the day?

Maybe he's security? He's definitely built for it.

I'm intrigued. I want to know more about him.

The week passes and I observe the man from afar. I have made mental notes. He takes three cigarette breaks a day. He is always dressed in business attire. And I never see him leave. But something about him bothers me.

I have never seen him smile.

Meems breaks my thoughts with, "Well?"

Uh, what?

Confusion settles over my features and I reply, "Well what?"

"Did you have a nice trip?" Mimi smirks. "You were miles away, babe"

Oops.

I cringe and say, "Sorry. What were you saying?"

She looks livid. Her blue eyes flash at me and she spits, "I said that fine ass

man is out there again!”

I want to stroke her shoulder length silky sunny blonde hair but this is a no-go with Mimi. I’m very affectionate and hugged Mimi once. Once was enough to realize this is a no-go because when we parted from said hug, she looked at me like I ran over her dog.

I save all my workplace affection for Lola who is a bit younger than me and comes from an affectionate household. She gets me.

I sigh through my response. “Yeah. I saw him, Meems. He’s looking pretty good today. Lilac is a good color on him.”

Her eyes widen and she almost yells, “That’s all you have to say?” She narrows her eyes at me. “You’ve been watching him for two weeks, Tina. Grow some balls and ask the dude out.”

Um, No.

I don’t do relationships.

I’m twenty eight years old and have only been in one relationship. It was good in the beginning. It totally sucked at the end. *Never* again.

I’ve dated men since my relationship went bust, quite a few actually. But not one of those men broke through the thick wall I’ve built around myself. I call it protecting myself. It works and I’m sticking to it. It’s a bit lonely but at least I have my friends.

I lower my eyes, fold another sweater and whisper, “You know I can’t do

that, hon. I think a new box of those linen shirts came in. Can you please steam and shelf them?”

Her face shows her frustration and she mutters, “Way to change the subject, boss lady.”

I watch her walk into the stock room but my attention is pulled back to building across from mine.

On the counter next to the register are two clear cellophane wrapped bags of candy. One has Raspberry bullets in it, which are my all-time favorite; the other holds red wax lips.

I don't have to talk to him to be nice to him. He won't ever know who they came from.

I set aside the wax lips on the counter and taking a piece of paper from next to the register I write three small words. I fold up my note, punch a hole in it, and tie it around the candy using the red foil ribbon we use to gift wrap items with.

I look at the time on the register.

Another hour and he'll be back for another cigarette break.

I walk into the stock room and tell Mimi I need a break. She comes out front to man the counter for me. I walk out of Safira's and turn left to the coffee shop next door.

I know every person who works at Winnie's coffee lounge and they know

me and my girls pretty well, too. We're there at least three times every day to get our coffee fix, and believe me when I tell you Winnie's coffee is the *bomb*.

It's not a large coffee lounge. In fact, there is only one three seater lounge in the store because that's all it can fit. It's about a quarter of the size of Safira's and I'm sure at one point our two stores used to be one.

I go in to find Sammi behind the counter.

Perfect. Just who I need to see.

I walk over to him and smile, he smiles back flirtatiously.

Sammi is eighteen; he works at Winnie's part time and goes to college. He is cute. At least, I think he is under all that dark hair. His hair is long and brushed forward over one eye. The eye that I can see is a warm brown color.

He smiles and says, "Tina, babe, what can I get you?"

Ever the charmer, I reply, "Actually, Sammi, I need a favor."

His face shows unconcealed surprise. A small smile forms on his lips and he says in a husky voice, "Sure! Whatever you need..." He licks his lips in invitation.

I laugh, put a hand on my chest and say, "Oh my, not *that* kind of favor! Sammi, I'm old enough to be your Mo...uh, older sister."

He wiggles his brows at me and responds, "My sister ain't a hottie."

I can't help but laugh. We banter like this all the time. It's harmless and Sammi is a sweetheart.

"Can you help me or not?" I say in mock sternness with my hands on my hips.

That charming smile appears again and he replies, "Anything for you, babe."

I explain to him what I need done and he looks at me like I've lost my mind. After pleading with him and planting a wet, sloppy kiss on his cheek, he finally agrees.

I jump up and down in victory, thank him and walk back to Safira. I relieve Mimi, take my place at the counter and wait to see what happens.

A half hour passes and the beautiful man across the street appears, right on time, cigarette in hand. I spot Sammi making his way across the street and anxiety knots my stomach.

This was a bad idea. What was I thinking??! God, I am such a turd!

Sammi approaches beautiful man and hands a small brown paper bag to him. Sammi says a few words and walks away. He spies me through Safira's window and winks at me.

I watch Mr. Beautiful open the brown paper bag and take out the candy.

He looks confused. I'm not surprised.

He tears the note off the ribbon, opens it and reads. He looks even more

confused and my heart shrinks.

What I see next makes it all worth it.

His eyes crinkle and a small smile twitches at his lips.

Not great, but definite progress. This is the first smile I've seen grace his gorgeous face and it was nice. I can't help but smile, too.

Yay, me! See?! Not such a bad idea after all.

A deep sigh escapes me. I feel at peace once again. I go about my work with a huge smile plastered on my face.

Rawr Raaawr

I inwardly cringe and glare at the damn door.

A man stands there.

He's smiling but his eyes look at me like being a girl is a disease and you can catch it from visiting a boutique.

He is tall, probably 6'2". Olive skin tone and amber colored eyes.

I'm mesmerised.

His eyes are like honey! I've never seen that eye color before. He has dark brown spiky hair and a *nice* five o'clock shadow.

Wow, this man is gorgeous.

He looks to be about my age. He walks over to me, places both forearms on my counter, leans in close and asks, "Can you help me, honey?"

“I. Ahh...” I’m tongue tied. His voice is as smooth as his honey eyes.

Having obviously heard a man’s voice in the store, Mimi comes to stand next to me.

She looks Mr. Gorgeous up and down and narrows her eyes. She says firmly, “I can help you.”

He looks her up and down the same way she’d done mere seconds before and smiles a big smile. Mr Gorgeous has a dimple.

My knees almost buckle and I start to sweat.

He smirks as he responds, “Great. I’m looking for the owner of this.”

I look down and feel the flush rise from my chest up. This is because on the counter sits my Mr. Beautiful note.

Mimi looks down, brow scrunched in confusion. She reads the note and I know I’m totally busted. Meems knows my handwriting.

I feel her stare bore into me, I won’t look at her.

“You didn’t...” Her voice colored with amusement.

I’m red, splotchy, and embarrassed. I look towards the man who is now looking at me with narrowed eyes, his head at a tilt. Like he’s trying to read my mind or figure me out.

Before I can stop myself, I answer with a shrill, “How did he know it was me?”

Mr. Gorgeous takes the note from the counter and turns it over. We all look

down and what I see makes me even redder. I hear Mimi burst out laughing.

Mr. Gorgeous quietly chuckles.

Safira Boutique.

I wrote on Safira stationary!

I. Am. Mortified.

He was never meant to know!

Mr. Gorgeous speaks, "C'mon, sweetheart. You're comin' with me."

Uh, What?

I whisper, "Excuse me?"

He flicks his head to the note and says, "Boss wants to see you."

Uh, What?

My eyes widen and I whisper loudly, "Am I in trouble?"

He looks me up and down and his lips lift a little. He answers, "I'm not sure, sweetheart." He says sweetheart in a way that makes it sound like *sweethawt*.

He takes my hand that rests on the counter, pulls me next to him, and tucks my hand into the crook his arm. I know he sees uncertainty in my eyes. He looks to Mimi and smiles as he speaks, "I'll have her back in one piece. I'm Max, by the way."

She does a little head lift and responds, "Mimi." She points to me and says, "That's Tina."

He smiles and says, “Great, she’ll be back soon.” He starts pulling me along with him and I turn to glare at Mimi.

Standing tall with eyes wide, she smiles big and lifts her hand in a wave.

Crud! I knew this was a bad idea.

Chapter Two

Friend-zoned

I'm waiting for Max to get back with information on who sent me the candy and note.

Curiosity eats away at me.

Who the hell would send a guy candy?

Not just any candy, but those goofy wax lips that taste like cardboard.

Someone nutty, that's for sure.

Maybe even a past fling. I'm wracking my brain trying to think if any of the girls I've slept with recently were a bit nutty.

There was that one girl who wanted me to...Nah. I smile at the memory.

She was the good kind of nutty.

The door to my office bursts open and Max tries to walk in but it looks like something is holding him back.

Max starts laughing and says, "C'mon sweetheart, he won't bite."

I stand and step towards the door, my brows furrowed. I decide to sit on the front of my desk.

What did he bring me, a Pitbull?

Max is struggling with whoever is out there and Max is big. And strong. He looks at me like he wants to burst into laughter. Walking back out the office door, he emerges seconds later.

Walking backwards towards me is a woman; Max has his hands on her shoulders and is walking her toward me. Once she hits the middle of the room, he stops walking. He lowers his face to hers and says, “He just wants to talk, hon.” He flicks her hair playfully, turns and walks out. But not before he winks at me.

The woman standing in my office still has her back to me and she’s looking at the floor. I do a quick scan of her from the back. Medium height; maybe 5’5 or 5’6 without the black pumps she’s rockin’. Nice body. *Great* ass. Long dark hair to her waist. It’s shiny and has a nice natural wave to it.

It’s now been over a minute and this slip of a woman still hasn’t turned to face me.

I’m getting irritated now.

I have to break the ice.

I say, “He’s right, you know. I won’t bite.”

Her shoulders stiffen but she slowly turns to face me. Her face is still

lowered so I can't see what she looks like.

I take a look at her body from the front. Decent boobs. Nice curvy body. She's dressed nicely, wearing a white linen shirt and a high waisted grey skirt. You know the ones that are tight around the ass and get tighter around the knees?

Nice.

She's also wearing a thick black belt that goes just under her boobs. The more I look at her, the sexier she becomes.

This somehow makes me more irritated.

I ask a little too firmly, "Can you look at me, miss? I just wanna ask you a few questions. Nothin' to be worried about."

She nods and lifts her head.

Oh, Hell.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

Not a past fling, that's for sure.

She's cute. And flushed, I mean, *really* flushed. It kinda makes her cuter.

Not just cute, but adorable.

And she's petrified.

I have no idea why. I mean, I know I'm a big guy but I don't think I'm *that* scary.

She has light green eyes that are unusual because they have a black rim, a

cute little nose, and her lips...Oh, man.

Her top lip is full and her bottom lip is fuller.

Damn.

Using my foot, I pull out a chair and motion for her to sit. Thankfully, she does so without hesitating.

Who is this girl?

Uh, that voice.

It's the type of voice you hear in your own made up fantasies. Deep and sexy.

I look up at Mr Beautiful and Wow. He's actually even more beautiful up close.

Now that I'm close enough to him, I can see he has the same eye color as Max. He looks a lot like Max, too. I'm guessing they're brothers or at least related.

Just above his eyebrow is a scar; it goes through his eyebrow at an angle and ends at the outer tip of his eye.

A scowl mars his face and he sighs deeply.

He stands up and walks around the desk, sits behind it and takes his cufflinks out of the button holes of his silk lilac shirt. Not many men could pull off looking manly in lilac. But he's just *that* awesome.

He rolls up the sleeves to his elbows. I think he's done this to make me a little more comfortable around him. I'm surprised that it works. The simple move has made him much less intimidating and I feel myself loosen up.

He sounds bored when he says, "I'm Nik."

He already thinks you're a weirdo, don't you dare freeze up now. It's just talking.

I reply a little too loudly, "I'm Tina."

His lips twitch. He asks, "You work at Safira's Boutique?"

I simply nod.

He points to the note which now sits on his desk and asks, "Can you tell me who gave me this note?"

Immediately I respond, "I did." Just like ripping off a band aid, the quicker you do it the less painful it is.

His brow furrows in confusion, he taps his pen on the desk and says, "Oh. I guess you could say I'm a little curious about the note. And what's written on it."

I flush even warmer and slide deeper into the chair.

I'm so embarrassed!

I quickly respond, "I'm so sorry if I offended you in any way. I, ah, I think I should just go." I move to stand but he reaches over the table and takes my hand in his huge one.

He says, "Sit down, please." This is not a request.

He places my hand back on the desk and I park my butt back down. He reaches for the note and reads aloud, "Smile sometime, handsome."

Yep. I'm an Idiot.

This Tina woman closes her eyes and cringes when I read the note aloud; it's so cute I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing.

She straightens up, looks me in the eye and says matter-of-factly, "It's just that every day you come outside for your cigarette break which, by the way, smoking kills." She scrunches her nose, and says quietly, "But at least it didn't stunt your growth." She looks thoughtful, places her fingers to her chin and tilts her head slightly. Her head straightens suddenly as if she just remembered she wasn't done and she continues, "And I see you out there every day but you're never happy. And you never smile. Like ever. And I just wanted to, *anonymously*, make your day a bit better and make you smile because, frankly, watching you is a bit depressing. And I know it's none of my business and you have the right to be as broody as you damn well please, but I *like* when people smile and I like making people smile!" She finishes a little louder than she needs to be. I have to stop myself from running my hands down my face.

Yeah, too cute.

I feel a frown form.

I don't do cute. She has a great ass that I would definitely like in my bed but I don't do *cute*.

Cute girls wanna kiss. I don't do that shit. Kissing means special things like relationships and girlfriends. And I don't have relationships or girlfriends. I have fuck buddies. Because I fuck. Often. I most definitely *don't* make love. I might not screw hard all the time but even slow screwing is just screwing.

I don't have the time or the inclination to make the effort to keep a girlfriend.

One day, when I'm not knee deep in nightclub bullshit, I'll find a nice girl and settle down. I'll make sure that girl will be worth it. But that time is not now.

Tina is looking at my eyes and asks, "What color are your eyes?"

Uh oh, she's making goo-goo eyes at me. Crap, cut her loose and let her be on her way.

Nik shifts in his chair almost nervously as he replies, "Uh, I don't really know. Like a gold-ish brown or somethin'."

I push the eye color thing. I tell him, "I've never seen eyes that color. It's like warm honey."

He looks away and swallows hard before he says, “Uh, yeah, I guess.”

Oh my, he *is* nervous.

As he looks toward the bookcase in the corner and I spy ink travelling up the back of his neck past the back of his ear. It’s black, thick, and looks tribal.

Yummy.

He won’t look me in the eye now and I wonder what I said to get a reaction like the one he’s giving me.

I’m confused.

Frowning, I take a look around his office while I try to figure him out. It’s nice. The walls are a pale sandy color. His desk is wooden and looks heavy. This desk was not bought at Ikea. This was the type of desk you bought at an antique store and had re-finished. It’s clearly mahogany (La dee dah!). And I notice the whole room is neat; not a stray paper in sight. I can’t even see my desk in Safira’s store room! It’s covered in papers, stock, and trash.

Mental note; find your desk.

There are two framed photos on the mahogany bookshelf in the corner of the office.

One is of a little girl who is so beautiful, my heart aches. Her smile is pure sunshine and she is missing one of her front teeth. She has Nik’s eyes. The frame is bright pink with purple glittery butterflies around it.

Aww, cute.

The other frame is exquisite. It is thick silver with pieces of beige mother of pearl swirling through it. The photo is an old one, a family portrait it looks like. A tall, dark haired, middle aged man stands with his arms around a short but beautiful dark haired, dark eyed woman. The woman is very much pregnant. The man looks like Nik but he is pale skinned where Nik is much darker. Most importantly are the man's eyes. They are Nik's eyes. I'm going to take a stab and say these are Nik's parents.

Two small girls flank the couple, hugging them both around the legs. Hugging the two girls are two young men. Looking closer at this picture I can see Max's cheeky dimpled smile and it confirms my earlier suspicions that Nik and Max are brothers. Both girls have their mother's eyes; both boys have their father's eyes. All the children got their mother's beautiful skin tone. They are all laughing and smiling.

Wow, I love this photo.

Everyone in this picture is so happy. Like, *blissfully* happy. I think back to Nik and wonder what happened to his happiness.

I take another look around but there is nothing else to note except a filing cabinet in the opposite corner of the room close to the door.

No more photos, nothing at all personal, nothing to suggest he has a girlfriend or wife.

Then it clicks.

His reaction to my stupid questions. And I almost burst out laughing but manage to stop it and make a choked sound instead.

He thinks I'm coming onto him!

I mean, I can't blame him for thinking that because he *is* beauty defined. And now that I've spent some time with him I realize I had nothing to be nervous about. He seems like a nice, well-mannered guy but still a little too broody for my liking.

An idea enters my brain and before I can think about it and verbal diarrhea spews forth.

Tina spends a good few minutes looking around my office. Her eyes land on the family portrait which was taken a few months before Dad died.

I realize she's looking for photos of a wife or girlfriend.

Here we go. She's gonna make her move. I should've left the damn note thing alone.

Tina makes a choked noise and I look up to find her trying to hold back a smile.

Cut her loose and no one gets hurt. She's too cute.

She is too cute. Too cute to fuck and leave, she ain't that type. I can tell. I

spend a lot of time with girls like that and they normally have the same interests as me.

Sex without strings.

My body tenses. *How do I turn her down without sounding like an asshole?*

Girls like Tina hurt easy. That's why I don't deal with girls like this.

She's smiling a small smile and waiting for me to say something. I don't know what to say to her, she's nervous as it is and doesn't need me going all asshole on her.

I start tapping my pen on the desk. I'm thinking so hard I'm sure she can see my brain moving around through my skull!

I haven't noticed she started to speak.

"So we can be friends, right?"

Wait, what?

I stare at her, a frown forming at my mouth.

Did I..? Did I just get Friend-zoned?

I look over again to see Tina nodding vigorously and smiling brightly.

Wow, this has never happened to me before. Girls usually come to the club knowing I got money; they ask me out or ask me to their place for a "drink", which one hundred percent of the time ends up meaning sex.

Tina takes my silence as her cue to speak again. "I mean we work right across the street from each other. We can do lunch sometimes and, Ooh,"

she widens her eyes almost comically, “we can get together for coffee at Winnie’s!”

She looks so excited at the prospect of us being friends, she’s practically bouncing up and down in her seat.

You don’t need another friend. Definitely not a friend that’s a girl; too complicated. Cut her loose, man. You don’t need this shit.

“Uh...”

Just do it! Cut her loose. This is a mistake.

I look into her sweet face and the words are out of my mouth before I realize.

“Yeah, sure. We can be friends”

What. The. Fuck?

Where the hell did that come from?

Before I can think about what just happened, Tina looks at me and smiles big. Her lips are a pale pink, not lipstick or gloss, but naturally. Her teeth are white and perfect. I tell myself to stop staring at her damn lips. So I focus on her eyes. Her eyes are slightly crinkled at the corners. Goddamn, even her eyes are smiling.

Great. Just great, you moron.

Tina stands abruptly, pushing the chair out so hard it almost flies backwards onto the floor. She snatches up one of my business cards out of the holder

on the desk, smiles brightly at me and says, “Great! So I guess I’ll be seeing you around, friend!” enthusiastically waving my business card back and forth in the air like it’s a Polaroid picture. She finishes with, “I’ll be in touch.”

And then she’s out the door. I sit back in my chair and my brow furrows once more as I scratch my chin.

Seriously. What the fuck just happened?

I walk myself down the stairs and out of Nik’s building, thankfully remembering the way Max showed me. I make my way across the street to Safira, bound through the door grinning from ear to ear and holding Nik’s business card. Mimi looks at me, her face twisted in confusion. She looks around the store then back at me. She narrows her eyes and slowly walks over to me. She takes the business card out of my hand and reads aloud, “Nikolai Leokov. Owner. The White Rabbit.” She breaks out into a huge smile and shakes her head in disbelief.

She claps her hands together and yells, “I can’t believe it! You’re *actually* going out with him!” Still smiling, she pats my hand. This small action is *huge* for Mimi. In Mimi Land, that is a hug.

Meems knows all about my past relationship; in fact all my girls know about Jace Weathers. I don’t keep secrets from them. One girl’s night out,

after one too many cherry bombs, I unloaded my past onto Mimi and Lola. They listened intently as good friends do and offered me unconditional support.

I love my girls.

They are *awesome*.

Mental note; make the girls cupcakes.

I feel the rush of warmth in my middle; my face softens a little but I quickly pull on a poker face and straighten my back. I prepare for the wrath of Mimi.

I overdo it a little with the cheer, smile big and say, “Actually, we decided to be friends!”

Mimi does not speak for almost thirty seconds.

I chance a look at her. She is leaning gracefully with her tall, lithe body against the counter, one leg crossed over the other. Her eyes are narrowed (stop that darling, you’ll get wrinkles) and she wears a facial expression that clearly says *Are you freaking kidding me?* And not in a good way.

She shrieks, “Are you freaking KIDDING me??!”

Thar she blows!

I cringe and bite my lip before returning with, “It’s better for everyone this way.”

She counters with, “Umm, No. It’s better for you.” She shakes her head

slightly and looks disappointed.

That sucks.

I don't want to disappoint Mimi.

She and Lola have been on a mission since I told them about Jace the Moron (which Natalie calls him, or The Moron for short). They both set me up on blind dates hoping I would meet a nice man and fall in love. I went on four dates in the last four months and all the guys were nice. But, firstly, I don't want to fall in love again and, secondly, I'm happy with my life as it is.

I don't need a man.

I start, "Meems, I appreciate your interest in my social life..."

"You mean *Lack Of* social life!" she bites back.

I continue "...and you're a great friend. But I'm busy with the store and I don't have the time for a boyfriend right now. To tell you the truth, I don't *want* a boyfriend right now. I love my life. I'm back on track and loving it."

Jumping up, she plants her butt on the counter in front of me. She leans in and whispers, "You're my best friend."

My throat closes up and my eyes mist. I whisper, "Honey..."

She goes on, "You gave me a chance when no one else would. I'll always be in your debt." She looks uncomfortable and I know telling me this is taxing her. "I know I'm not the most cheerful person and I don't do

emotions well,” she whispers so quietly but I hear the words clearly. “That man damaged you. I just want you to be happy.”

Mimi is not wrong. Jace did damage me. Not physically but mentally. I don't trust the way I used to. It took me over a year to trust Mimi and Lola enough to tell them about myself. They know most of the dirty details of what Jace put me through. They know that loss hit me hard and, yes, damaged me.

Who isn't damaged in some way or another these days?

I'm a glass-half-full kind of girl.

My palms start to sweat as I think about what I left behind in Cali.

I miss it. A lot.

It sucks badly but I'm glad that soon I'll have the best part of Cali right here...Natalie!

Just another week. Almost there.

My bff is a hoot; so much attitude and sarcasm in such a small package. I love her for that; she makes me laugh all the time. Humor is my way of dealing with a plethora of things. I love to laugh. It calms me.

She's made me laugh a lot over the past year when I really needed it. I can't wait to see her so I can squeeze her. I haven't seen her in a year but we talk on the phone every few days and text every day. She knows more about Jace than Mimi and Lola.

Uhh, Jace Weathers.

What can I say about Jace?

I met Jace just before I turned twenty. He was twenty three. We were both in college when he asked me out. I said yes, and we spent two wonderful years together.

He was my first in a lot of things. He was my first boyfriend, my first love and my first...you know.

I had dated every now and again. I fooled around, too, but I kept my virginity for *the one*.

Jace, I thought, was the one for me. I gave him my virginity after only three months together. After that first time, we did it a lot.

How great is sex?!

Pretty great if you ask me! That's the only thing I miss about having a man.

Jace was ecstatic that I was so enthusiastic about it. It was me initiating foreplay most of the time and I kept him extremely satisfied.

After two pretty great years together, we both decided that we were too young to get engaged or even move in together. We were happy with our relationship. Most of our time was spent together, laughing and goofing off. We were happy. Well, I know *I* was happy.

Jace is a good looking guy. About 6 foot tall, lean and muscular. He played basketball through college. Wearing his dark brown hair in a spiked style, with green eyes and an easy smile. He stole my heart.

I want it back, you goddamn thief!

Everything was great until it wasn't.

I hate Jace now. I actually loathe Jace. He is a coward and a big fat stupid head.

What more can I say about Jace?

He broke my heart; shattered it into a million pieces.

I mean, really, what kind of man doesn't show up to his own daughter's funeral?

Chapter Three

Shit just got serious

Max looks incredulous as he slowly asks, “So you’re telling me you agreed to be friends with her?”

I sit at the table in our ‘chill out’ room.

I do a lot of business dealings at the club during the day. The club consists of two floors. I own the building. There were vacant rooms on the second floor, one of which is my office. There are two conference rooms. Lastly, the ‘chill out’ room which has a huge LCD TV, cable, DVD player, computer, stereo, board games, the most comfortable sofa you’ve ever put your ass on, dining table and chairs, refrigerator, a cupboard full of snacks, and coloring books and markers (for my niece).

I’m looking down and tearing up a napkin into as many small pieces as I can.

I respond, “I know, right? What the hell is wrong with me?”

My brother looks at me and smirks. He says, “She got under ya skin.” He laughs and continues, “She *is* pretty damn cute. And that *ass*, mmm nice.”

I have the sudden urge to slap him across the back of the head. My brother Max is my best friend. Well, he is, and so is Asher who we nicknamed Ghost. We all grew up together, went to school together and towards the end of our high school years Ghost moved with us. This made Mom extremely happy because as she said his parents are ‘*mala gente*’ or ‘bad people’.

The whole town knew this.

Mom loves Ghost as her own son. She refuses to call him Ghost though, but he doesn’t mind. He calls her Mom and he loves her as much as I do, maybe even more.

Ghost would sneak out of gym class so nobody could see the bruises all over his body. I knew they were there but it was forbidden to speak of it. I brought it up with him once and he disappeared for a week. The next time I saw him I told him I wouldn’t mention it again but let him know he was my brother and I had his back. Always.

Asher and I are thirty four. Max is a year younger than us.

Ahh, the golden boy himself!

Ghost walks into the room followed by my cousin Diego who we call Trick. They both take a seat.

Max starts, “Hey Casper, guess what Nik got himself?!” He’s practically giddy.

Idiot.

Ghost runs a hand through his blonde hair and turns his brown eyes towards me.

He guesses, “A new car?”

“Nope.” Max pops the *p*. He turns to Diego and tells him, “Trick you get one guess.”

Trick looks like us in every way, same facial structure and skin tone. He is a little shorter than us but is still tall. He’s the same age as me but we went to different schools. His mom and mine are sisters. The only difference between us is his eyes are hazel.

Trick asks, “A dog?”

Max starts laughing. He says, “Get this,” *Shut it knucklehead*. I glare at him from across the table. “He’s got a new friend. And it’s a girl!”

Both Ghost and Trick jerk their heads up wearing questioning expressions. I nod in confirmation.

They are silent for a while before Trick smirks at me and asks, “Wait, is this a *friend*-friend?” He wiggles his brows at me.

I laugh and respond, “No, man, just a friend. She works across the street at that chick store Safira.”

Max chuckles “She sent him candy and a note!”

Ghost, who is staring at me like I’ve lost my damn mind, bursts into fits of laughter. He says, “What are we in fourth grade?”

I glare and tell him, “She’s nice.” I say *nice* like it’s a bad thing.

Trick tilts his head to the side and looks over my shoulder like he’s thinking. He enquires, “I don’t think you’ve ever had a *girl* friend. I mean a friend who you won’t be gettin’ any nookie from, right?”

I frown and nod.

“You’ve lost your damn mind,” Ghost mutters. “You better get a file on this broad. Just in case.”

He’s right.

Damn it but he *is* right. I need to call my guy and get file a put together. This is one of those things that comes with having money. It’s not that I don’t trust people but it’s better to be safe than sorry. I work with family and I have to make sure their safety comes first. Always.

All I know about her is her name is Tina. She took my card so I guess I’ll have to wait for her to contact me.

Rawr Raaawr

I look to the front of the store, smile and say, “Hey Honey, how’s it going?”

Lola runs across the studio to the staff room. She's running a few minutes late and she knows I won't care but she always makes an effort to please.

She comes out of the staff room replying, "Not so good. Any cupcakes today?" She looks hopefully up at me.

I grimace through my response, "No, sorry hon. I'll make a batch tomorrow."

Her face falls a bit. I love that she doesn't try to hide her disappointment. She says pitifully, "That's okay." She sounds so forlorn I can't help but chuckle.

"Bad day?" I ask.

She logs onto the register and says, "The worst."

I wince as I ask, "How bad sweetie?"

She wails, "Cupcake bad!"

I laugh inwardly.

Oh woe is me!

Lola is sweet but can be terribly naive. She is twenty five and a bit of a drama queen. She is short; about 5 foot nothing. Her chocolate brown hair is layered down to her shoulders and she has sweet deep brown puppy dog eyes. So when she asks for my delicious cupcakes, she gets my delicious cupcakes.

Lola starts, "So, get this. I drag my ass out of bed to do some grocery

shopping this morning. I'm waiting at the checkout. It's so early I can't even see color yet. I look up and that bitch Nicki is my checkout girl. She smiles and says I just want you to know the whole time you were with Alex, I was bangin' him, too."

Oh. No. She. Didn't.

The look on my face must have conveyed this because Lola continues, "Uh, yeah. So I say to her I hope you always used condoms like I did because I found out he's carrying!"

I burst out laughing and ask, "Is that true?"

She chuckles and replies, "I have no idea. Her face was so pale, she looked like she was gonna be sick! Then she says, 'He said I was the best he ever had, he said you're like a corpse in bed'. So I reach over to my groceries, open a can of chopped tomatoes and dump em on her head!"

I'm laughing so hard I'm clutching my stomach, I can barely breathe. Lola looks at me and starts laughing just as hard. Then she stops, looks up slightly, scrunches her face and says quietly, "Yeah, I'm probably banned from there. I need to find a new place to get my groceries."

I smile, "That's the least of your worries! Tell me it was worth it."

She smiles big as she responds, "Totally worth it."

Lola used to be a little too sweet. That is until she met Mimi. Mimi fell in love with Lola the second she met her. She took our little friend under her

wing and gave her a new motto.

Don't Take Shit!

So, over the course of the last year, I've seen Lola blossom from a delicate flower into a durable weed!

That sounds bad, but trust me, it isn't.

"So," Lola says while counting stock. "Meems tell me you've got yourself a new *friend*." She says friend like she wants to follow it with smoochy kisses.

God, Mimi, you suck.

Using my stern mom voice I utter, "Not. A. Word."

She sounds exasperated when she replies, "Oh, Come *on* Teeny! You *cannot* tell me you don't see what I see when you look at him."

I sigh deeply and admit, "I do! I know he's Mr Beautiful and, by the way, you should see his brother who is Mr Gorgeous. The guy spoke to me and I almost peed. I was so nervous and my neck did that stupid itchy red thing and he was all suave with his deep bedroom voice and...Gahh!"

Turning my back to her, I walk my way over to the staff room. I'm almost there when I hear Lola.

"Why don't you ask him to lunch?"

Hmmm, I might just do that.

Two days later

I sit at the front counter and stare at the business card which stares right back at me. Mocking me.

Nik's email address is on the card. I could just send him an email asking him to lunch or coffee.

So why is this so hard?

Stop being a chicken and just do it. You know you want to see him.

I log in to my email, start writing, and chicken out at the last minute. I save the email to the draft folder in case I change my mind.

Rawr Raaawr

My doorbell no longer sounds like a cat in heat, now it's more like a mooing cow. Today is Wednesday and is the one day a week I'm alone in the store.

I smile and look to the door. What I see there makes my smile disappear and my heart sinks.

Miss She-Devil (from the dress return debacle) saunters over to the counter.

Oh, Dear Lord. Please give me strength.

I smile stronger this time and ask, "Good Morning, Miss. How are you today?"

She smiles back and replies "Oh, I'm great Hon. How are you today?"

Uh, What?

I'm immediately suspicious of her because she's smiling like the cat that got the cream.

I say, "Well, we aren't too busy today so I guess we could be better. What can I help you with?"

She responds, "I just wanted to come over here and apologize for my rude behavior the other day. It was totally unacceptable and I'm really truly sorry." She's trying to look contrite but it comes off as constipated.

I'm shocked. I stutter my response, "Um, wow. I, ah, thank you. That's really nice of you to do that."

Then it comes.

She puts on a sad smile and sighs. "I know you understand as a woman, we like to wear nice dresses for our men. But three hundred dollars for the dress I bought was probably overkill." She laughs a bit too cheerfully and places a hand on her cheek. "I honestly don't know what I was thinking. My husband owns the club across the street and that dress was far too formal to wear there. He didn't even look at it twice."

What. The. Hell. Did she just say she was Nik's wife?!

I take a close look at her. She can fake sweet pretty well. If she were auditioning someplace, I'd be impressed.

She is thin, a little taller than me and maybe a year or two older. Her long

bleach blonde her is bordering silver. Her eyes are blue and look ice cold.

She-Devil sighs hard and musters up the sweetest voice she can and tells me, “It would be such a huge help if you would *please* take the dress off my hands. I made a mistake and I promise I’ll never do it again.” She sounds like a five year old. “My husband is really mad at me. I really need that money back.”

This doesn’t make sense to me.

Firstly, why would Nik care about a measly three hundred dollar dress when his shirts are silk and probably cost that much for a single shirt?

Secondly, he owns the club! The club is very popular (according to Mimi); they can’t be strapped for cash.

The confrontation flush I get is already attacking my chest and climbing up my neck.

I clear my throat and say, “I understand you have a predicament and I’m very sorry for you. Even if I take the dress from you I can’t re-sell it. If I can’t re-sell it, I can’t offer you a refund. So unfortunately, my answer is still no.” Somewhere deep within me courage blooms, “And that is my final answer.”

She-Devil’s murderous scowl reappears.

Oh, hey you! There you are! I’ve missed you.

She hisses at me, “This is BULLSHIT! You think you’re so high and

mighty in your damn clothing store. Well, guess what? Your clothes look like shit. I've seen better shirts at Target! You think you've seen the last of me, think again! I'll be back every damn day til you give in. And you will, Honey." She looks me down at me, smirks, and says, "I suggest you lose twenty pounds if you want to look good in the clothes you sell."

And then she's gone.

Oh, Hell no!

Shit just got serious.

I walk into the staff room, grab my keys, lock up and I'm out the door.

"You can't use a draw four there!"

Max has been doing this since we were kids. Making up his own rules to games which he knows won't even help him win.

I respond, "Pretty sure I can, bud." I place the card down and he groans.

Trick can't control his laughter and asks, "Why do you even bother, Nik? You know you're gonna win. *He* knows you're gonna win. It's like torture watching you two. Hilarious torture!"

Ghost watches from the sofa smirking.

Clip Clop, Clip Clop

High heels.

One of my sisters must be here. I don't get up; they know where to find me.

Clip Clop, Clip Clop

The steps come quicker and harder. I face the doorway to see Tina storm past the 'chill out' room obviously going towards my office.

"Tina?" I yell out. I hear her stop walking and she appears at the door.

Holy Hell, she looks pissed!

She looks beautiful, too. Wearing her hair in a messy bun at the top of her head and very little make up. Her skin is flawless. She's wearing white ankle boots and a black and white patterned knee length dress that has three buttons down the front of the chest; it's open a little low.

God, she's hot.

I can see her cleavage but I don't stare.

She notices there are other people in the room and her face softens.

She says, "I'm sorry. I'll just go. I don't want to interrupt your...Is that Uno?" Her face brightens.

I reply, "Uh, yeah. We were just taking a break. Are you okay?"

She walks into the room, sits next to me at the table, takes the cards out of my hands, and starts shuffling.

She sighs and tells me, "I'll deal this round"

The guys are looking at her like she's crazy. Ghost gets up and joins the table. Max is looking at her like she's freakin' hilarious.

Tina finishes dealing and looks around the table. She introduces herself,

“Hi. I’m Tina. I work across the street”.

Trick smiles widely at her. *Don’t do that, asshole.* He keeps sneaking peeks at her cleavage. He says, “I’m Trick”

Ghost doesn’t even look at her as he utters, “I’m Ghost”.

She scrunches up her face and asks, “As in Casper the friendly Ghost?”

He nods but still doesn’t look at her.

Her face awestruck, she whispers, “That is so cool.”

Total Goofball.

I clear my throat, look at my cards and ask, “So, You looked like you were ready to kill someone when you came in. I hope that someone wasn’t me?”

She places a blue 2 down and goes back to her cards. She replies in a bored tone “No. But I think the next time I see your wife I’m going to throw a shoe at her head.”

Um, what wife?

I almost choke on my question, “Um, what?”

She sighs and says, “I’m sorry. That was rude. Next time I see your wife I’ll throw something soft at her head.”

The guys look at me, then at Tina, then back at me.

Max speaks up, “Babe, he doesn’t have a wife to throw anything at.”

Tina places her cards down and leans forward closer to me and says, “She said she was married to the owner of The White Rabbit. That’s you, right?”

I nod. Max looks at Ghost, then Trick. They are all smiling.

I know why they're smiling.

Sissy.

I'm going to kill her!

Tina puts her fingertips to her temples. She whispers, "God, I'm so confused."

Trick pulls her hands down from her temples and asks, "Was she tall, blonde, and meaner than a junkyard dog?"

Tina looks up at him and nods quickly.

Rage burns in the bottom of my gut. Sissy is a royal pain in my ass. The only reason I keep her around is because she has a mouth like a Hoover. Sissy and I are not together but she has been my regular screw for a few months. I have never kissed her on the mouth; she knows it's one of my rules. Sissy teases me by calling me Pretty Woman but I can see it hurts her. I don't really give a shit if it hurts her, she knew what she was getting from the first time we had sex. I never once played games with her, I told her straight out that she and I were only fuck buddies. She agreed. End of story. Unfortunately for her, after this stunt, I have to cut her loose.

This doesn't bother me. I'll send her a text when Tina leaves. It was fun but it is what it is.

I look at Tina and say, "I'm sorry, Tina. If I knew she was causing you

trouble I would have cut her loose sooner.”

Tina looks up at me with wide eyes and responds, “I don’t want you to break up with your girlfriend because of me!”

I roll my eyes and mutter, “She wasn’t my girlfriend, just a casual acquaintance. She was becoming a huge pain in my ass anyways. Time for her to go.”

“So,” Tina frowns and purses her lips, “what do I do if she turns up at the store? I don’t want her making a scene again. Its puts customers off from coming back.” She looks uneasy.

I get up, walk over to the fridge and take out two sodas. I sit back down and place one in front of her.

Without even a thank you she opens it and sips like she’s been playing Uno with us for years. I respond, “Leave that to me. She comes back to the store, you call me. Straight away.”

Nodding, she plays with the ring of her soda can and turns to check the time on the clock on the wall.

She jumps up and yells, “Crudsickles! I’ve been here for an hour; I’ve got to get back.” She looks around the table, smiles and says, “Nice to meet you all. Hope I see you again soon.”

Crudsickles?

She turns to me, puts her small hand on my shoulder and speaks again,

“Thanks Nik. I appreciate it.”

The guys watch her leave. Well, they watch her ass sway as she leaves.

Knuckleheads.

Trick smiles big, still looking to the door. He declares, “I like her!”

Yeah...Me too.

Chapter Four

I was just in the neighborhood

I wake up with a start.

Sweat pours down my face, my stomach knots, and my chest expands with every heavy breath.

Sitting up, I place my back against the headboard of my awesome sleigh bed.

I haven't woken like this in at least three months. I used to wake like this every night, sometimes multiple times.

It's still dark out. I squint over at the digital alarm clock on my bedside table. 4:57 am.

Fan-freakin-tastic.

I don't have to start getting ready for work for an hour and a half but I'm up

now.

After losing my daughter and Mom, I had trouble sleeping for a long time. I kept hearing Mia cry in the middle of the night and would find myself in her very empty bedroom sobbing.

I really need you right now, Mom.

The thing I miss most about my Mom is her hugs. Coming from a Croatian background, I was raised very affectionate. I would never leave the house without giving both my parents a kiss on the cheek.

I could be having the worst day ever, but a warm, comforting hug from Mom would make everything seem okay. Every time I was in a bad mood she would ask, “What’s the matter, Dušo?” and always made sure I would vent to her about whatever was bothering me. And vent I did.

Baking is my release. I love to bake; my specialty is cupcakes.

I know my cupcakes are good. Actually, good is an understatement. My cupcakes are the *bomb*.

You’re up now. Get your butt out of bed. Let’s get baking.

I reach over and fling my covers back.

Bang Bump Meow

Oops.

I apologize to my sweetheart. “Sorry Bear. Come here, honey.” He stretches and walks over me. I pick him up and scratch him all over. When I reach

under his chin he purrs loudly and drools. I chastise him softly, “Ewww Bear, control yourself.”

When Mia was a year old she spoke her first word which was cat. As a reward for my super smart daughter, I got her Bear. I got him from a shelter, he was really fat, but after months of diet cat food he was back in shape.

Bear is a super sweet and very affectionate (my kind of cat). He has a white body with three big black blotches on his back, a completely black tail and looks like he’s wearing a black Zorro mask.

I look down at my feline friend and say, “C’mon honey, let’s get you some breakfast.”

Bear walks beside me as I exit my room and make my way to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face.

I reach the kitchen, cover my mouth, and yawn.

Bear is already on the kitchen counter doing something which can only be described as the *Give Me Food* dance. He struts back and forth, purring loudly, bumping his head on random things. Every now and then he looks back at me in a way that says *the dance is working, right?*

I reach under the counter for one of his many bowls, put some wet food in it, and place it on the counter.

He purrs while he eats. I scratch his head and say in a cutesy voice, “A fancy feast for my fancy beast.” I love Bear, he is the ideal cat. I tell him,

“You have five minutes to eat, buddy. I’ve got to get baking.”

Bear finishes his meal and jumps off the counter. I wipe down the counter with disinfectant spray and go about getting my ingredients organized.

I place them all on the counter, whip up a chocolate mud batter, and divide it evenly between the patty pans.

I pop them into the oven to bake and make my way to the bathroom to shower.

I sing ‘Working 9 to 5’ in the shower, loudly. When I’m done, I step into the hall and the delicious smell of chocolate mud cake attacks my nostrils. My mouth waters and I know one of those babies has my name on it for breakfast.

As I walk into the kitchen, the oven bell dings.

Perfect timing.

I take them out of the oven, cover them with a tea towel and put them on the counter to cool.

After, I heat cream on the stove top, not too hot. I pour the warm cream over some semi-sweet chocolate and slowly stir. I put it aside and wait for it to cool.

Yum!

My stomach rumbles and I pat it.

Soon, my pretty.

I go back into my room to change for work. I decide on a linen pants and blouse combo. Add some heeled sandals and *voila!*

I scan my bathroom counter for my small bounty of makeup. I don't really wear a lot of makeup. On the rare occasion I go out with the girls, I'll apply it a bit darker. I never wear lipstick, only clear or lightly colored gloss. I like the natural color of my lips.

Looking at my limited selection, I decide on mascara and pale pink lip gloss.

A glance at my watch tells me I can start icing the cupcakes so I make my way over to the kitchen counter.

There is something about icing cakes that is almost therapeutic. Using a piping bag, I carefully ice all 12 of them in a swirly snail pattern.

I'm so hungry at this point I take the wrapper off one of the cakes and shove the whole thing in my mouth.

Chewing loudly, I hear the doorbell ring.

What on earth?

I'm still chewing when I answer the door. There stand two men in blue overalls.

Oh, Crudsickles! I forgot about the moving truck!

One of the men speaks, "Good morning, ma'am. I believe you're expecting a truck of furniture."

I nod but am still chewing. I hold up my hand with my index finger pointed up. The universal signal for *one minute, please*.

When I'm finally able to speak I smile big at them both, "Yes! I'm so sorry." Checking my watch I say, "I actually forgot and have to be at work soon."

The other man looks at my mouth, clears his throat and speaks up, "I'm sorry ma'am but someone needs to be here for us to unload."

Darn it!

My brain goes *Ping!*

I get an idea. I walk past the movers to the apartment next door and knock quietly.

The door opens and I'm greeted with a large smile, "My, oh, my, is that you Tina?"

Smiling back at her, I say, "Hi Molly! I need a really huge favor."

Molly looks down at my mouth. Her lips twitch as she tells me, "Girl, you got chocolate all up in yo' teeth!"

My eyes widen, I can feel the warm blush rise on my cheeks.

Molly is a really cool neighbor. She is in her fifties, African American and small but full of fire. Every time I see her I'm mesmerized by her outfits. They're always traditional African garments and wraps with fantastic patterns and are usually beaded. Her husband died ten years ago and they

never had children so she decided to downsize by selling her house and buying an apartment instead. When I met Molly, I felt like I had won the neighbor lottery.

Molly was wary of me at first. Until I invited to her eat dinner with me one night and she tried my cupcakes. It's safe to say that Molly and I are good friends now.

Embarrassment seeps through my pores. I squeak, "Can I use your mirror?" She places a hand on her hip and taps her toes. She asks, "You holdin' out on me, baby girl?"

Um, what?

I whisper, "Um, what?" My face must show my confusion because she keeps talking.

She sternly asks, "You eatin' those cupcakes behind my back?"

Oh!

I feel a bubble of laughter rise in throat. I chuckle and say, "If you do me this favor, I'll save you a couple."

She smiles and responds, "Deal. You know where the mirror is, sugar."

I quickly fix myself then explain to Molly about the movers. Luckily, she didn't have plans for the morning. Molly has one of my spare keys; she normally feeds and watches Bear for me when I'm out of town hunting new suppliers for Safira.

I pack six of the cupcakes into a container, give Molly a big hug and make my way to my car.

I love my car. It's a convertible.

A 1975 VW Yellow Super Beetle. The girls call it my Dung Beetle.

It's slightly rusted and the leather top has holes in it so when it rains I have to cover it with a tarp.

It has character. It's my baby.

I approach the driver's side door and jiggle the handle. I depress the button.

Nothing happens.

I jiggle harder. Try the button again.

Still nothing.

I jiggle hard and knee the door. I hear it. *Click.*

Bingo!

I open the door, sit down and place my cupcakes on the passenger side floor. I feel a headache coming on.

Mental note: take some aspirin.

I put the key in the ignition and turn. Nothing happens.

My forehead falls forward between my hands onto the steering wheel with a thump.

Le Sigh.

So many emails.

I need to hire a secretary or assistant to help me out. The White Rabbit has gotten so popular; people want to hire it during the week for birthdays and special occasions. And I'm all for that.

My sister Maria comes to help out on occasion. She works part time as a receptionist so she's great help when we need her and she knows what she's doing. She can work all the gadgets and is pretty technology savvy. I'm thinking of asking her to become our full-time secretary. If work keeps coming in the way it is, we'll need it.

Ding!

A window pops up on my computer. It's an instant messenger program I've never used. I signed up for it when I got the computer, it automatically logs in when the computer turns on but I haven't added any friends.

“Valentinatomic@Safira.Net has made a friend request”

Her name's Valentina? That's kinda nice.

I accept the friend request and immediately a message comes through.

TheTomicBomb: Hey Friend!

I can't help but chuckle at her messenger name.

Nik123: Hi. How are you?

TheTomicBomb: Great thanks. How r u?

Nik123: Busy. But Good.

TheTomicBomb: That's good. Whatever u told ur "wife" seemed 2 work. I haven't seen her since.

Damn right. I cut Sissy loose. She was devastated and I don't give a shit. She's spoiled and used to getting what she wants. She has to learn she can't pull that kinda shit and get away with it.

Nik123: I'm glad. If she gets the balls to come see you again, let me know and I'll fix her up.

TheTomicBomb: Eeek, that sounds a bit scary! I wouldn't have the "balls" 2 go against u :)

Nik123: That's because you're sweet. It's not in your nature.

TheTomicBomb: Sweet?! I'm badass!!! One time I went 2 a museum and didn't even give the voluntary coin donation!

I burst into laughter. This girl is a total goof. I like that.

Nik123: Oh hell, that *is* badass

TheTomicBomb: R u free 4lunch 2moro?!

I take a quick look at my schedule.

Nik123: Sorry Tina, tomorrow isn't good. I'm meeting a potential sponsor.

How about the day after?

TheTomicBomb: Great. I'll book u in. What kind of sponsor?

Nik123: I meet with companies who want to use The White Rabbit's name.

They give me money to spend on the club. I put their names on posters and events and add links to their websites from ours.

TheTomicBomb: Wow! But I thought u were doing really well, do u need their money??!

Nik123: I like spending other people's money rather than my own. That way I get more profit.

TheTomicBomb: *Thinking face* this is true. How big is the sponsor?

Nik123: Pretty damn big. It'll mean big money for us.

TheTomicBomb: Cool! I hope u get it. I have 2 go, I'll see u4 lunch the day after 2moro :)

Nik123: Great. Just warning you, I'm a big sushi fan

TheTomicBomb: Me 2! Sounds like a plan :p

TheTomicBomb logged off.

I don't know what just happened but I'm smiling like an idiot.

Should've cut her loose.

Last night was spent packing away most of Nat's things in the second bedroom.

I'm super psyched!

Next week she'll be here and I'll be living and working with my bestest friend in the whole wide world!

I messaged her to tell her how her room was coming along.

Me: Hey hon, your room is almost sorted. You're almost here! Yay!

Nat: Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious! Totally awesome! I went to your dad's and got his spare key.

Me: Cool. How is he?

Nat: You know your pops, always working on something. He made a new coffee table last week!

This is good news. My dad is a carpenter and fascinated with anything wooden. Most of my childhood memories of him include him making something out of wood. When Mom died, he stopped tinkering and became

a bit of a recluse. Unfortunately, I wasn't much of a help to him because I was mourning the loss of my sweet Mia. We comforted each other as best we could but living in Cali became too hard for me, so I moved to New York. I think it took me moving to break him out of his spell. We call each other a few times a week to chat and Nat goes over on occasion to check up on him.

Me: Awesome. How'd it look?

Nat: You tell me. It was in the moving truck!

Oh, wow!

Me: I thought it was yours! I put it in your room!

Nat: Nope, it's yours babe. You have a new coffee table! I gotta jet, see you soon. Love you x

Me: Love you more x

This is awesome because I never even had a coffee table to begin with. I walk into Nat's bedroom and take a closer look at my gift.

It's beautiful. It's as high as my knee with a toffee brown finish. The hand carved pattern around the sides is of roses, stems, and leaves. The stems wind their way around; it's so realistic he's even carved the thorns into it. I

love it.

My eyes mist and my throat tightens with emotion because I know this table is more than a gift. It's a message from my dad. The message is to not worry about him because he's okay.

Relief settles me while love warms me.

I wipe at my eyes, clear my throat and pick up my cell to call my father.

“Knock Knock!”

I lift my head from my schedule to see a smiling Tina standing in the doorway of my office. She's holding a large white container.

I smile and ask, “Hey, what are you doing here?” I check my watch; its 11 am. Still got some time before my meeting.

“I was just in the neighborhood!” She looks a bit sheepish as she continues, “Well, I know you said you've got an important meeting so I brought something to sweeten the deal for them.”

My eyes widen. I ask, “Oh, yeah? What have you got there?”

She walks over to my desk and opens the container. There are twelve of the most delicious looking chocolate cupcakes I've ever seen. Half have chocolate frosting, half have a light brown colored frosting. The smell hits me.

Pow! Right in the kisser!

I can smell peanut butter. I'm salivating. I tell her, "These look so great"

Multiple footsteps approach the office. Max and Ghost appear. It's like they can smell food from down the street.

Max smirks, "Hey Tina, what's shakin' baby?" Ah, Max, what a knucklehead.

Ghost lifts his chin to Tina.

Her skin flushes as she explains, "Well, I made some cupcakes for the sponsor meeting thing. I know it's important and these babies can be *really* persuasive." She turns to Ghost and says, "I don't want to toot my own horn but these cupcakes," her eyes narrow and she looks left then right like she's trading inside information, she finishes on a whisper, "are the *bomb*."

Her phone buzzes and 'Thrift Shop' by Macklemore blasts from the small device. She straightens and yelps, "Oh *crud*, I have to go!" She turns to me and says, "Listen, I know you said you can't do lunch today but you still have to eat so I'll pick something up and bring it to you."

Is this girl for real?

"Ah..." I'm stunned speechless.

She lifts her brows and asks, "So what time does your meeting finish?"

I reply, "Around one." Still stunned, still speechless.

She smiles big and says, "Great. I'll bring you a turkey sub."

I was going to get a turkey sub for lunch today. This is too weird.

Tina turns to Max and Ghost and asks, “You guys want subs for lunch?”

Max’s shocked face turns soft. He says quietly, “Naw, hon, that’s cool,”

Ghost shakes his head. Max smiles as he continues, “But I want one of those cupcakes.”

Tina smiles back at him and tells him, “Have at it! But leave some for the sponsor.” She spins to face me and says, “Seriously, though, persuade the sponsors to try them.”

I’m still in shock so I just nod.

Just as she walks to the door Ghost picks up a cupcake with light brown icing. Tina turns, gasps, and runs back toward us. Like a Tennis player on crack, she slaps the cupcake out of Ghosts hand, hard.

Splat!

It lands on the wall and surprisingly doesn’t fall; it stays where it is like a wall decoration.

Her chest heaving from exertion as she yells, “Holy Cannoli!” She looks at Ghost and says, “I forgot to warn you not to eat those if you’re allergic to peanuts!”

Ghost grabs another chocolate peanut butter cupcake, tears the wrapper away and shoves the whole thing in his mouth. His eyes close in bliss. He slows his chewing and his head falls back. Shaking his head slightly he looks at Tina and mutters, “Not bad. I like crunchy PB, though.”

Ah, Ghost. Ever the ass.

Max unwraps a chocolate frosted cupcake, takes a bite and moans. Taking three steps toward her, Max wraps his arms around her shoulders and picks Tina up, he holds her there for a few seconds before he lets her back on her feet. Then he speaks with a full mouth so his words are garbled, “Oh my gawd, Teen, this is the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

Tina looks up at Max with her huge smile on show. She blushes and says quietly, “Well, thanks guys. Don’t forget to save some for the sponsor.” She looks back at me and says, “I’ll bring you lunch at one.”

She goes to shut the office door behind her, as the latch clicks the cupcake on the wall lands on the floor with a plop.

Max starts to chuckle. Ghost joins in. I can’t help but laugh, too.

That girl is a Hurricane.

12:40 pm.

I better get a move on if I want to get lunch in time.

The sub shop down the street sells the most delicious and freshest subs. They actually cut the meat right in front of you and their t urkey is *always* moist.

Nik didn’t say no to turkey so I guess he likes it. He looked a little shocked when I made the cupcake offering. He looked even more shocked that I

offered to get him lunch, but I figure if we're going to be friends, I'm the one who'll have to make the initial effort. Once we're at a comfortable stage, I'm sure he'll open up more, but already he fascinates me. I can't seem to keep away. I want to know more about him.

Max and Trick like me. I know this because they make no effort to hide it. And I like them right back.

Ghost, on the other hand, hates my *frickin'* guts. I'm not sure why but I can tell he doesn't trust me.

Silvio is working the counter at the sub shop like always. He is an animated Italian and always really loud.

Slightly balding, he does what good men do and shaves it short rather than comb it over.

Silvio likes me because I eat. He always tells me to get a cookie with my sub and much to his delight I almost always do.

Silvio smiles with his normal greeting, "Buongiorno Principessa! What my get you today?" Silvio's English isn't perfect.

I say, "Hi Silvio, you're looking good today! I need two of my regulars."

He raises his brows at me, smiles big and claps loud. He responds, "Oh, very good gehl. I love you mangia! You get cookie, too." This was not a request.

I chuckle at his antics and say, "You better make that two cookies. I'm

taking lunch to a friend today.”

Understanding dawns on his face and he ups the dramatic hand movements with, “Ahh, this is a good. Friends make a laugh when mangia together!”

I bite my lip to stop my laugh; after two years of knowing Silvio his English could’ve quite possibly gotten worse.

Two subs and cookies in hand, I wave goodbye to Silvio and walk over to The White Rabbit.

The door to Nik’s office is closed; I check the clock in the hall: 1:05pm

I’m juggling quite a bit of food but luckily the door handle is a lever, not a round one.

Balancing the food on my lifted leg, I use my hip to push down the lever, I hear the latch open, and I walk backwards through the door.

I state ,“Whoa! That wasn’t as easy as I made it look. Here is your sub, Monsieur.” I turn and see Nik at his desk, eyes wide. There is also a very pretty woman sitting opposite him.

Eeeek!

Luckily, Pretty Woman wears an easy smile.

She stands and offers kindly, “Here, let me help you.” She takes the subs and cookies out of my hands and puts them on the edge of the desk.

I sputter, “Oh, thank you so much. I’m so sorry to bother you. I thought the meeting was over.” I shoot Nik an apologetic smile

“That’s fine,” she says, “We were just finishing up and I was just about to ask Nik where he got those delicious cupcakes from.”

Nik clears his throat and walks over to me. He stands so close to me my shoulder is in the crook of his arm. He explains, “Well, actually, Tina made those.”

I look closer at Pretty Woman and realize I’ve seen her before. I say slowly, “Wait a second. I think I’ve seen you in my store. You asked for my help and I recommended that Yellow sweater because it looked killer with your black pumps.”

The woman is smiling and wide eyed. She responds with a shocked and amused voice, “Oh my goodness. That was a while ago. I didn’t think you would recognize me. I *love* that sweater!” she chuckles. “I’m Vanessa.”

I’m genuinely happy to see her again. I reach over to shake her hand and say, “It’s so good to meet you, Vanessa. I’m Tina. If you ever need any help with something to wear, come see me again. And, by the way, if you liked those cupcakes I have the recipe on my work computer. If you give me your card I can email it to you.”

Vanessa smiles and says, “Really? I would love that.” She digs through her purse for a business card and hands it over. “My husband loves chocolate and I’ve never tasted anything like that before.”

I look up at Nik, who I haven’t even noticed has moved his arm around my

shoulder. He looks down at me, eyes dancing.

Gahh, look at those beautiful eyes!

I shoot him a smug look that says *See! I told ya!* then take a huge bite of my cookie.

I'll admit I forgot Vanessa was even there until she spoke again. She says, "If you don't mind me saying, you two make a great couple."

Nik's arm tightens around me and he replies, "We certainly think so."

What. The. Hell?

"Right, honey?" Then he leans down and kisses my temple.

I have a full mouth of cookie but I manage a, "Mmmpff" and a small nod.

Vanessa says her goodbyes to us both and takes her leave. I turn to Nik. He is staring at me and says, "I can't *believe* the cupcake thing worked!"

"Like a charm, every time," I confess. Then I narrow my eyes at him, "What was the couple thing all about, mister?"

He has the grace to look sheepish. He explains, "Sorry about that but I'll do anything to get this client. And she seemed to really like you. I didn't want her disappointed."

Rolling my eyes at him, I sigh and respond, "Well, I'd better get back to work because I may have lied about having that recipe on my work computer. Luckily for you, I know it by heart." My face turns serious, "I really hope you get it, Nik."

His face softens and he says softly, “Thanks for the cupcakes, T. And the sub. Sushi is on me tomorrow.”

I nod and make my way to the door.

I have a recipe to email.

Chapter Five

Only in New York

Inventory day is the worst day of the month. I have Lola and Mimi in on inventory days because like a creature suffering photosensitivity, I will not see the light of day today.

Call me Smeagle.

The floor is not very busy so Mimi straightens up loose clothing items around the place and Lola takes calls and answers emails for me. They share the customers.

I hear the store room door open and close. I don't think anything of it; I just continue my monotonous task.

Hands close over my eyes and I feel breathing next to my ear. "Guess who Bitch?"

I know that voice.

I jump up and down and squeal as loud as my lungs will let me. I stop

squealing for a moment to turn around. There smiling back at me is my bff Natalie; 5 days early!

I jump into her arms and we both squeal loud for a full minute. I scream at the top of my lungs, “Oh my God!”

The door bursts open and Max barges in with a gun in hand!

Nat and I start squealing for a different reason and we both hit the floor and I cover my head.

“What the fuck is going on here?” Max booms; he looks angry.

I croak hoarsely, “Why do you have a gun, Max?”

He looks around the room and takes in the scene before him. Chest heaving, he lowers his gun hand to his chest. He speaks a strained, “Holy shit babe, you scared the fuckin’ shit outta me.”

I reply a shrill, “I scared *you*? I’m not holding a gun!”

He puts the gun in his waistband and holds out a hand to both me and Nat.

We take his hands and he pulls us both up. He puts his arms around both our shoulders and explains, “I was at the coffee shop and I heard you screamin’ like a freakin’ loon. I thought someone was hurtin’ you. I dropped my damn coffee all over Winnie’s floor and ran the fuck over here. That’s why I had my gun out.”

My face turns soft. I say, “It doesn’t explain about the gun but I’m glad you were ready to help me, hon.”

Max smiles, dimple and all. He responds, “Who would make me cupcakes then?”

Nat smiles as says, “Ahh, she got you with her cupcakes.”

Max looks down at her and exclaims, “Wow. You’re really pretty! I’m Max.”

Nat corrects, “Actually, I’m not ‘Really Pretty’. I’m Natalie. I moved from Cali to be closer to my best friend and *that’s* the welcome I get?” She chuckles, “Only in New York.”

Max looks properly chastened and apologizes. “I’m sorry, ma’am. It won’t happen again.”

Nat makes a positively ghastly face at him and spits, “You’re damn right it won’t! If you call me ma’am again I’ll punch you in the face.”

Max puts his arms up in retreat and utters, “Okay! Okay! Yeesh! Well, now that I know you ladies are safe and sound, I’ll be on my way.”

He backs out of the store room. I look over at Nat, smile and shrug.

Only in New York.

Laughing so hard I’m clutching my ribs, I let Max finish his story.

“And they both hit the freakin’ floor like I was goin’ postal or some shit.”

He’s laughing as hard as I am as he continues, “Then, get this Nik, I make the mistake of callin’ her friend ma’am and she threatens to punch me in the

face!”

Ghost is reading the newspaper but he’s chuckling, too. Trick’s face is bright red and he’s wheezing, he thinks this is as hilarious as I think it is.

Ghost lifts his face and frowns. He asks “What is it with chicks and squealing?”

Trick answers “It’s their version of when a dog gets so excited it pees.”

Max face turns serious as he tells us “You should see the friend though. Mmmm, nice. Tina is cute as all get out with a great ass. Mimi is sexy but scary as hell. Natalie is just plain sexy. And there was another girl there who was a little young but just as fine.” He turns to me and smirks, “I’m really glad you decided to be friends with Tina.”

With Nat here, I get inventory done in 2 short hours. Work goes quickly when you’re gabbing away with an old friend.

After a year apart she still looks the same to me except her hair is longer and dyed a deep magenta, some would call it violet. People always ask us if we’re sisters; we have the same eye shape and green eyes. Except my eyes have a dark rim around them and are lighter, hers are bright grass green.

I’ve told her all about The White Rabbit and the guys. I’m surprised when she doesn’t question me about Max and his gun but I’m glad because I honestly wouldn’t know how to answer her.

I ask her if she can steam some new items and she seems really excited to be put to work. After showing her how to use a professional steamer and warning her about steam burns (which I have had many of), I leave her to it. The red mailbox on the computer flashes. I find one unread email.

It's from Vanessa.

To: valentinatomic@safira.net

From: vanessagraves@nt3advertising.com

Subject: Re: Cupcake Recipe :)

Thank you so much, can't wait to make these for my husband!

Who ever heard of mayonnaise in cake? But whatever work, right?

Kindest regards,

Vanessa Graves

P.S.

Tell your boyfriend he's got himself a new sponsor. Doing the paperwork right now. Should be there Monday.

HOLY CANNOLI! Yay!

After yesterday's accidental meeting with Vanessa, I went back to the store and typed out the recipe to email to her. I was just about to email it when I read what business she was from. NT3 Advertising is a *huge* advertising firm in New York. So, now I understand why this was so important to Nik. If he succeeded in getting them as a sponsor it would open the door to him for a lot of other sponsors. NT3, alone, has over ten sub companies.

I'm so happy for him right now I could dance a jig!

Instead, I forward the email to him and wait for a reply.

My excitement deflates when I don't get one after ten minutes. I get back to work.

Rawr Raaawr

Just as I'm ready to glare at the damn doorbell, I'm pulled back into something hard.

I look up and there is Nik. Hugging me from behind.

He is so tall and handsome. And I feel safe in his muscular arms.

This bothers me.

I try to laugh it off saying, "Hey there big man! I see congratulations are in order!"

He takes my hand and turns me to face him. He takes my face in his large

hands and explains, “They were going to turn me down. You,” he shoots me a grateful smile and whispers, “you are the reason I got this. This one’s all on you.” His face turns serious, “Thank you, sweetheart, you have no idea how much I needed this.”

Wrapping his arms around my shoulders, he picks me up and rocks me from side to side. My legs are swinging left to right and I can’t move my arms. I’m sure anyone watching thinks I’m his dolly.

When he’s done, he sets me back on my feet and put his hands on my shoulders. He orders, “You’re shuttin’ down for an hour. You and your girls are coming to The White Rabbit for lunch.” Not a request.

I scrunch my face up and start to refuse, “I really shouldn’t.”

His face turns serious again and he says firmly, “I’m not taking no for an answer.”

Ooookay then.

He tries to persuade me with, “C’mon. It’s just an hour. We need to celebrate.” He starts nodding.

This is the first time he’s been in my store and it’s been nice so far. I look around to see Mimi smirking, Natalie wink, and Lola wide eyed. I shoot them all a questioning look. Mimi and Nat nod vigorously, Lola just stares at Nik.

Oh, Lola. I know how you feel.

Shrugging my shoulders I put on my best bored voice, “Well I guess an hour won’t hurt.”

Nik smiles huge and, wow, I’ve never seen him smile like this before. I’ve only ever seen his smirk. But this...*This* is a smile. It’s a masterpiece. A work of art.

It’s a little like Max’s. He has a single dimple which is totally yummy. And his teeth are so straight and white, I want to lick him.

But his smile transforms his whole face. Gone is any hardness I once saw in his face; now whenever I see him I will remember this beautiful smile. I feel sorry for anyone who hasn’t seen it.

He turns to Mimi and asks, “Can you lock up?”

She nods and walks to the staff room. Keys in hand, she shuffles us out the door and locks it.

Nik takes my hand, puts it in the crook of his elbow and walks us across the street, girls in tow.

We arrive at what Nik calls the ‘chill out’ room and there are at least ten other people there.

Max is the first to spot us arrive. He swoops up to us and picks me up, hugging me hard.

What the heck is it with these guys and picking me up?

Max exclaims, “Oh, doll face, you are a sight for sore eyes!” He looks at

my girls and asks, “Have you tried this girl’s cupcakes?” They all nod and he continues, “They should win awards or some shit!”

From across the room, an older lady yells out to Max, “You watch your mouth, young man. You’re not too old for me to spank you, niño travieso!” She has a slight accent. She is also beautiful. I would guess she is in her mid to late fifties with salt and pepper hair, olive skin tone, and dark brown eyes.

Nik walks me over to her. He introduces me to her. “Mom, this is Tina.” He looks proud to introduce me. I melt a little.

She looks at me curiously and questions, “So this is your new *friend*?” She says friend in a teasing way. I don’t know what to make of it.

I clear my throat and respond, “It’s lovely to meet you...”

She takes my hand in hers and introduces herself with a kind voice. “Cecilia. But you girls can call me Mama.” She winks at me then goes to get my friends names.

Trick approaches with three other girls. They are all smiling big as Trick introduces them. “Tina, these are Max and Nik’s sisters. Leticia, Maria, and Isabel.”

Leticia looks the oldest. Not quite as old as Max or Nik but she is the oldest sister. She looks a lot like her Mom. As does Maria. She says, “Please call me Leti.”

I take her hand and shake it. I say with an awe-filled voice, “Wow, you’re all so beautiful. You must have great genes.”

Maria takes my hand next and responds, “We get told that a bit but it’s hard to see that in yourself.” She is humble and sweet. She looks about my age.

Isabel is the youngest. And I mean *young*. She is maybe eighteen. Nik has to be at least twelve years older than her. She looks a little like her sisters but shares the same eye color as Nik and Max. She gently takes my hand and shoots me a shy smile, “Call me Isa.”

Leti asks me about Safira’s. I tell them I’m the manager and which brands we currently stock. I also invite them to come see the store sometime. They all listen intently and seem genuinely interested. I like them instantly.

Ghost appears in the doorway carrying platters upon platters of sushi.

Oh dear lord, I’m in sushi heaven!

I freakin’ *love* sushi! I don’t love the raw fish bits but give me Teriyaki and Satay chicken any day. Ooh, and spicy tuna rolls. And spring rolls. And maybe the edamame beans.

Okay, so I love a lot of Japanese food items.

Nik comes up behind me and catches me staring with wide eyes at the platters. He smiles, I get the dimple again, and he says teasingly, “I promised you sushi, right?”

I nod up at him and he tells me, “Go eat then, sweetheart.” He gives me a

little shove to move me along.

Looking around the room I see everyone chatting and laughing. Cecilia and Trick in one corner. Nat, Lola, and Max on the lounge, Ghost sitting on the arm of the sofa listening in. Mimi is chatting away to the sisters. Everyone seems to be having a good time and I'm glad we came. It seemed to be important to Nik.

I make a move to the table with the now open platters when a voice startles me.

“Daddy?”

Such a sweet little voice that my heart clenches.

I look up to see a young girl in a wheelchair blocking the doorway. I recognize her from the photo in Nik's office.

She is around nine or ten years old and she has pale skin (like me) and auburn hair which is cut to her shoulders. Her eyes are the same color as Nik's. The tooth that was missing in the photo has almost completely grown back.

This little Angel must be Nik's daughter.

I'm a little shocked when Max walks over to the girl and kneels by her chair. He asks, “What is it, baby?”

She holds up a handheld game console and frowns. She whispers loudly, “I can't get my game to work.”

He takes the game console from her, kisses her hand and says, “Hmm, let me see what I can do.”

The little girl rolls her chair into the room and right up to Nik and me. She looks up at him questioningly, “Hey uncle Nik, is this your girlfriend?”

He chokes down a laugh and explains, “No, Cricket. This is my friend Tina. Tina this is my niece Ceecee. She’s named after Mom but this is easier for us.”

I smile and take her small hand in mine and say, “It’s nice to meet you, Ceecee.”

Ceecee smiles back at me. She frowns suddenly and declares, “I’m hungry.”

I kneel beside her and ask, “Would you like for me to make you up a plate, sweetie?”

She nods and follows me over to the table. I ask, “What would you like?”

Her face scrunches up in disgust when she sees the Sashimi; she says with certainty, “I don’t want the fish.”

A bubble of laughter catches in my throat. I tell her, “That’s okay. I don’t like the raw fish either.” I take a look around the platters and say, “There’s chicken, egg, and cucumber. Which ones?”

Her face brightens and she replies, “One of each, please.”

I put some sushi on a plate for her and pop it in her lap. I notice her legs aren’t muscular at all; in fact they look quite small for her body. I take a

guess that she is possibly a paraplegic.

Max comes back into the room and walks over to us. He sees the plate on her lap and his eyes go wide. He asks her, “Did you get that on your own, baby?”

With a mouth full of sushi, she replies, “Nuh uh. Tina got it for me.” She looks to her father and says, “Don’t you think Tina’s pretty, daddy?”

Max and I look at each other and laugh. He nods genuinely and tells her, “Yeah, baby, I think she’s very pretty.”

Ceecee surmises, “I think she looks like a princess.”

Max smiles and claims, “Maybe she is a princess.”

Her awe filled eyes meet Max’s and she questions, “Do you think she’s a real princess like in my book?”

With a small shrug, he responds, “I don’t know, babe. Why don’t you ask her?”

She turns her face to me and in a completely serious voice asks, “Tina, are you a princess from my book?”

Oh, my...You are too cute.

Shaking my head slightly, I tuck her hair behind her ear. I tell her, “No sweetie.” Her shoulders slump, so I continue, “But sometimes when I dress up really nice I feel like one.”

Her eye widen and she whispers, “Me, too. Can we be princesses one day?”

Without hesitation I answer, “Absolutely.” This is important to her for some reason.

Eyes still wide, she looks to the floor and whispers slowly, “Cool.”

She is so small and sweet. I want to hug her. So I do.

I wrap her small frame in my arms and hug her. I lean down to her ear and whisper, “You don’t have to be a real princess to feel like one. I’ll show you someday.”

She returns my hug briefly, takes the game console from Max, and wheels herself out of the room.

I turn to Max, grab hold of his hand and state, “I love her.”

Max pats my hand holding his and smiles as he boasts, “She has that effect on people.”

“You must be so proud,” I say. My voice is a little thick.

His face turns serious but answers with a soft voice, “I am, doll. I really am.”

Tina holds onto Max’s hand and I feel a swell of emotion in my chest. Max has been through a lot over the past nine years. He was in love with a good woman. We don’t see Maddy anymore. Actually, we haven’t seen her since Ceecee was about one and a half.

Ceecee was born an extremely healthy little girl. She wasn’t planned but

Max loved Maddy so much that he would've done anything to make her happy. They eventually both fell in love with the idea of a baby. Max was twenty four and strutting like a peacock when Maddy wound up pregnant. He liked the idea of being a dad.

When Maddy brought Ceecee home from the hospital she was soon after diagnosed with postpartum depression. She wasn't bonding with Ceecee and would sometimes leave her in her crib for hours without a feed or changing of her diaper.

Mom stepped in and they moved into the family home. Mom gave Maddy an ultimatum. Either she would go to counselling or Mom would call child services on her. Yep, Mom pulled out the big guns.

Months passed and Maddy was getting better. She was making more of an effort, playing with Ceecee, bathing her and putting her to bed at night. Mom was over the moon.

Ceecee was fourteen months old when the accident happened.

Mom was now confident enough to leave Maddy with Ceecee so she left them both at home to go to the grocery store for an hour. What Mom returned to would change us forever.

Ceecee was crying so hard on the kitchen floor she was blue in the face. Maddy was cowering in a corner with her hands pulling at her hair. Mom called an ambulance and was told by the phone operator not to touch

Ceecee. Mom was hysterically crying when she went to take a closer look at Ceecee. There was no blood but her little body was twisted at an awkward angle.

It turns out Maddy was getting lunch ready for Ceecee and put her up on the kitchen counter. Maddy turned to the refrigerator for just a second.

Ceecee fell back off the counter and severed her spine when she hit a stool on the way down.

Can you imagine the pain that little girl was in?

We don't talk about Maddy. Ceecee has asked about her a lot. She knows her Mom's name and that her Dad doesn't like to talk about her. That's it.

Max refuses to talk about her but about a year ago he came to me for name of a top private investigator. He wanted to find out where Maddy was.

We found out that Maddy had turned herself in to the police before being placed in a rehabilitation facility. She was never charged with neglect and child endangerment because the courts found she was mentally ill. Maddy lives in Arizona with a husband and their two children, both boys. When Max heard this last bit of information, he went gonzo. He was a wreck for a long time after Maddy left.

I never held Maddy responsible for what happened to Ceecee. As far as we all knew, it really was a horrible accident. And one she will be living with for the rest of her life. I'm sure she left Max out of guilt.

What kind of person wouldn't have guilt? After all, she almost killed her daughter.

I love Ceecee like she was my own. I would do anything to keep my Cricket happy.

Something tugs at my lapel. Tina is standing before me and looking up at me with an uneasy face. She's so close to me we're toe to toe and her face is at my chest. One small move and we'd be kissing.

What the heck?

I start, "Ahh..."

She smiles a sad smile and muses, "When someone wears the face your wearing they usually need a hug."

She places one arm around my waist, rests her head on my chest, with her other hand at the back of my neck stroking the hair there.

We stand like that for almost a minute and I feel my body relax. She squeezes my waist, lifts her head and asks, "Better?"

My brow furrows and I look past her shoulder, thinking. I am feeling better.

I give her a small nod. She smiles, lets go of me and walks back to Max.

Probably the best forty second hug I've ever had.

Chapter Six

The White Rabbit

“So what’s going on with you two?”

Turning to look at Nat I answer, “We’re just friends.” She looks sceptical.

She slyly shoots, “Sure didn’t look like that hug you gave him this afternoon was between friends.”

I scoff, “Oh, c’mon, tell me he didn’t look like he needed a hug!”

She mutters, “I wouldn’t have known because I wasn’t watching Nik all day long. Unlike somebody I know.”

I try to change the subject. “Pass the blankie, hon.” She takes the blankie off her feet and pulls it over both of ours.

We’re on my awesome soft cream colored sofa watching some singing contest on TV.

After I gave Nik the hug he so terribly needed I started to feel awkward.

This was because every eye in the room was watching us like the Hawks

they are. Max, Trick, Mimi and Cecilia couldn't conceal their happiness. Lola, Nat and the sisters faces all held a bit of shock. And Ghost was openly scowling at me. Not too long after, I made excuses for us girls and we left in a hurry.

Work for the rest of the afternoon went quickly and on the way home I asked Nat if we could get Chinese food for dinner. She was down for that. Now, here we are, on my sofa, watching crappy reality TV and eating Chinese food out of the cartons.

Ahh, this is the life.

I couldn't have asked for a better way to spend a weeknight. I'm loving that Nat's here to stay. I feel secure in knowing she's close by.

Nat utters, "All I'm saying is that the only guy I've ever seen you hug like that was The Moron." Of course, she's referring to Jace.

Bear decides it's time to find the most uncomfortable place to sleep and jumps on the sofa to lie down on my feet. I pat his furry little head and he purrs loudly.

I say, "I don't know what to tell you, babe. I've only ever had a few guy friends and I only knew them a short time before I moved to New York. So, I guess I'm a little inexperienced in what is and isn't appropriate with a guy friend. I'm just treating him like I'd treat you, Meems, and Lola." I end on a shrug.

Picking at her food with her chopsticks, she casts me a side long look and whispers, “I just don’t want you getting hurt.” She pats my covered foot. “You’re a sensitive soul, my chickadee. I love you more than anything. I’m just looking out for you.”

Under the blankie, I nudge her foot with mine. I mutter, “I know doofus.” I furrow my brow and look right at her, “There’s just something about him, isn’t there?”

She rolls her eyes and exclaims, “Uh, *yeah!* It’s called animal magnetism and he has it in bucket loads. He’s also sexy and that neck tattoo...*hawt!* I’m also diggin’ the eyebrow scar...and the brother.”

Laughter bursts out of me. I say, “Wait a sec, I thought I caught you staring at Ghost this afternoon and now you’re into Max?”

Making a thoughtful face, she replies, “I don’t know about the Casper guy. He freaks me out. Too intense, ya know? I think if I was looking for some fun I’d go with Max, he’s easy to get along with.”

I raise an eyebrow at her and cry, “Max burst in on our one year reunion with a gun! If that’s not intense, I don’t know what is.”

Her body shakes with silent laughter. She chuckles, “That was so freakin’ awesome.”

We look at each other and burst out laughing.

Yeah, it was pretty awesome

Nat and I arrive in to work with a few minutes to spare. I put her to work immediately by sending her over to Winnie's to introduce herself to whoever is working that morning and getting our morning fuel.

It's Saturday so it'll be a busy one for us.

Thank Heavens for that.

I have a bit of money. But like Nik said "I'd rather spend someone else's money, that way I make more profit". Unfortunately for me, I do not have *that* much money to spend on the store. When Mia was born, my parents talked me into adding her to my life insurance, so I did. When she died I received a substantial amount of money and threw all of it into Safira. And when Mom died, I received a very decent sized inheritance. I put that money into an interest earning account and cannot touch it for another five years. So, yes, I have quite a bit of money. None of which I can touch.

After paying the girl's wages, I'm not left with a huge amount so when we have a busy day of work, it makes me stupid happy.

I travel twice a year to scout out potential suppliers. This doesn't mean I don't like my current suppliers, it just means I like to broaden our clothing and accessory options.

The girls all get any clothing bought at Safira at wholesale price. So,

basically, I don't get a cent from any clothing sold to them. I do this because I love them and they are so good to me.

Nat walks into the studio holding two caramel lattes and places one on the counter for me then goes about re-folding yesterdays messed up clothes.

Rawr Raaawr

“Yeesh babe, you gotta get someone to fix that damn thing.” Max is standing behind the counter holding a white parcel.

I sigh loudly and state, “God, I *know!* It's just awful. I'm just so busy I keep forgetting.” I make a point to stare at the parcel; I narrow my eyes and ask suspiciously, “Whatcha got there?”

He smirks, “Well, I guess you can call it a gift. I've been told to tell you not to open it until I'm gone, though.”

What on earth?

I'm stunned. I question, “Ahh, okay?”

Max laughs and assures, “It's nothin' bad, toots. Just accept it and say thank you.”

Still stunned, I take the parcel from him and say, “Thank you, Max.”

He raises a brow, shrugs, and admits, “Well, technically, it's from Nik the Dick,” he winks and adds “but I'll take any thank you you wanna give.”

I blush and smack his shoulder with the parcel. I accuse, “You dawg! I need to work so you can just *shoo.*”

He kneels before me, takes my hand and kisses it dramatically. He replies seriously, "It's always a pleasure, my lady."

I giggle as he leaves, place the parcel on the counter and stare at it.

What could it be?

I've never been good at accepting gifts. And the girls usually hound me for weeks before my birthday til I crack and just tell them what I want.

I'm staring so intently that I haven't heard Nat come up behind me.

I jump when she speaks. "What's in the box?"

I'm wide eyed and I answer slowly in a whisper, "I have no idea and it's freaking me out."

Nat grabs the box from the counter and rips the tab off. We both lean a little closer as she open it.

There in the box is a big yellow envelope with my name on it. Nat opens the envelope and dumps the contents in to the now empty box.

I'm a little confused at first. There are four laminated cards in clear cases and a note.

I reach for the note first.

Take them and use them. I won't take no for an answer. Nik.

Nat takes a look at a laminated card and whispers, "No shit?"

I look at her wide eyed and enquire, “What are they?”

Shocked, she marvels, “VIP passes to The White Rabbit.” She smiles wickedly and states, “We’re going out tonight!”

I’m curious about these VIP passes so I turn on the computer and go to The White Rabbit’s website.

No shit?!

I loudly whisper, “No shit?!” I’m stunned.

Nat looks at my shocked face and replies wide eyed, “No shit *what?!?*”

I hold up a VIP pass and shout, “These babies are a hundred bucks a pop!

And you can only use them for one night. It gets you access to the VIP lounge, a private booth, and unlimited drinks.”

Nat is giddy. Smiling and bouncing up and down. She yells, “NO SHIT?”

I whisper, “No shit.”

Now I know why Nik told Max to tell me not to open it until he was gone.

He knew I’d refuse his gift. After reading his note, I don’t *want* to refuse these passes. I think he feels he owes me but I’m going to tell him next time

I see him that he absolutely doesn’t. Friends help friends.

I call Mimi and she squeals so loud my ear throbs. Next I call Lola and she’s stunned into silence.

We all agree that tonight we go to The White Rabbit.

All the girls meet up at my apartment to get ready. My apartment is the biggest of all of ours.

We spend two hours perfecting our outfits, doing our hair and makeup.

Nat has been placed in charge of my makeup. She applies smoky black shadow and eyeliner to my eyes, clear lip gloss on my lips, and finishes my look with false lashes and mascara.

I look at myself in the mirror and can hardly recognize the person staring back at me.

I look *good*.

No, I look sexy. I can't believe it.

I take a look around at my girls. Lola's hair is straightened and down and is wearing a tight red tube dress which is thigh high and black and red heels. Mimi's hair is also straightened and she is wearing black wide-legged hipster slacks, a turquoise off the shoulder blouse, and black heels. Nat's hair is lightly curled and she is rocking a black pencil skirt with a charcoal tank tucked into it, charcoal ankle boots, and a thick white belt high on her waist. My hair is parted at the side and in its natural state of wave; I'm wearing a tight black long sleeved dress which comes just above the knee and bright purple suede heels.

Goddamn, we look good!

I kiss Bear goodbye.

Time to get our dance on.

It's 11pm and still no sign of Tina or the girls.

Damn it.

I really hoped she would use the VIP passes I gave her. I owe her big for NT3 Advertising sponsoring us and I hoped to share some of the fortune, which she helped me get, with her and the girls.

I'm up in the security room scanning the monitors for any sign of them out the front. I'm just about to go back in the club when I spot Nat on the monitors. They're lining up with the regular club goers. I didn't explain they could walk right in.

I'm such a putz.

If I don't send someone to get them they'll be waiting there all night. I call Max on his cell and tell him to get the girls so they can actually enjoy their night rather than spend it lining up out the front of the club.

I'm actually looking forward to seeing Tina outside of her comfort zone. She doesn't look like the kind of girl who goes clubbing regularly. I hope she'll loosen up and have some fun tonight.

In fact, I'll do anything to make sure she has a good time tonight.

The girls and I are lining up, waiting to get into The White Rabbit.

The line is long. And I mean *long*! It's almost two blocks down the street. I don't think we'll get in any time before 1am.

Well, that's what you get for trying to be 'fashionably late'.

Shut up, brain.

I have my back turned to the street, rubbing my arms for warmth.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" I turn and Max is smiling at us.

He asks, "What do you chicas think you're doing with all the regular folk? You're VIPs!" He offers his elbows to Nat and I, we take them and the girls follow as he walks us to the front of the line.

Some of the waiting club-goers groan and a smiling Natalie struts passed them like a peacock and boasts, "Yeah, that's coz we're VIP, bitches!"

As we approach the front of the line, we're greeted by a huge African American man. He's bald and looks badass. Max fist bumps him and presents us to him, "B-Rock, these ladies are personal guests of Nik's." I hand him my VIP pass and he smirks at me, "You hold onto this, mami. You'll need it at the bar."

Awesome!

B-Rock (cool nickname) unhooks the red velvet rope and we follow Max just inside the hall. We reach another set of double doors and Max clears his throat and smirks at us, "Ladies, welcome to The White Rabbit."

He pushes open the double doors and I almost pee.

My ears are assaulted by loud R-n-B music which fades into loud Pop music.

My mouth hangs open as I follow Max into the first floor of the club.

This place is *unbelievable!*

I always thought The White Rabbit was a strange name for a club until now. It all makes sense.

Max takes my hand, I take Nat's hand, she takes Mimi's, and Mimi takes Lola's hand. We form a mini snake. He leads us into the main club area. There are booths all around the edges of the *huge* room, there isn't a spare seat in sight. You have to walk down four or five steps to get to the dance floor, which is packed full. The outer rim of the room is higher than the dance floor. The dance floor is retro tiled in black and white.

Max leads us to the bar and I'm actually dumbstruck by how awesome this place is.

There are waitresses walking back and forth from booths to the bar and they are all wearing costumes. They wear a short light blue and white pinafore dress with puffy sleeves, thigh high white lace stockings with garters, and four inch white maryjane heels. They also wear long blonde wigs with a light blue bow tied atop their head, false eyelashes, pale makeup, and bright red lips.

Get it??! The White Rabbit is an Alice in Wonderland themed club!!! So freaking awesome!

I love this place!

“I love this place!” I yell this to Max who bursts out laughing.

Max offers, “Sweetheart, you haven’t even seen the VIP area yet!”

I’m in awe.

There’s more?!

I’m suddenly giddy. I take another look around. All the walls are painted deep purple; this has been done whimsically and the artist has mixed white through the purple in a swirly pattern. There is a huge bronze Cheshire cat statue by the bar, people are gathering around it and taking photos with it. Some fantastic Alice in Wonderland prints and paintings hang around the wall. There are even original cartoon cells.

Oh Em Freakin’ Gee!

Max leads us to a staircase and we climb up. As soon as we reach the top, an Asian Alice smiles at us and says, “Good evening ladies, do you have a VIP booth reserved?”

My hearts sinks. I sputter, “Uhh...”

Max interrupts me, “Yeah. It’s under Safira. These are Nik’s guests.”

Asian Alice’s eyes widen slightly. She utters, “Of course, please come through.”

We follow her to one of the bigger booths, it can seat at least ten people and I'm confused as to why she would give us this one when there are only four of us.

The girls, Max, and I take a seat. We order Cherry Bombs and I look around while we wait.

Max was right, the VIP area is even better than downstairs. The booths are black soft leather with bronze buttons down the sides. Every booth has their own waitress and the music is not as loud up here so you can talk to each other without yelling. More cells, prints, and paintings line the walls.

Nik arrives at our booth and speaks, "Ladies, I'm so glad you could make it."

He's smiling at us (dimple and all...yum!) and I know he's genuinely happy that we came. He looks delicious in grey slacks, Italian dress shoes, and a light grey sweater which he's pushed the sleeves up to the elbows.

I shriek, "This place is *awesome!*" Nik laughs as takes a seat beside me.

He begins, "I can't believe you've never been here." He feigns being upset. "I was a little hurt actually."

I laugh at his antics and respond, "Well, you lured us here and I can tell you I've only been here twenty minutes and I already want to come back!"

He leans in close to my ear and says, "I'm glad you like it." He leans away, winks, and adds, "Now to make sure you have a good time."

Swoon.

Fuck. Me.

I knew these girls were good looking but, *damn*, they clean up nice.

They all look stunning but I'm actually a little disappointed that Tina is wearing a lot of makeup. She's normally adorable but tonight she looks sexy. When I leaned in closer to her I caught her smell. Goddamn it, she smells like cake! Like vanilla, cinnamon, and sugar mixed together.

The dress she's wearing shows off her body; it hugs every sweet curve. She looks hot.

I'm feeling a little protective of her. I don't want any of the guys here to make a move on her. I want her to relax tonight.

Yeah, keep tellin' yourself that.

Hush, brain.

Someone behind me clears their throat. Ghost is standing there with Trick. I gave the boys the night off because I want the girls to enjoy themselves tonight and when we we're celebrating at lunch the other day everyone seemed to get along really well.

Trick takes a seat next to Lola but Ghost remains scowling at Natalie who is staring right back at him.

Oh damn, it's a stare off.

I'm just about to tell Ghost to sit the hell down when Nat straightens her back, leans her head forward slightly, and scowls theatrically hard at him.

I can't believe my ears when I hear him chuckle behind me. Ghost isn't what many would call a people person. But he has his reasons.

He rolls his eyes at her and plonks himself into the seat next to her.

Everyone has a drink and starts conversations with each other and I find myself listening to answers Tina gives to the questions asked of her.

I find out she's lived in New York two years, formerly a California girl. She's twenty eight. Nat shares Tina's apartment with her. She has a cat named Bear. Her dad lives in Cali but her Mom's passed away. That's too bad. She and Nat have been friends for as long as they can remember and they're both of Croatian descent. She also advises that she's a lightweight and to not let her drink more than three drinks.

Two hours pass and we're all still deep in conversation with each other. Tina is on her third drink and I won't let her drink anymore tonight. Ghost is not much for conversation but he seems to be listening to whatever Nat is talking to Mimi about. Everything is going well and I'm glad we're all getting to know each other better because these girls are the *shit*. And I can't stop looking at Tina.

She's beautiful and she looks so relaxed, laughing so hard she almost chokes on her drink. I rub up and down her back and her skin's bare. Her

skin is so soft.

Jeezus.

I like these girls. A lot. They are real deal kind of girls. Nice girls who like to have good conversation. No drama kind of girls.

My kind of girls.

And then...

“You fucking asshole!”

“You fucking asshole!” The entire booth turns to face the shrill voice.

Oh, dear god!

There at the end of the booth stands She-Devil.

Miss I-Wanna-Return-My-Three-Hundred-Dollar-Ruined-Dress.

Nik’s face turns hard as he snarls, “Sissy, what the fuck are you doin’ here?”

I told you, it’s done.”

Her scowling face turns to mine. She asks, “So, you fuckin’ her now?”

Nik’s reply makes my stomach knot, “None of your damn business.”

Damn it, why didn’t he say No!

She-Devil Sissykins smirks at Nik and leans forward a little and states tartly, “I am going to make your life a living hell.”

Oh, Hell no. That shit doesn’t fly.

I stand up and out of the booth, I’m immediately flanked by my girls and

we stand tall.

Nat speaks first, “Oh, hell no, Hoochy Spice. You do *not* come into this man’s club,” she points her thumb back at Nik, “and start shit while he’s hosting a private party. You got shit to say to him, you wait for an appropriate time or make an appointment to see him. What you don’t do is bring your two dollar made-in-china silver hair extensions to our booth and make a fuss like a five year old.”

Mimi speaks next, “And there is no way you’ll do anything to make his life a living hell, either. I know you think he’s your man or some shit but have some dignity and move on graciously, bitch.”

Lola turns it up a bit, “And if we find out you’ve done anything to make any of these guy’s lives harder than it should be,” she whispers loudly, “we’ll come after you.”

I hide the fact I’m flushed, itchy as hell, and finish it up, “I know you’ve got no problem starting something here where you can talk big but I promise you,” I take a step closer to her, “you do not want to take us on. Because back there,” I point my thumb back at Nik, “you’ve got a man who won’t lay a finger on you. But right here, you’ve got four angry women just itching to rip those ratty hair extensions out of that pretty head of yours.”

She-Devil’s face is flushed and contorted with anger. She tries hard to stare us down. She opens her mouth to rip me a new asshole when a hand closes

over her upper arm.

B-Rock the Bouncer has her gripped tight.

Nik stands and holds out his hand. He barks, “Your VIP pass, Sissy.”

She stares him down but hands him the pass.

He puts the pass in his pocket, sits down, and cautions, “You’re no longer welcome here. I see you in here again, I’ll have you arrested. B, please escort Sissy out.” B-Rock pulls her along and Nik doesn’t even look at her which I’m sure cuts her deep.

We all take our places in the booth. The guys are shocked and open mouthed.

Nat teases, “Close your mouths boys, you’re catching flies.” Then she rolls her eyes at them. Mimi and Lola chuckle.

Ghost smirks and shakes his head, a smiling Trick sips his drink, and Max laughs and slaps his thigh.

I feel an arm around my shoulders. I turn to see Nik looking down at me with a soft face. He says, “You didn’t need to do that, you know?”

I lower my eyes and smile, “What are friends for?”

He looks at me a moment before lowering his mouth to my temple. He kisses me so softly; I close my eyes and lean into him. He smells so nice and masculine like sandalwood.

I exclaim, “Oh!” I straighten up and hand him my VIP pass and explain,

“Just in case I forget later.”

Nik looks around the table as the girl’s fish out their passes to give him. He clears his throat and mentions, “I realize I didn’t give you any information when I gave these to you so I’ll explain a few things now. When you arrive, you walk straight through the door. This booth is yours. And the passes,” he opens my hand, puts the pass in, and closes my hand over it, “are unlimited. You girls are permanent VIPs here and welcome any time.”

I gasp and put my fingers over my lips, “No. Way.”

He nudges my shoulder with his and smirks, “Way.”

I look around the table and the girls are suspended in shock. The VIP passes are a hundred dollars each. And we have them permanently with unlimited use!

We all squeal. I hug Nik while bouncing up and down. Nat, Lola, and Mimi all reach over and hug him over the table.

The guys are covering their ears and laughing. Well, Ghost is scowling. Other VIPs are watching us and the waitresses clap and laugh.

When we finally let go of Nik, he’s flushed and embarrassed. He looks so cute!

I can’t help but laugh at him. “Bet you’re regretting those permanent passes now, huh?”

Looking around the booth, he clears his throat, turns his face back to me

and reassures, “Nope. Not even a bit.”

I smile like a loon.

I love these guys!

Chapter Seven

Lunch for three

It's Monday afternoon. I check the wall clock: 2:27pm.

I know I should be getting some work done but I keep thinking about Tina.

God, she's beautiful.

The girls left The White Rabbit around 2am. As soon as they left, all us guys were gabbing about them all for another hour before we all went about our work.

After the girls became my own personal soldiers in the Sissy showdown, the atmosphere at the booth changed. I could tell the guys were impressed with their display of protection and loyalty towards me. I was shocked when Ghost started joining in the conversations and, *gasp*, even laughed a

few times. We were all much more comfortable with each other. We spent the rest of the night joking and teasing each other.

The girls had earned all of our respect and although they really didn't need to do what they did, I was grateful for it. They stopped an even larger scene from occurring.

Just send her a message.

Yeah, I think I'll do that.

I haven't seen Tina since Saturday and I'm already itching to see her again.

I sit at the computer and open up the instant messenger.

Nik123: Hey teeny Tina, how are you today?

A few minutes pass before I get a reply.

TheTomicBomb: Hey Nik the Dick, I'm good thanks. How r u?

I laugh. She's been talking to Max.

Nik123: Have you been talking to Max? How do you know about Nik the Dick?

TheTomicBomb: Haha, he might've mentioned it when he brought the

passes to Safira.

Nik123: Whatever he tells you, I'll deny it all. How did you enjoy yourself at the club?

TheTomicBomb: Oh. My. Gawd!!! It was *awesome!* The girls have already decided we'll be back this Saturday.

I'm really happy about this. I'm smiling like an idiot.

Nik123: That's great. I'm so glad you girls enjoyed yourselves. Like I said, that booth is yours. I'll reserve it under Safira again.

TheTomicBomb: Awesome! Thanks :) will u guys be joining us again?

Nik123: Definitely but we'll have to take turns because we all work on club nights.

TheTomicBomb: Really?! I know u own it but what do the other guys do?

Nik123: Ghost runs security and mans the CCTV, Trick does a bit of everything, and Max is a VIP host.

TheTomicBomb: Wicked. How cool is it 2 work with ur best friends?! I love it.

Nik123: Yeah, it's pretty great. How's work?

TheTomicBomb: Well I was so busy I 4got 2 get lunch so I'm a little hungry :(

I don't like that. She should've sent one of the girls to get something for her.

Nik123: That's not good. You need to take better care of yourself.

TheTomicBomb: I know...but Nat hasn't eaten either so we'll get an early dinner. Sorry Nik, I've got 2 go. Talk 2 u later x

TheTomicBomb has logged off.

I like the little kiss she wrote. I stare at the little x a few seconds before I grab my wallet, then I'm out the door.

“Will this day *never* end?” Nat complains as puts her forehead on the counter with a thump.

It's only the two of us at the store today and we've been pretty busy. There was a pupil free day at a few schools around the area so we've been off the hook, packed full of young girls.

We've sold a bucket load of jewellery, bags, and accessories. So, even though we're exhausted and haven't eaten, we're happy.

Nat's just seen to a small group of high school girls and the exhaustion is catching up to us.

Rawr Raaawr

We both look up and there's Nik, looking handsome as ever, holding a brown paper bag.

He looks at the state of us both, shuts the door, and locks it.

"Eat...Now." He says this in a voice I wouldn't dare to question.

Nat walks over to him, puts a hand on his chest, and kisses his cheek. She beams, "You. Are. A. *God!*"

She takes the brown paper bag, clutches it to her chest as if it's life saving medicine, and walks straight to the staff room.

I walk over to him with a small smile. Without saying a word, I kiss his cheek, lean my head on his chest, and hug him tightly around the waist.

He places one arm around my back, uses the other to stroke my hair and admits, "I don't like thinking about you goin' hungry."

God, his arms are nice.

I look up at him and chuckle, "It was only a few hours but I'll admit it, I am so hungry." Still tight in his arms I ask, "So, what did ya bring me?"

Nik looks toward the staff room door and says, "Well actually, I got something for you, Nat, and for me. I missed lunch, too."

I put on the best stern voice I can muster, "And you're worried about *me* not taking care of myself? Tut tut." I look to the staff room and sigh, "We better get in there or she'll eat it all."

Natalie eats like a horse and never gains a pound. I hate her for that. In a loving, best friend way.

Untangling myself from Nik, I take his hand and lead him to the staff room. There is a small table which seats four people. Nat has already organized the food and placed three wrapped parcels and three salads in front of three of the four seats. Nik and Nat take a seat while I go over to the fridge and get us some sodas.

I take a seat and we all unwrap our *huge* Reuben sandwiches.

Geez Louise, this guy is perfect.

With a mouthful of sandwich I moan, “You *are* a God, Mr Leokov.”

Chewing, he smiles at me.

I take the lids off all the salads and dress them. I start moving the olives in my salad to one side and notice Nik moving his cherry tomatoes to the side of his container.

“You don’t like tomatoes?” I ask.

He looks disgusted and states, “No, I don’t. I like them cooked but not raw. Mom tried to force ‘em on me when I was little but stopped when I threw up all over the dining table.” He chuckles to himself and says wistfully, “Good times”

Nat and I chuckle with him. He looks over to my container and questions, “You don’t like olives?”

I grimace, “Yuk. No.”

Nik leans over me to my salad container, takes it over to his, and dumps all the olives into his salad. Then he lifts his container and puts his cherry tomatoes into my salad.

Nat and I watch fascinated like. He puts down both containers, claps his hands together, and smiles a triumphant smile. “Problem solved”

I think I love you.

What the heck? Where did that come from?

Nat and Nik are chatting away about EPL Soccer and I listen in silently. I find out he barracks for Tottenham and has been known to watch the games on cable even if it means getting up at 3am.

He tells us Max and Ceecee live with him and have since Ceecee became paraplegic; he doesn't tell us what happened to her but I'm sure he believes it's Max's story to tell. Nik is thirty four. Ghost (whose name is really Asher) has been a part of his family since he moved in with them senior year of high school. I want to know more about that but don't want to interrupt him. He tells us he's owned the club for seven years and has two silent partners. Trick is Nik's cousin, their mothers are sisters. I ask where Ceecee goes when Max works at the club. Nik tell us his Mom and sisters all take turns watching her and that Ghost is Ceecee's godfather. He tells us a bit about the club. Nat and I are both listening closely; we're both curious

about our new friends.

I straighten up having just remembered to ask him something. “I haven’t seen you taking your cigarette breaks anymore. You hiding from us?” I tease.

He looks a bit sheepish as he rubs his hand on the back of his neck and says, “Well, see, I met this little woman who told me smoking kills.” He scrunches his face and looks at me, “So I quit.”

Unbelievable. I actually don’t know what to say. I’m pretty sure I mentioned the ‘smoking kills’ thing the first time I ever spoke to him.

That’s all it took to make him quit?

Then I realize something, frown, and complain, “But now I won’t see you three times a day.” It’s only after I say it that I realize how pathetic I sound so I quickly add, “But it’s so good you’re quitting!” with a big smile and I quickly ask him more questions about the club.

Phew, quick save!

An hour of random conversation passes and Nik stands and excuses himself. “Sorry to leave you ladies but I really have to finish some work.” He looks at me and informs, “By the way, we’re officially sponsored by NT3 Advertising. I got the contract in the mail today.”

That. Is. Awesome!

I stand, hug him, and smile. “Congratulations. I know it was a big one.”

He hugs me back quickly then looks at Nat and questions, “You know she’s the reason I got a seven hundred thousand dollar sponsorship?”

WHAT THE HECK?

Nat gasps and we both stand there open mouthed. He takes in our obvious expressions and chuckles. “Yeesh, too cute.”

He lifts his fingers to us as a goodbye, unlocks the door and leaves.

I know he said the sponsorship was a big one but I had *no idea* it was almost a million dollar contract. I suddenly don’t feel bad about taking the VIP passes anymore. He can afford it.

No one can resist the cupcakes.

Nat nudges my shoulder to get my attention and tells me, “I’ve changed my mind about him. I really, really, *really* like him.”

I smile up at her, “Yeah, me too.”

Like, a lot.

Maybe too much.

I decide to wake up early the next morning and make glazed donuts. I feed Bear then get my cook on.

I double the dose so I can take some to The White Rabbit for Nik (and the guys) as a Thank You for the late lunch he brought us yesterday.

These donuts are baked not fried so I have no problems eating two of these

babies each time I make them. They are soft, fluffy, and a classic. You can never go wrong with donuts. I mean, who doesn't like a good donut?

I'm still in my bathrobe and just about finished glazing them when Nat emerges from her bedroom.

I take her in as she stumbles into the kitchen. Her hair is a mess, she hasn't opened her eyes, and she looks adorable.

I laugh at the state she's in. "Hey, you didn't have to get up for another half hour."

She finally opens her eyes, sits at a stool next to the counter, and confesses, "I swear I don't know how I got here, I just followed my nose." She looks at the counter and groans, "No! Not the cinnamon glaze!" She whines, "You know I can't resist the cinnamon glaze!"

Nat takes one of the cooler donuts in hand and takes a small bite. She lifts her eyes heavenward and moans, "Oh my God, my mouth just had a freaking orgasm."

I chuckle and remind her, "Well, it's been over a year since you had my donuts so you were due."

"No wonder I lost weight when you left," she says with a smile. "No one was making me delicious baked goods to maintain my booty."

Smiling, I tell her to get ready for work. Forty five minutes later, we're ready and good to go.

We take the donuts and head to my car.

After battling with my car to let me in, I unlock the passenger door and Nat climbs in placing the donuts on the floor.

I put the key in and turn. Of course, nothing happens. Because what kind of car would actually turn on willingly? My baby has attitude.

Pumping the gas with one foot, I lift my other foot onto Nat's lap and kick the passenger door while turning the ignition. Nat laughs at me. I scowl at her while continuing my morning car routine. I yell out over the thumps of my kicking, "I don't know why this works but it just does!"

After a few more seconds of beating the crap out of my car, the engine kicks over and we both whoop in delight.

When I brake at the exit of the parking lot, my temperamental sweetheart stalls. Nat bursts out laughing. I pull my hands up to my face pretending to sob. I peek up at her through my hands and we both burst into hysterical laughter.

"Time to get a new car me thinks," she wheezes through her laughter. I know she's right.

Crudsickles.

And then I go about beating the crap out of my car. Again.

Nat and Lola open up at Safira while I make my way across the street to give the guys my breakfast delights.

I walk into the 'chill out' room and there's nobody there. I try Nik's office but it's also empty. There are three doors at the opposite end of the hallway and I'm not sure why, but I hold onto my container full of donuts and tiptoe down to the other end of the hall like I'm a spy.

Cue mission impossible theme.

I walk passed the first two doors and find that the third door is actually an elevator. This must be how Ceecee gets up here.

I think out loud, "That is so cool!"

"What are you doing?"

I gasp, turn quickly and Ghost and I are nose to chest.

I scream at the top of my lungs for a good five seconds right in his face.

When I'm done I clutch my heaving chest and shriek, "What is with you guys and scaring the crap out of me?!"

Ghost, still looking down at me and frowns, "Skittish little thing, aren't ya?" He lifts his head back at the door behind him. "In there."

I follow him into what looks to be a conference room. It has a long, large table in the middle with six seats on either side. There is a white board on the wall and a projector hooked up to the ceiling. Max, Nik, and Trick are sitting at the table looking at me smiling hard.

I'm immediately embarrassed for screeching like a banshee. I feel my face flush.

Max speaks up, "I thought I recognized that squeal."

I bite my lip, scrunch my brows, and look at them through squinted eyes. I quietly apologize, "I'm sorry. I hope I wasn't interrupting anything."

Ghost sits down and states, "You were."

Nik throws a pen at Ghost, shoots him a dirty look, and says, "She was not, bonehead."

I walk over to Ghost, place the container in front of him, and open the lid just a little so the smell of sugar and cinnamon waft up to him. I speak in an overly bored tone, "Oh, that's okay. I can take my cinnamon glazed donuts back to the Safira if you don't want them."

His eyes widen before he glares up at me and mutters, "You don't fight fair."

I smile brightly at him and stroke his hair, "Never said I would, honey."

Trick is up and by my side in a jiffy and asks, "Wha- wha- what kind of donuts?"

Laughing, I open the container to show him the twelve cinnamon glazed donuts. He groans dramatically, hunches over and puts a hand on his knee as if to steady himself.

He straightens up and begs in a whisper, "I need one of those donuts." He

sounds like a junkie.

I hold out the container to him and he takes two straight away.

Greedy guts.

I know Ghost is dying for one; he keeps swallowing because he's salivating.

I walk over to the end of the table where there are clean plates, pick them up and place one in front of each of the guys. I put two donuts on each plate, apart from Trick's. Then comes my favorite part; watching them enjoy.

They each take a bite and the room erupts in moans and groans.

I start giggling at their over enthusiasm.

Trick speaks around his donut, "They're like little clouds of cinnamon goodness."

Ghost moans in agreement.

Max looks up at me and says, "These are so freakin' good. Why the heck didn't you open a bakery?"

Nik finishes his first donut. He has glaze all over his lips and doesn't even know.

He looks adorable and adds, "Yeah, Tina, you've got a real talent for baking. I know we've only tried the cupcakes and donuts but I've never tried anything so good in my life." Nik looks at Max and threatens, "If you tell Mom I said that I'll kick your ass."

I'm a little uncomfortable with all the praise so I explain, "I love working at Safira. It's my whole life. Every girl's dream is to work at a clothing store. Don't get me wrong, there was a time in my life when I was actually considering opening a bakery. But this," I point to the donuts, "is all me. And when I bake for someone, I give them a little part of myself. It's like giving someone a part of my heart every time." I look up thoughtfully and shrug, "I don't know if I like the idea of people buying pieces of me. They're mine to give away when I feel like it. And that makes them special."

All the guys have stopped eating and stare at me.

"That actually makes sense," Nik says, his face soft.

I'm embarrassed and decide to cut my visit short.

I clear my throat and utter, "I need to get back so I'll see you guys later." I turn and leave without waiting for their goodbyes.

Halfway down the hall I'm stopped by a hand on my shoulder. I turn and face Nik.

"Tina, I actually wanted to see you for a minute." His face is serious and I'm a little worried by it.

He looks so handsome today. He's rocking day old stubble on his cheeks and I want to put my fingers to it.

Must you be so beautiful, Nik?

I nod, “Uh, sure.”

Am I in trouble?

“Am I in trouble?” I ask.

I must sound apprehensive because he puts an arm around my shoulders and chuckles, “No, sweetheart.”

Still caught up in a Nik hold, he leads me down the hall to his office. I’m even more nervous when he shuts the door behind us.

He pulls out a chair for me, ever the gentleman, then sits himself behind the large mahogany desk.

Looking a little anxious, he starts, “So we’ve known each other a few weeks now, right?”

Where is this going?

I nod, “Uh, yeah.”

He comments, “This is never easy to tell someone.”

Grab your shit and run like hell!

Quiet, brain.

I quiet my voice and ask, “What is it Nik?”

He blurts out, “I had you investigated.”

Uh, what?

“Uh, sorry. What?” I’m so confused.

He looks ashamed and explains. “When we met, and under the

circumstances we met, I was really unsure of you. There have been a lot of women who have tried to get close to me for my money and I really needed to know if there was a possibility that you might be one of those people.”

I don't have anything to hide from Nik. I actually feel sorry that he's had those past experiences and that they've made him unsure of people's intentions towards him. I'm sad for him.

In saying that, I'm really distressed about the fact that he might know about Mia. When people find out about her, they start treating me differently and looking at me with pity. That's normally the time I start avoiding them and I really don't want to avoid Nik. I *like* Nik. I just would have hoped to be able to tell him about Mia in my own time.

I try to steady my thick voice, “Oh, Nik. I can understand that. And I don't have anything to hide from you.” I force a laugh. “I'm not after your friendship for money.”

Looking shocked, he jolts slightly in his seat and agrees, “Oh, I know. I just didn't want any secrets between us. And I wanted you to see the file yourself.”

Sliding the file over to me, he smiles a small smile, “Knock yourself out”

I throw him a wary look before opening the file.

Oh My God!

There are at least ten pages. I'm shocked at how much the person put to this

task was able to recover. There is my birth certificate, my address and phone numbers, most of my bank account statements (*yikes*), the deed to Safira's building (*well that cat's out of the bag*), business name certificate which shows my name registered as Safira Boutique's owner, and a couple of pages of personal interests/schedules.

Holy Cannoli!

This guy was actually *watching* me. That's kind of creepy.

There is nothing about Mia. Nothing about Jace Weathers. Or my Mom. He doesn't know about Mom's inheritance money. I relax slightly.

Nik is waiting nervously for me to say something.

I hold up the file and ask, "Can I keep this?"

He smiles again, "Of course."

I smile back, "Thanks, Nik."

Frowning down at the table, he softly says, "I hope I haven't overstepped a line here. I would hate for things to become awkward between us." He clears his throat. "I like having you around."

I beam on the inside and assure, "No, not at all. It probably would've been weird if I found out some other way but you came right out and told me. And I understand why you did it." I chuckle, "After all, who sends a guy candy?" I cover my face with my hands and laugh out of embarrassment.

His shoulders slump and the look of relief is obvious on his face.

He laughs at my reaction. “I have to admit, I thought it was a little weird but now that I know you I think it was really sweet.”

I lower my hands, turn my flushed face to his and smile, “So, we’re still friends right?”

He grins, “Oh, yeah.”

Awesome.

Chapter Eight

The object of my affections

“He did what?” Lola looks like she’s about the spew fire.

I answer, “He had me investigated.” I go about my business and try to ignore the stares from Lola and Nat.

“But, why?” This from Nat. She’s quiet and sounds confused.

Lola chides, “Oh, hell no, this conversation doesn’t go any further until we have Mimi add her wisdom to it.” She walks up to the counter, puts the phone on speaker, and dials what I assume is Mimi’s number.

The phone starts ringing and then we hear Mimi give us her usual greeting, “Yo.”

Lola clears her throat and begins, “Meems, we’re all here and need you to be a part of this conversation. The topic up for discussion is why Nik had Tina investigated.”

Mimi actually sounds amused through the speaker, “Well, hot damn, that’s

awesome!”

The three of us at the store all say, “What?” a little too loudly.

Mimi sounds exasperated, “C’mon guys, don’t you know what this means?”

The silence is enough to let Mimi know we have no freakin’ idea.

She sighs and enlightens, “It’s because he wants to keep her around! And I’m guessing since you guys know, that he told Tina about it which means he trusts her. Excuse me for being happy about this because, yes, it’s a breach of privacy but Tina doesn’t have anything to hide. So, teeny Tina, you’re in!”

I whisper, “I’m in?”

I look around to Lola and Nat whose expressions have changed so abruptly from scowls to small smiles.

Mimi laughs over the speaker, “You’re in, babe. Listen, I have to go. See ya later.” She hangs up.

Nat nudges my shoulder and admits, “I guess I was a little too shocked to see what Meems just pointed out.” She looks me in the eye with a meaningful look, “How much does he know?”

I know what she’s asking. Nat is the only one who knows I own Safira apart from my dad.

Rawr Raaawr

A customer walks in and Lola straightens up, “I’ll take it.” She walks over

to them with a big smile.

Nat and I are alone so it's safe to tell her, "He knows I own Safira. He doesn't know about Mia, Mom, or Jace. He doesn't know about Mom's inheritance money, either."

Nat looks thoughtful and clarifies, "So he thinks you have very little money and still wants to keep you around even though he was worried you were after him for money. That's awesome."

I'm glad the girls are letting this go. It wasn't even that big of a deal to me. I get people having trust issues. It's why I've only had one relationship in my twenty eight years. I want Nik to trust me. I understand that'll take time and I'll have to be patient. That's all right with me. He's the kind of guy who's worth it. I want him around. So, I'll be patient.

It's only been a few weeks and he's already changed so much towards me. I know he was weirded out by my need to be affectionate and touchy. When he brought Nat and I lunch and I hugged him, he actually hugged me back. It wasn't just a hug, he stroked my hair. And it felt *nice*. So nice that I want to hug him every time I see him and feel his big, muscular arms around me, keeping me safe.

Keeping you safe?

I guess I feel protected by him, which is strange, but it's also nice. I just came from his office and I want to see him again. Like, now.

You're getting too attached.

No, I'm not. I just like my new friend.

It's Wednesday morning and I'm feeling good.

All my paperwork is up to date. I've discussed with my two silent partners (Max and Ghost) what the sponsorship money should be used for and was surprised when they actually agreed with me. We're going to try to buy the building next door and extend The White Rabbit. We're all eager to put in a bid for the building. I can't believe we've arranged so much since the sponsorship was only made official on Monday.

You wouldn't even have the NT3 if not for Tina.

I wasn't lying to Tina when I told her NT3 we're going to turn me down. I didn't even fit the criteria. Then hurricane Tina bursts through the door, literally, and Vanessa was smitten.

Just like I am.

Only a little.

Yeah, sure.

They took a big chance on The White Rabbit and I have to make sure they aren't disappointed. We're making really good profit through the club nights alone, not counting hiring out the first floor during the week. I'll make certain they don't regret it.

I had Tina investigated. I knew when I got the file, I had to tell her. She's a nice girl and I want her to trust me. The only way I can make sure she does that is by being one hundred percent honest with her. Only after I got the information, I was ashamed of myself. How could I think Tina was after me because of my money?

She's so giving and hasn't one asked for a thing. I knew she'd have a problem with taking the VIP passes I gave her, that's why I gave Max specific instructions to make her open it after he left. Then at the club, the girls all tried to return them. The truth is those passes were for only one night. But after spending time with them and then how they stood up for me to Sissy, I made a snap decision to make them permanent VIPs. When they screamed and hugged the life out of me, I'll admit it felt good.

Tina must be a fairy or some shit. I've never been affectionate. In fact, the thought of being affectionate used to make me sneer. But it's different with her. Most women who hug or rub up against me in public want to be seen with me or want something from me. Tina, though, you can see it in her face when she hugs you, it's genuine. It's *her* emotions being put out there on display and she doesn't care who sees.

Stop smiling, pinhead.

I can't stop. I've tried. She hugs me a lot and I *like* it. I want her hugs. Just for me.

I want to talk to her. I log onto the instant messenger.

Nik123: Hey T, what's shaking?

TheTomicBomb: Not much Niki. How r u?

Nik123: Good. I'll be even better if you have lunch with me...

TheTomicBomb: Well I want u 2 feel even better so I guess we're having lunch 2gether! But this 1s on me. I owe u 4 saving me & Nat from starvation.

I don't like this. When I invite someone out, I pay. Always. Not up for negotiation. But I have a plan.

Nik123: Alright, you're on.

TheTomicBomb: Great! Around 12:30?

Nik123: I'll come to the store and get you.

TheTomicBomb: See you soon! X

TheTomicBomb has logged off.

I got a big kiss that time. Nice.

I can see Nik exit The White Rabbit through the storefront window.
I run into the staff room, check myself in the mirror and grab my purse.

Rawr Raaawr

“Goddamn, that’s an ugly sound,” I hear him say as I walk out of the staff room and look to the counter.

Nik stands there looking so yummy.

He turns to face me and gives me a dimpled smile “Ready to go, sweetheart?”

I stop a moment to take him in. Today he’s gone with a slightly casual look that I’ve never seen him wear. Wearing a tan colored skin-tight sweater that showcases his guns and broad chest, sleeves pushed up to the elbows, black jeans that make his muscular legs look amazing and white Adidas lace-ups. He pulls it off so well. Then again I nicknamed him Mr. Beautiful for a reason. He could wear a potato sack and still look great.

I walk right up to him, put an arm around his waist and look up, “Yep! Let’s do it.”

He says goodbye to Nat and Mimi, puts an arm around my shoulder and walks me out of the door.

We walk three blocks wrapped up in each other sharing a comfortable silence.

I spot the place I want to go for lunch, look up at him and ask, “You feel a

steak?”

He rolls his eyes at me and smiles, “Who doesn’t like a good steak?” He squeezes my shoulder and we walk over to the restaurant.

The restaurant isn’t full but they are still pretty busy for lunch service. We make it to the host station and the lady there smiles when she sees us. I’m sure she thinks we’re a couple and I’m shocked at myself when I don’t care what she thinks.

Nik speaks, “Table for two, please.”

The host immediately replies, “Of course. Follow me.”

Still with our arms around each other, she shows us to a table just inside an open doorway that leads to the patio seating. I feel a slight breeze come through the doorway and I think she just gave us the best seats in the house. Just as we’re about to sit, I hear multiple gasps and look over two tables to see three pretty women sitting and staring at us open mouthed. Nik stiffens and I’m confused.

What’s going on?

All the women look past us to the restaurant’s entrance. I feel my eyes follow theirs and when I see what they see, I stiffen as much as Nik has.

At the host table stands She-Devil Sissy. Her face flashes pain but she covers it quickly with a superior look.

She walks over to where her friends are sitting and as she passes us she

acknowledges us, “Nik, and Friend of Nik’s.”

Nik sounds bored when he replies, “Sissy. Enjoy your lunch.”

As Sissy sits with her friends I hear them bombard her with questions and statements. “Oh my *gawd* Sis, isn’t that your boyfriend?” “I thought you guys were gettin’ married?” “Forget his cheating ass, honey.”

Nik takes out a chair for me and I sit, then he seats himself and shoots me an easy smile, “Just ignore them.”

I feel my neck get hot and itchy and I’m sure it’s bright red. I do my best to plaster on a fake smile, “Yeah, sure.”

Nik sees my obvious discomfort and reaches over to put his hand over mine. He whispers, “We can leave.”

I’m just about to answer when the waitress comes over to our table. Rather than answer Nik, I place my order. He smiles and shakes his head at me then places his order.

As we’re waiting for our meals, we chat.

I point out, “So, this is kind of awkward, having your ex-girlfriend watch us eat. Now she definitely thinks you’re shtupping me.”

Nik laughs at my silliness and says, “She was never my girlfriend, babe. Never even been to my house. We always met at the club or I would go to hers. Don’t listen to her friends. She knew what our relationship was. I never played games with her, I was always forthright. If I’m completely

honest with you, it was just sex.”

I blush at his bluntness and squeak, “Oh, okay.”

He narrows his eyes, places his joined hands under his chin and says, “But I’m curious about you, little T. How does a woman who owns her own business, bakes like you do, and is as pretty as you are not have a boyfriend?”

He thinks I’m pretty?

I return with, “Uh, I guess I could ask you the same thing. You must know how handsome you are. And you own a hugely popular nightclub. How do you not have a girlfriend?”

He smirks, “Ahh, the old answer a question with a question sham. I’ll answer yours but you’ll answer mine too, okay?” I smile and nod. He says, “Good. Okay. Well, I don’t have a tragic story to tell about lost love. I had a girlfriend in high school and she was great. I thought I’d end up with her.”

A look of pain crosses his face. “My dad died when my sister Isabel was just born. I was sixteen. Max was fifteen. I was the oldest boy in the family which meant most of the responsibilities fell to me because my Mom was raising five children on her own. After dad’s funeral, my auntie and Trick came to live with us for a few months to help out. They fell in love with New York and never left. Trick helped me out a lot back then because his dad died the year before and he knew what I was going through. To cut a

long story short, I didn't have the time to date like other teenagers did. I was always fixin' something around the house or watching the kids or working to make some extra money for Mom. When I was twenty four I took some night courses in Business and got a degree. A few years after that I decided I needed to look into a business which could be open at night so I could still help Mom during the days. I got together with two other people and opened The White Rabbit. There was no time in between for anything else. Now the club takes up most of my time and I don't think that'd be fair to a girlfriend, ya know? There will come a time when I want to settle down. It's just not now."

My face dropped halfway into his talk.

He lost his father at sixteen. His sister was just born when he died, she probably doesn't even remember him. I think back and now realize the family photograph in his office must have been taken just months before his father died because his mother was so heavily pregnant.

He took on the role of father figure at sixteen and did what he had to do to make sure his family was ok, missing out on most of his childhood and teenage years. While most teenagers we're going out, being stupid and fooling around, Nik was watching his brother and sisters.

Who was there for him?

My throat tightens with emotion and my eyes mist. I reach over and put my

hand over his, I whisper, “I’m so sorry, honey.”

With a soft face, he lifts my hand and kisses the top of it, “Your turn.”

I clear my throat and steady my voice. “I’ve dated guys. When those guys kissed me,” I shrug, “nothing happened. There was no spark. My heart didn’t skip a beat; there were no butterflies in my belly. It was just nice.”

He states, “They weren’t good enough for you.”

I feel a swell of panic. I don’t want Nik to think I think I’m pompous.

I immediately sputter, “What? No! It’s not like that!”

He chuckles, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make it sound like you’re picky or some shit. What I meant was you seem like the type of person who knows when she’s got somethin’ good. So, if any of those guys were good enough for you, you’d be with one of them.”

Wow, that’s nice.

I lower my eyes, pick invisible lint off the table cloth and tell him, “I had something good once. I was young and thought he was the one. I loved him. Like, *really*, loved him. And he left. So, I guess you could say that I don’t trust my instincts much anymore.”

Nik sounds mildly annoyed, “That’s too bad. What kind of asshole would leave all of this?” He waves his hand up and down at me. “He must’ve been blind, babe. You’re better off without him.”

I lift my head and smile at him.

The waitress brings our food and we push both plates into the middle of the table. Nik puts the tomatoes from his salad on my plate and I put most of my French fries onto his.

We pull our plates back and smile at each other.

You're doomed.

Yep, I'm pretty sure I am.

“That’s not fair, Nik. I said I would get it this time.” Tina actually looks pissed.

When I saw her come out of the Safira staff room, I was blinded. She looks like an angel today. Wearing a long white gypsy skirt, white blouse with short puffy sleeves and white sandals, she actually looks angelic. Her dark hair is down, falling in soft waves down her back, the front of her hair pinned up in a little poof. She wears little make up and only glosses her lips. That really turns me on. She has natural beauty. None of it comes from a tub of goop.

I can’t help but grin at her. She’s so damn cute. She actually thought she was buying lunch today.

Ahh, little Tina. You'll get used to it.

While she was in the bathroom I waltzed up to the register and paid for lunch.

We've spent most of lunch chatting. And very surprisingly haven't let Sissy two tables over distract us. She walked passed us a few times trying to get our attention but we ignored her. I know Sissy, and she does *not* like to be ignored.

I state, "Tina, I invited you. It was the polite thing to do." When she still looks pissed, I decide to fight dirty. "Have I mentioned I'm seven hundred thousand dollars richer because of you?"

That works. She tilts her head, lifts a brow and says, "This is true." I chuckle at her.

The girl wears her heart on her sleeve. You can tell whatever she's thinking through her facial expressions.

I want to leave so I can hold her while we walk. It's relaxing. And she's so small it makes me feel like a giant. I'm her personal teddy bear.

I like that.

I want to do a good job and make sure she's hugged out so she doesn't need to get 'em from anyone else. I want to be the only one who gets her affection.

God, I'm turning into a pussy.

I stand up and help her out of her chair. As soon as she's up I have my arm wrapped around her shoulders. Like it comes so naturally, she puts an arm around my waist.

As we turn to leave, I happen to glance at Sissy. She's watching us with unconcealed pain on her face. Her brow has crumpled and her lips are quivering. I feel sorry for her but not enough to apologize.

I've never treated Sissy the way I treat Tina. Sissy never earned my respect. I'm not sure how I'm meant to respect a woman who, without even knowing my name, gave me a blowjob under a table at the club one night. After that one time, she found out who I was and she was proving difficult to get rid of. It took so much effort that I gave up. Sissy can blow like a machine. That's why I kept her around. Now four months later, cutting her loose of hooking up once a week, I don't even miss her. In fact, I only have one star in my fantasies recently. And we just had lunch together.

I turn away from Sissy and lead Tina out of the restaurant. As we're walking in comfortable silence, Tina reaches up with her free hand and plays with the collar of my sweater.

This is the kind of thing I want when I meet the one.

Everything comes so easy with her. Nothing feels fake or for show.

Before I know it we're back in front of Safira. Still with an arm around my waist, she turns to face me, places the other arm around my waist and squeezes me tight.

"I had the best time." She whispers, "It was awesome. Thank you."

I look down into her sweet face and smile, "You're welcome, sweetheart. I

had a good time, too. We'll do it again soon."

She sighs and puts her head on my chest. "I love your hugs. You're so warm and your arms are *huge*."

I chuckle, "You're welcome to them anytime you want, teeny Tina."

Her laughter is hot on my chest as she says "Thanks, Nik the Dick."

I'm going to kill Max.

I utter, "Well, I think I better go. We're blocking the doorway."

She releases me with a pout and I feel it in my cock. I want to kiss that pout away and suck on her bottom lip.

Great, now you're hard. Move away. Quickly.

I tuck a stray hair behind her ear and say, "Talk to you soon." And then I make my way back to The White Rabbit.

Once I'm settled back in my office I get a really stupid idea.

I open up the instant messenger and type out a quick message.

I'm back at work trying to avoid the stupid smiles of Nat and Mimi. It seems they were spying on Nik and I when we had our little hug fest.

It's been about ten minutes since I've seen Nik. And I miss him already.

Just as I walk over to the counter I hear the tone of the instant messenger alerting me.

As soon as I read the message, I smile like a loon.

Nik123: How do you girls feel about Poker?

Chapter Nine

Poke Her Face

Every Thursday night is Poker night with the guys. As soon as I sent Tina a message asking the girls to Poker night, I knew I'd fucked up. The guys were going to string me by my balls. But I'm so desperate to see Tina again, I'm taking the *any excuse will do* route. When I told the guys, it went a little like this.

"So, everyone still on for Poker night?" I anxiously ask.

Max picks up on it, narrows his eyes at me and says, "Yeah, I think. Ghost wasn't sure if he could make it. Might just be me, you, and Trick."

I brighten a little too much and chime, "Oh, okay. We might have some extra players to fill in for him."

Max questions, “And who would these extra players be?”

I try my best at being inconspicuous, “Tina. Nat, Mimi, and Lola.”

Max looks at me a full minute before he bursts into laughter. He straightens up and says, “You’re shittin’ me, right?”

I need to sweeten the deal.

I blurt, “Tina’s bringing two different types of cupcakes. She said she only ever makes them for special occasions so you know they’re gonna be good.”

Max’s brows lift, he strokes his chin and says, “Okay, I’m good with it. You know Trick will be good with it.” He smiles a cruel smile and rasps, “You’re telling Ghost.”

I’d rather shit in my hands and clap!

Ghost doesn’t like changes to his routine. I call him and the second I greet him I know I’ve fucked up by being too cheerful. I normally say *Hey* but today I say *Hey brother, how are you today?* He knows something’s up so I just blurt it out. He laughs and teases me, “You’re pussy whipped.”

I claim, “I can’t be pussy whipped. I haven’t even had the pussy to be whipped!”

Take that, Ghost! Oh, wait...

He chuckles, “That’s even worse, bro.”

Fuck me, it totally is.

I'm shocked when Ghost agrees without a fight. I did sweeten him up with hopes of Tina's cupcakes though.

I told Tina to tell the girls to come around eight thirty. We don't eat dinner beforehand; we order pizza and eat while we play.

It's now eight o'clock. Max has ordered the pizza to be here at nine and I'm putting together our bigger poker table which seats ten.

Over the next twenty minutes the guys, Nat, Lola, and Mimi have shown up.

When the doorbell rings, I'm up and heading to the door before anyone can get it.

Whoa, this can't possibly be it?

I check the address again. Sure enough, I'm at the right place. And it's big. *Really* big. So big that it has those huge, fancy cast iron gates. Someone has been kind enough to leave those open. I head down the long driveway and I see Mimi's car there. They could fit at least ten cars in front of the house. And that's not including down the driveway.

I asked Meems to pick up Lola and Nat because I had cupcakes to finish and thought I'd be late. Better only one person being late than two.

I park my Dung Beetle, grab my containers of baked delights and head over to the front door. It's a classy timber double door. It's nicely carved around

the edges. My father would appreciate this door. I ring the bell and the sounds of soft bells chimes in the background.

God, even the doorbell is nice. Mental note; change the batteries on the sensor at Safira.

The front door opens and Nik beams, “Hey, I was beginning to think you weren’t coming.”

He looks *fine* in jeans, white long sleeved t-shirt and sneakers.

I beam right back at him. I move forward and give him an awkward one armed hug because of the precious loot in hefting.

I tell him, “I wouldn’t stand you up, Niki.”

He takes the containers from my hands, and says, “Good. That would suck if you did.”

Now that he holds the containers, I put both my arms around his waist and squeeze. I look up and smile, “Never.”

His face changes. I’ve never seen that face on him before. It’s almost...lust? I’m not sure.

He clears his throat, straightens up and lifts the containers, “Let’s get these babies inside.”

He moves back and lets me in. We’re in a small hallway. And it’s *amazing*.

Both walls of the hallway are packed full of framed photos. Not neat or straight or all in a row. It’s like a collage. It looks like it was all randomly

thrown there, yet fit together perfectly. Photos of his Dad, Mom, brother and sisters, Ghost and Trick, eating together, playing, candid, formal, old and recent. Ceecee has her own section of wall all to herself. One of the photos at her end made my heart wrench. Max is holding an infant. The baby has tubes coming out of its tiny body at all ends. Max looks a mess, looking down at this baby with a fierce love. Like he would do anything to protect it or die trying. My eyes are misting and my throat closes.

I hadn't noticed Nik stopped behind me til he speaks, "Ceecee after her first surgery. They only gave her a twenty percent chance. Max held her til the nurses had to force him away from her. Never left the hospital, not for an entire month. Mom brought him food. I brought him clothes. He slept on a chair for a month." He breathes deep, brow furrowed, he continues softly. "When Ceecee cried, Max cried. All the doctors and nurses knew us personally. Mom made cakes for 'em every Friday. When Cricket was given the all clear to come home, I moved them in with me so I could help out and keep an eye on Max. He wasn't coping well. I hired a nurse and got him back to work. Mom cared for Ceecee til she was five." He voice is steady but thick. "We love that little angel more than anything. She's our miracle." My heart breaks for my new friends.

I look away and wipe away tears I hadn't realized I shed. Nik squeezes my arm and we continue down the hallway. I can hear the voices of the other

guys and gals, laughing and talking.

When we enter the main area, I'm stumped. His house is not at all what I'm expecting.

Let me tell you what I was expecting. I was thinking I'd see dark colors, bleak and basic furniture, and absolutely no warmth.

How wrong was I?

Way off. This house *had* to be decorated by a female. Or multiple females. I'm guessing his mother and sisters had a part to play in decorating and furnishing this house. It's stunning.

The room we've just entered is enormous and open plan. The walls are a soft peach color. The ceiling is bright white and high up. There are down lights all over the place. All the furniture is wooden, apart from the sofas. And they are *three* three-seater light brown, soft leather sofas placed in a semi-circle around huge LCD TV which is mounted on the right hand wall. There is a large square coffee table in between those sofas; it looks mahogany. The left hand side of the room holds a large hand-carved dining room table and nice chairs, also mahogany. The guys have set up a Poker table in the middle of the room, with cards and chips at the ready. In the back left hand corner of the room is a closed off area which I assume is the kitchen because there are stools sitting at a breakfast bar. There are bookcases, a china hutch, and a DVD cabinet strategically placed around

the room. It's breathtaking.

"I love your house," I say in awe.

Nik smirks, "Thanks. We like it, too." And leads me into the closed off area in the left hand corner which confirms is the kitchen.

On the way, I greet everyone and kiss Max on the cheek. I admire him and his ability to be so happy regardless of the misfortune he's had.

Nik takes out cake platters and I load up my surprise cupcakes onto them.

Then I take the platters out to the dining table.

I haven't even done anything and I'm already having fun.

Stop being a turd.

Tina looks gorgeous in tight jeans, a sweater, and sandals. Her hair is in one of those cute messy buns at the very top of her head. Her lips are glossed.

I want to lick that gloss off and find out what flavor it is.

I don't know what she's doing to me! The woman must have the voodoo.

Tina has just finished placing the cupcakes on the dining table when Ghost approaches and reaches for a cupcake. She puts her hand out to stop him.

"No, Ghost, honey, yours are here." She says as she points to another platter of cupcakes.

Ghost narrows his eyes at her and questions, "Why are these mine? You spit

in em or some shit?”

Tina looks shocked that he would think that but responds, “Um, no. You said you preferred crunchy peanut butter so I made you your own batch.”

Ghost looks stunned. His brows are raised and his mouth hangs open a little. He straightens his face and asks quietly, “You made these special?”

Tina looks uncomfortable and slightly flushed. She straightens things on the table that don’t need straightening. “Uh...” She shrugs and looks to the floor. “You gotta eat, right?”

She walks back into the kitchen leaving a shocked Ghost staring at his personal batch of cupcakes.

Max walks up behind him and scolds, “You’re such an ass. I bet you don’t even like crunchy PB.”

Ghost answers in a small voice still frowning, “No. I do. A lot.”

Max gets a load of Ghost’s confused expression and smirks.

Ghost picks up a cupcake and confirms, “So, she’s genuinely nice, huh?”

Max smirks harder, “Yep.” He pops the *p*.

Ghost shakes his head and mutters, “Fuck me.”

I’ve hidden out in the kitchen long enough. I straighten my back and move to walk out of the kitchen when Ceecee rolls her way in. My god, but this child is beautiful. She looks up at me and smiles big with her crooked

teeth.

“Hi Tina!”

Smiling, I reply, “Hi Ceecee. How are you, angel?”

She looks up in thought, “I’m okay.”

Okay? Just okay?

I don’t like that. Children should be happy. They should at least be *good*.

I walk toward her, stroke her cheek and ask, “Everything okay?”

She sighs, “Yeah, I guess.”

I can see she doesn’t really want to talk about it. There is hesitance written all over her sweet face.

“Well, if you ever want to talk to me about anything,” I say as I walk back to my purse, pull out paper and a pen and start writing, “here is my phone number.”

She looks at the paper in wonder, eyes wide and whispers, “I can call you anytime?”

Without hesitating I answer, “Anytime at all. If you ever feel like you want to talk or need some advice, I’ll be available on that number, sweetie.”

Her face transitions from shock to happiness and she beams at me, “Thanks Tina.” She folds the paper and puts it in her pocket.

We both move out of the kitchen to find the pizza has arrived. I make a plate for Ceecee, bring it over to her and kiss her forehead.

Mia would be five if she were alive.

I can't stop the pain from clutching my heart. I think about her every day and I wonder what my life would be like if she were still here. It's a moot point. She's *not* here. I miss her, though.

Max tells Ceecee to get ready for bed and she makes her way to a hallway on the top right corner of the room. I want to see the rest of the house and am already scheming to sneak off later on and explore.

I feel someone behind me. An arm moves across the top of my chest and I'm pulled back into a hard body. I look up and Nik is looking at me apprehensively.

My eyes widen and I ask, "What?"

He shakes his head and rests his cheek on my temple. "I dunno. You just looked sad for a minute. I thought maybe you were thinkin' about Ceecee. You looked like you needed a hug."

I turn in to face him and hug his waist tight. I respond, "I *always* need a hug. Thanks."

He doesn't say anything for a long time and then, "Peaches."

Peaches, what?

I don't say anything. He leans down closer to my neck, he puts his nose under my ear and I feel his lips at my neck. "You smell like peaches."

Oh.

My stomach has the butterflies and I squeeze him tighter. And I feel something hard on my upper hip. Warmth spreads through my belly.

Oh my lord. Is that a...? Does he have a...?

The thought of Nik getting a hard on from my scent makes my legs shake and my core moistens.

His lips are still at my neck and he breathes me in, “Goddamn, you smell good, Tina. Good enough to eat.”

He nips my neck with his teeth, I shudder and almost moan. I loosen my hold on him and turn my half-lidded eyes up to his. My voice hoarse, I respond, “Maybe you should try a cupcake instead. I’m sure they’d taste better than me.”

Nik closes his eyes, looking pained and says, “I don’t think anything would taste as good as you.”

He turns and walks away. I’m left thinking in my own thoughts.

What just happened?

Max puts Ceecee to bed and turns on the baby monitor we keep on the mantel. Her bedroom is the last at the end of the hallway and a bit far away so if she calls out we can’t hear her unless the monitor is on. It works out well, this way we don’t have to be quiet for her to sleep.

I’m still painfully hard.

I want Tina in my bed. Not just for sex. I want to do all the stuff you do with people you care about. I want to kiss her and taste every inch of her gorgeous body. I want to hold her while she sleeps. I want to protect her from everything that's bad in the world. I want her to need me. But we're friends. And friends don't do shit like that.

You need to snap out of it.

Yeah, I do. Tina asked for my friendship and that's what I'm going to give her. If I can't have her in my bed, I'll take her any way I can get her.

I don't know how to explain it without sounding like a pussy. I've never felt this way about a woman before. She makes my day brighter. I'm happier when I'm with her. I've never been good with it but I *want* to give her my affections. She's my little goofball. I love that she wears her heart on her sleeve. She gives everyone she meets a small piece of her big heart.

I feel my body become lax.

Thank god.

It would suck if I spent the entire evening hard.

We all sit at the poker table, eating and drinking, then it's time to play.

Tina looks around the table and smiles big, "So, how do you play?"

Oy, vey.

Only Tina would come to a Poker night *not* knowing how to play Poker.

Nik spends an hour trying to teach me to play Poker. It all sounds a bit like this “this card is the *blah*, you use it to *blah* and *blah*. Then you *blah* the *blah-dee blah* and that’s Poker!”

Let me tell you, it’s not so simple.

I give up with a pout and coax the girls to play Uno with me at the dining table.

After three games of me winning, Nat takes the deck and throws it in the air. Cards fly in every direction. Nat is somewhat of a sore loser. Lola, Mimi, and I burst into laughter at her dramatics; Nat pouts like a little kid.

We move back to the Poker table with the guys who are loud and boisterous. They tease each other, laugh loudly, and whoop when they win a hand. They are so much fun to be around.

Trick has eaten six of my special cupcakes and is currently devouring a seventh. He leans over to me and smacks my cheek with a sloppy chocolaty kiss. He asks, “What are in those cakes, girl?! They are heaven.”

I wipe my cheek and laugh, “Ewww Trick! Well, the red velvet cupcakes have a chocolate sauce in the middle and the chocolate mud cupcakes have a peanut butter cup in the middle.”

His eyes roll in bliss; he leans over close and puts his lips to my cheek, “Run away with me.”

I laugh at his theatrical scene. Nik takes my hand in his, pulls me over to

him and says, “Sorry Trick, she already promised me.”

Trick glowers at him, “You *always* have to get the girl. Save some for us, buddy.”

Nik smirks, “Never.” He pulls me sideways on to his lap and without thinking I put my arms around his neck and settle in, placing my forehead at the side of his chin. I love hugging this man. He’s my teddy bear.

I can feel everyone stare at us but I could care less. I’m so comfortable and don’t want to move.

The girl’s watch the other guys play this round and cheer them on. Nik plays his hands and then strokes my back. We’re all having an awesome time.

“Daddy?” This is slightly distorted and coming from the baby monitor. Max goes to stand but I put a hand on his arm and state, “Let me get it.”

He looks amazed at my offer. “Uh, okay, if you’re sure. She’s normally thirsty so take a glass of water. It’s the last room down the hall.”

I smile at him, go to the kitchen for a glass of water and make my way to Ceecee’s room.

She smiles a little smile when she sees me enter her room. I keep the light off but leave the door open slightly for some illumination and sit next to her on the bed. Low and behold, she’s thirsty.

Sitting up, she drinks half the glass and places it on the nightstand. I lower

my head to hers and place my lips on her forehead. I ask, “Better, honey?”

She hugs me and whispers, “Yeah, thanks Tina. Goodnight.”

I tuck her in and make my way back to the others. Max looks at me with a raised brow; I smile at him in a way that says he was right.

I walk over to him, kiss his head and utter, “You’re so lucky.”

He reaches back and squeezes my shoulder. “Oh, I know.” He chuckles, “She tells me every day.”

“Is there a day you bring Ceecee to The White Rabbit?” I ask.

He tells me, “Every Saturday, babe, she gets bored as hell there. I let her bring her games, though.” And a plan starts forming.

I prod lightly, “What time are you there from?”

He looks up at me, eyes narrowed. “From nine. Why?”

I try to be as blasé as I can. “Just asking some questions, dear.” And I sit back down.

The guys are so into their game they don’t notice when I motion for the girls to follow me. They all stand making excuses to stretch their legs or get a drink.

We all walk over to the hallway and discreetly as we can.

Time to explore this castle.

The long hallway has four doors down each side and one at the end which is Ceecee’s bedroom. That’s *nine* additional rooms! This is a small mansion.

The first two doors on either side are bedrooms. We don't explore these because that would be rude. Though, I really want to.

We open the second door on the left hand side of the hallway and gasp when we enter it. It's a small studio!

There is a baby grand piano in the middle of the room. That's it. Nothing else.

I start bounding up and down and send a pleading look to Nat. She rolls her eyes but nods.

Yay!

We try to find the light switch but can't so Mimi walks over to the curtains and pulls them open. We're immediately bathed in moonlight.

Nat sits at the piano, links her fingers together and stretches them. She says, "I'm a little rusty." She looks to us and asks, "What am I playing?"

Lola immediately replies, 'Amazing grace'.

Nat smiles at her, "Great choice, hon."

And then we sing.

The girls disappeared a little while ago. I get up and shush the guys. There is faint piano music in the background.

We all glance around confused. I walk over to the hallway and hear the girls singing to the piano.

I wave the guys over and we make our way to the doorway. We stand just outside looking in. They are finishing up Amazing grace. No one has played that piano since my dad died. It was his and I'm happy to hear it being played. It brings back some really good memories of my father.

Nat remarks, "That was awesome. I haven't played in a while so sorry if it was a little off."

Then we hear Mimi. "Can you do 'Poker Face'?"

A confused Tina speaks, "Wait, I thought it was 'Poke Her Face'. I thought it was a sexual innuendo."

Total goofball.

Lola chuckles, "Like when you thought in 'Can't Fight The Moonlight' the words were 'Pardon Me The Starlight, Starlight'?"

Mimi is in hysterics, "Or when you thought 'Hooked On A Feeling' was 'Hooked On The Ceiling'?"

Tina is holding her gut from silently laughing so hard. She giggles, "Yeah, I hate when I'm singing a song and the artist gets the words wrong."

All the girls laugh at her. I'm glad she can laugh at herself.

A still chuckling Nat asks, "Any requests?"

The girls remain silent probably thinking of a choice. Then Tina speaks up. "Impossible."

I can see a frown form on Nat's face. She slowly shakes her head no.

Tina touches her arm and softens her voice, “Please?”

Nat doesn’t look any happier but nods. “Which version? Shontelle or James Arthur?”

Tina replies, “James Arthur.”

Nat nods and works the piano. The soft melody plays and Tina starts to sing.

I remember years ago,

Someone told me I should take

Caution when it comes to love, I did...

Tina has a nice singing voice. She carries the song well.

And now when all is done there is nothing to say,

You have gone and so effortlessly,

You have won, You can go ahead, Tell them,

Tell them all I know now,

Shout it from the rooftops, Write in on the skyline,

All we had is gone now, Tell them I was happy

And my heart is broken, All my scars are open,

Tell them what I hoped would be impossible...

She sounds like she's in pain. I want to go over and hold her but I want to hear her tell her story. She isn't just singing the words. This is gospel. She feels the words.

*Falling out of love is hard, Falling for betrayal is worse,
Broken trust and broken hearts, I know...*

My chest tightens with anger.

Damn it, Tina's been hurt. Badly.

*And now when all is done there is nothing to say,
And if you're done with embarrassing me,
On your own you can go ahead, Tell them,
Tell them all I know now, Shout it from the rooftops,
Write it on the skyline, All we had is gone now,
Tell them I was happy, And my heart is broken,
All my scars are open, Tell them what I hoped would be impossible...*

Mimi discreetly wipes a tear away from her cheek. Lola has her hands covering her mouth and her shoulders shake with silent sobs. They're

feeling everything Tina is feeling. The thought of someone hurting Tina this badly makes my gut coil with rage.

I would do anything to make her better.

I remember years ago, Someone told me I should take

Caution when it comes to love, I did...

Tina's voice is steady as she sings. Her eyes are closed. Natalie's lips quiver as she plays the piano.

Impossible...

The song finishes and Tina lowers her head. Her shoulders shake and I know she's crying. In a broken voice she says, "I hate him so *fucking* much."

I want to kill the motherfucker that hurt her. I've never heard Tina swear like that. She's been hurt bad and I don't know what to do with this information. I guess I'll just have to be patient and wait for her to tell me when she wants to. I motion to the guys to back away from the door. We walk back to the table and continue our Poker game.

Max plays with his cards, eyes lowered to the table. He mutters, "I don't

like it.”

Me either, brother.

Chapter Ten

Fairy Godmother

Poker night was a blast! Not that I played any Poker. Or did much of anything else, but the company was phenomenal and we got to know each other even better. Real friendships are starting to form.

Even Ghost tugged my hair when we said goodbye. Which I guess is his equivalent of a hug.

After I sang for the girls and we had our cry fest, you'd think I would be in no mood to go back out to the guys and joke around. But when I broke down the girls all came over to comfort me, and I realized how lucky I am to have them. My life could be so much worse than what it is and I need to be grateful.

We pulled ourselves together and fixed our makeup the best we could then went back out to the guys. As soon as we walked into the room they all turned to look at us and I could tell they knew something was up.

Max broke the silence by asking, “How about a movie?”

This broke us out of our sorry spell. The girls and I love watching movies together! We all joke and tease the actors. It’s a sure good time. We all agreed quickly.

Nik went to a cabinet and pulled out two DVDs, he held up ‘Step Brothers’ and ‘Old School’.

They must be Will Ferrell fans.

We all wanted to watch Step Brothers. We arranged ourselves on the three huge three-seater sofas. Nik, Max, and myself on one sofa, Mimi, Lola, and Trick on another and Ghost and Nat on the third.

I sat in between my favorite brothers. Mimi sat on one end of their sofa, Lola in the middle, Trick laying with his head in Lola’s lap his legs dangling over the armrest. Ghost sitting on the end of their sofa with Nat sitting at the opposite end throwing scowls his way.

C’mon guys! Can’t we all just get along?!

The movie started and we all relaxed. Some way through the movie Nik, Max, and I had become all tangled up together looking a bit like a human caterpillar. Nik put a pillow on his thighs, I put my head on his lap and lay sideways in a fetal position, Max with his head resting on my thigh. We were all laughing our heads off and there were a few times I thought I’d actually pee.

Halfway through the movie I look around to see Lola take Tricks hand and play with it. That surprised me. Nat had fallen asleep. She's funny that way, she could fall asleep at a rock concert and there is no waking her without physically picking her up and placing her on her feet. She was in an awkward position and I could see Ghost glowering at her sleeping form. After a few more seconds staring at her, he pulled her towards him, lay his body full on the couch, put a pillow on his chest and lay her head on it with her laying on top of him. Of course, he sighed like it was the biggest chore he'd ever done but within minutes, he'd fallen asleep, too. This surprised me even more. They actually looked really sweet together.

I can't wait to tease her about it!

Nik was absent-mindedly stroking my hair and Max was snoring and drooling on my thigh.

And I was smiling like an idiot.

Ever since I met these guys, my life is more fulfilled. I love my girls with everything I am but I couldn't help but feel something was missing. I feel I've found that missing puzzle piece. And we all look so stupid right now that I can't stop the giggle that forms in my throat.

Nik stops stroking my hair, lightly pinches my cheek and asks, "What are you laughing about, sweetheart?" He sounds amused.

I tilt my head up to look at him. I give him a small smile and say, "Look

around. We're a bunch of misfits that fit perfectly together." He frowns and then turns to look at everyone. A big grin settles on his face and I know he gets me.

I turn to watch the movie and he begins to stroke my hair again.

It's now Saturday. After we said goodbye on Thursday's Poker night, Max advised the girls we were invited to next week's Poker night, too. I guess they liked having us around.

We didn't see each other on Friday because we were all busy. And today I'm doing something I haven't done in two years.

I'm taking the day off.

I've left Nat in charge of the store. When I told her I wasn't working she looked at me like I must be seriously ill but after I told her what I was going to do today she thought it was an awesome idea.

Today, I'm very underdressed and nervous about seeing Nik in this state. I walk out of Safira and make my way over to The White Rabbit.

I arrive on the second floor and walk down to the 'chill out' room. There, by her lonesome, is Ceecee. She hasn't seen me yet and I smile at the back of her head. I don't know how today will turn out, I could be making a huge mistake but I won't know unless I take the chance.

I creep over to her and cover her eyes, her body stiffens. I say, "Guess who,

honey bear?”

She giggles and cheers, “Tina!”

I chuckle and walk around her, “You’d be right my dear! Get your things, we’re leaving.”

Ceecee looks so confused that I giggle and tease, “Well, c’mon slowpoke, we’re going to be late!”

She whispers, “Where are we going?”

I kneel in front of her wheelchair and stroke her pretty auburn hair. I tell her, “We’ve got a big day of deluxe princess treatments to get through.” I use my best bored tone and straighten my spine. “I know it’ll be difficult to get through but, hey, when you’re a princess you *have* to do all the things princesses do, right?”

Her face holds a look of shock but she whispers, “Right.”

Then she beams and fast as lightning is out the door yelling, “Daddy!”

I follow her out. Max is out of the conference room in a flash, “What is it, baby?” He sounds alarmed and kneels in front of her with his hands on her shoulders. When he sees her smiling face he relaxes slightly. “What the heck, Ceecee? You scared the hell outta me.”

Ceecee beams, “Tina’s taking me for a deluxe princess treatment! Can I go? Please, daddy, please, please, *pleeease!*” She holds her hands together in front of her chest just under her chin like she’s praying.

Max finally notices me and asks, “Hey T, what’s this all about?” He smiles at me.

I use a matter of fact tone, “Well, as princesses, we need to do what princesses do. We need facials, manicures, pedicures, we need to get our hair done and finish with a massage. We’ll be gone most of the day.”

I hear someone clear their throat and Nik is standing in the doorway of the conference room. His eyes are on me and dancing. “Tina, you look beautiful.” I look down at myself. My sweatpants are not beautiful; they are tatty, huge and comfortable. I look up at him and state, “You need your eyes checked, Niki.”

He laughs and says, “So, where are you taking my Cricket for said princess treatment?”

I give Max a card of the salon down the street and say, “I called and booked us in this morning. We’ll be a few hours. I hope Ceecee isn’t busy.” I give Max a meaningful look. I know she was going to be bored all day and really want him to let her come with me.

His eyes crinkle, he know what I’m doing. He responds, “No, Ceecee isn’t busy. If she wants to go with you she can...”

Ceecee puts her little hands in the air and shouts, “YIPPEE!”

“...As long as you take my credit card and pay for the both of you with it.”

My face falls and I glower at him. He smiles big at me. He knows I hate

this.

He pulls out his wallet, takes out a black shiny credit card and says, “The limit is enough to buy a new car.”

I snatch it out of his hand. I grit my teeth together and answer with a hard, “Fine.”

There is no way in hell I’ll use that card.

Max turns to his beautiful daughter and whispers loudly enough for us all to hear, “You tell me if Tina doesn’t use that. Okay, honey?”

Uh, Max! You suck!

Ceecee looks up at Max like he’s the best dad in the whole world. And to tell you the truth, I’m starting to believe he is. She answers him softly, “Okay, daddy.”

I look to Nik then Max and point out, “We’ve got to go. We’re going to be late.”

Ceecee and I wave to them both and head to the elevator.

That went better than expected.

Ceecee and I are on the sidewalk and I ask her, “Do you want to wheel yourself or do you mind if I push you along?”

She shoots me a shy smile, “I dunno. Whatever you want. I’m okay with either.”

I jump up and click my heels together, Ceecee laughs at my silliness. I hoot, “Hot damn! I always wanted to drive your car!”

I push her along the sidewalk up the road to the salon. I’ve called ahead and let them know Ceecee is wheelchair bound. Luckily, they have suitable access.

A woman coming out of the salon holds the door open for us, we go in and thank her.

Tanya owns Bells and Whistles salon. I’ve been getting manicures from her and her girls for two years and I like her a lot. When I called I told her I needed a deluxe princess treatment and she worked out a schedule for us. Tanya is in her forties but looks about thirty. She is always made up and her long hair is dyed a vivid red.

As soon as Ceecee spots her making her way over to us she gasps, her voice awed, “Can I get my hair like that?” I actually laugh out loud at the thought of bringing her back to Max with bright red hair.

“Well, hey there Tina! Is this Princess Ceecee that’s scheduled in with us today?” Tanya is looking down at Ceecee with a huge smile on her pretty face.

I chuckle and state, “This is the one and only Princess Ceecee.” I decide to act out a bit. I put my nose in the air. “I demand the best of service for her. Her father is a king after all.”

Ceecee giggles and covers her mouth with one hand. Tanya widens her eyes and she plays along, “But, of course. Only the best of service for Princess Ceecee. Please, come this way.”

I push Ceecee over to the first station for a facial. As I walk past Tanya she scrunches up her face, puts a hand on her chest and mouths, “She’s beautiful.”

Don’t I know it.

Tanya takes a seat beside Ceecee’s chair and explains what will be done to her today. “Okay, princess Ceecee, today we’re going to start with a facial. That’s where I’ll put some cold goop on your face. We’ll leave it on for about ten minutes and then wipe it off. Then I’ll do your fingernails and toe nails. You can pick whatever color you want on them. After that, I’ll trim and style your hair. And we’ll finish up with a massage. How does that sound, honey bun?”

Ceecee’s eyes are wide. She whispers to Tanya, “Good. Thank you.”

Tanya smiles big at Ceecee, “Well you’re a princess and you deserve the best, sweetie.”

Ceecee smiles, lowers her eyes and whispers, “Okay.”

Sweet baby Jesus, I love this child.

Every time I see Ceecee my heart melts. She is so lovable and warm. She seems in disbelief whenever someone compliments her, though. That

bothers me. By the end of today I want her to feel good. As good as she's ever felt.

Tanya applies our face masks and while we're waiting for them to set I hear Ceecee singing along with the radio. "You are now, now rockin' with Will.I.Am and Britney, Bitch."

I gasp and softly reprimand her, "Ceecee, we are ladies and princesses, and we do *not* say b i t c h." I end on a whisper and have no idea why I felt the need to spell the word when she just said it.

Ceecee becomes thoughtful then looks back to me and says, "But Britney said bitch and she's a lady."

Damn it, Britney. Now look at what you've done!

My eye twitches as I try to think of an acceptable answer, "Ah, I guess... Well...That is...Britney is over the age of twenty one. She is an adult and she can do what she likes. And she isn't a princess." I pat her hand and feel I've won this round.

Her eyes widen and she says slowly, "So, when I'm twenty one I can do *whatever* I like?"

Without thinking I say, "Sure."

She leans closer to me and drops a bomb. "Even get a tattoo?"

Oh, Poop! How did this happen??!

I sputter, "Uh, yes, I suppose..."

Ceecee becomes so excited she almost yells, “That’s so cool! I want one just like daddy and uncle Nik’s. That way everyone will know we’re family.”

“...with your father’s permission, of course.”

But Ceecee doesn’t hear me, she’s too far gone in her mind getting all sorts of crazy ideas that people frown upon.

After our facials, manicures, and pedicures Tanya brings us a lunch of sandwiches and fruit salad. Ceecee eats half a sandwich and some fruit. When I coax her to eat more she gives me some information I never knew. She tells me, “Daddy said people in wheelchairs don’t eat much. They don’t have to eat as much as regular people.”

Sorrow painfully shoots through my chest. I don’t like what she just said.

I respond, “Honey, you *are* regular people. You’ve just got a sweet ride, that’s all.”

She smiles a sad smile, “It’s okay, Tina. I know I’m different. It’s why I don’t make any friends and change schools a lot.”

My face drops. I cautiously ask, “How many times have you changed schools, angel?”

She toys with a piece of cantaloupe on her plate, avoiding my gaze and replies, “Four times in three years.”

That. Is. Huge. No child should be changing schools *that* much.

“Can I ask why, honey?” I ask carefully.

Still avoiding my eyes, she explains in a small voice, “People make fun of me. They call me weird. They say I’m a freak.” My heart is actually breaking. I can feel it split in two. Her blank eyes focus on my legs and she continues quietly, “I never make any friends. I don’t know why.” She finishes with a small shrug and is so quiet I can barely hear her.

This is so upsetting to me.

I can’t even imagine how this little angel feels. Bullying is a huge issue nationwide. The unfortunate truth is kids can be cruel. They don’t realize what they’re actually doing to a person when they poke fun at them.

I clear my throat to clear any thickness and steady my voice. “Well, that’s going to change. You’re a princess. Princesses don’t let people make fun of them. They stick up for themselves. And I’ll tell you how. Whenever someone says something ugly to you, lift your hand, smile and wave at them. That way, it’s them who look silly. Not you.”

Her face is still lowered but I see a small smile twitch her lips. I take it as good sign and continue “And making friends isn’t that hard, honey. A stranger is just a friend you haven’t met yet. All it takes is for someone to make the first move. So here’s what I want you to do. Next time you see someone who looks nice, just go on up to them and say Hi. The rest will come easy after that. You don’t have anything to lose.”

I mentally cross my fingers and wait.

After a long silence, Ceecee looks up at me and smiles, “Okay, Tina.”

Really? That easy?! No freakin’ way!

I make a mental note to do cartwheels *outside* of the salon.

I smile back at her.

Yay! Today was a good idea.

We’re all in the ‘chill out’ room brainstorming when the elevator dings followed by the familiar sounds of two ladies talking and laughing.

They’re back.

I smile to myself. What Tina pulled this morning was so unexpected. I know Max was grateful for it, though. Ceecee gets so bored here on Saturdays. It’s the one day a week that mom or our sisters can’t take her. As soon as we got back into the conference room, Max looks right at me and says, “If you don’t wife that girl, one of *us* will.”

I was surprised to see even Ghost nodding in agreement.

Tina sure is a force. Just storms in and storms back out. Normally, leaving you confused.

Tina enters the ‘chill out’ room and clears her throat dramatically. She lifts her arm, sways it to the side and announces, “May I present, the ever lovely, Princess Ceecee.”

And in comes Cricket looking, not only pretty, but happy. All of us guys whistle and cheer while Ceecee giggles.

I take a sip of my coffee as Ceecee speaks, “Tina said I could get a tattoo!”

I choke, sputter, and coffee ends up all over my shirt.

The silence is deafening. That doesn’t sound like something *my* Tina would say.

Tina laughs nervously and corrects her, “Um, actually I said when you were twenty one you could do what you please. I also said you had to ask your dad’s permission first.” Tina looks at Max and nods vigorously.

That sounds more like it. My little Cricket is already becoming a cheeky one.

Max narrows his eyes at Tina and asks Ceecee, “Baby, did Tina pay with daddy’s card?”

As soon as the question is out Tina stiffens and I want to burst out laughing. She didn’t use the card.

What Ceecee says next proves Tina somehow got through to her, “Um, I’m not sure daddy. I didn’t see. She *must* have. I’m pretty sure she did. Yes, she did. I’m *sure* she did.” Cricket is lying her ass off to protect Tina.

Max’s eyes remain narrowed and at Tina, whose eyes are wide and her neck is bright red, then he answers Ceecee, “Well, if you’re sure, angel.”

Tina finally caves and blurts out, “Princess’ daddies don’t pay for princess

things, their fairy godmothers do!”

Ceecee turns to face Tina and asks quietly, “Are you my fairy godmother?”

Tina’s eyes crinkle as she touches Ceecee’s cheek and confidently states, “Today I am.”

Yeah. Tina’s the shit.

Chapter Eleven

Cherry Bombs

Tina left shortly after returning Ceecee to The White Rabbit. And the rest of the day consisted of Ceecee going on and on and *on* about Tina and what she said and did and that she eats a lot and how Tina said ladies and princesses don't say the word bitch. Tina is Cricket's new idol.

Before she left, she took me and Max aside and spoke to us about Ceecee. What she told us wasn't anything we didn't know but at least she was trying to help.

She told us, "Ceecee is really insecure. I spoke to her about a few things today and got a few answers if you want them. I normally wouldn't tell you but it's not like she swore me to secrecy."

Max looks dejected and quietly replied, "That would be good, T."

She puffed out a breath and remarked "Where to start? Um, Ceecee has *no* idea how to make friends. I told her the basics but because she's been

bullied she's extra shy. So I gave her a little advice about the bullying, even though when she told me I wanted to ask her what school she went to and give those bullies something to talk about!" She nods enthusiastically as she says this, eyes wide. I try my hardest not to laugh. "She also told me everyone in the family treats her like a baby." She puts her hand on Max's. "This isn't helping her, honey. She's nine going on eighteen. And she's smart. She knows when she's being babied."

Max runs his free hand through his hair and explains, "I don't know how to be any other way. I try not to, T."

She takes both of his hands, pulls them up to her chest and looks his right in the eye.

She answers fiercely, "Try harder, honey. She needs you. And it's great to be protective of her but she doesn't need a bodyguard, Max. She needs a daddy who she can come to with her problems, not a father that tries to stop all the problems before they've even happened."

Max drops her hands and pulls her into a bear hug. They rock from side to side.

Max says, "I'll try, T."

"That's great, honey." She smiles, loosens her hold on him and looks up. "I have to go. I'll see you guys tonight, right?"

Max kisses her forehead and replies, "Bet your life on it." He releases her

and she walks over to me.

“I need a hug from Niki.”

I smile and pull her into my arms. I saw Max leave my office. Tina toys with my collar and speaks softly, “He’ll be okay, right?”

I smile into her forehead, “Of course sweetheart. He’s tough. I know he’d do anything for her. He’ll try harder, you’ll see.”

She smiles up at me and reaches on her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. Her lips brush the very corner of mine but she doesn’t seem bothered by it. She says, “See you tonight, Niki.” And then she’s gone.

Freakin’ A.

The girls all come to my apartment to get ready to go to The White Rabbit.

I tell them how my day went with Ceecee and although they’re sad for the little chicken being bullied and friendless, they’re happy she had a great time.

I feed Bear and give him a cuddle then we all commence Project Get-Ready-For-The-Club.

Primping. Curling. Straightening. Making Up. Dressing Up. And an hour later we’re ready to go.

Mimi looks stunning in a Safira bought little black dress with black and

white checkered heels; black makes her blue eyes pop. She wears her honey blonde hair straight.

Lola looks beautiful in a dark green kaftan style dress that's tighter around the top and flows around her feet with sandals. Her long brown hair is wildly curled. She goes with little makeup but with bright red lips. She looks like a sexy gypsy.

Nat is just gorgeous in a gold halter dress that goes to her feet with a wicked split up the thigh; she wears gold sandals that strap up the calf. Her violet hair is straight tonight; she makes herself up so her green eyes are surrounded by a smoky black shadow.

I'm dressed wearing yet another long sleeved black backless dress that comes mid-thigh. This one has silver beaded patterns through it. I finish it with black silver-studded heels. I feel good in this dress. Although the back is so low you can't wear underwear with it which I feel a little uncomfortable with but the girls swear you can't tell. I put on a little eyeliner and mascara and finish with a light pink gloss.

We arrive at The White Rabbit around 11pm and walk right up to B-Rock who smiles at us and says, "I was wonderin' if I'd ever see you girls again. Thanks for not breakin' my heart." He winks and lets us in. Mimi rubs his bald head, Lola pats his cheek, Nat winks back at him and when I walk past him, I put my hand on his chest and kiss his cheek.

The club is pumping and we're giddy. We walk straight up stairs to be greeted by Asian Alice who smiles at us and says, "Ah, the Safira party has arrived. Right this way, ladies."

Everyone knows us!

I feel like a rock star!

Asian Alice walks us to our huge booth and takes our first drink orders. We decide on cherry bombs which is a bad idea because these babies go straight to my head but I cave. All they are is Red Bull and cherry vodka.

We've been sitting, chatting, and laughing for an hour and a half. We're finishing our third drinks when I see Mimi smiling at something behind me.

I turn and all the guys are there walking toward us.

I smile a hugely stupid smile. I'm so happy to see them even though I just saw them some hours ago.

They look *hawt*!

Trick and Ghost wear what I assume is their uniform which is a tight black V-neck t-shirt over black slacks and dress shoes. Max is wearing a black button up shirt over black jeans and dress shoes. And last but definitely not least is Nik. He's wearing a white button up shirt over dark blue jeans and dress shoes and looks oh-so-yummy.

All the girls stand to exchange hugs and greetings, then we all sit back down. A waitress brings the guys a drink I hadn't know they'd ordered and

she also brings us another round. I'm already fuzzy headed. I haven't eaten anything since lunch with Ceecee. Stupidly, I shoot the rest of my drink and pick up my fourth.

Nik has chosen the seat next to me and I'm glad. I put my hand on his thigh and scootch over to be closer to him. He smiles down at me and puts his arm around my shoulder.

I make eye contact with Mimi who pokes her tongue out at me and shoots me a cruel smile. She speaks loudly so everyone can hear her, "I have a great idea. Who wants to play Truth or Truth?"

Son of a Big Mac... I'll cut a bitch!

She knows I hate these games. They're always dirty and give me hives.

Unlucky for me, everyone agrees. Mimi goes first. "Max, have you ever fantasized about someone other than the person you were actually having sex with?"

He laughs, "Yep. I have. I was dating this girl in high school and every time I closed my eyes I'd see Christie Brinkley." Everyone laughs with him and he asks, "Okay, Nat. If I were a food what would I be and how would you eat me?"

A loud chorus of *Ooooooh* crosses the booth.

Nat takes it all in stride and says, "Well, I guess you'd be an ice cream." She looks at Max with lowered eyes and makes her voice sultry. "I loooove

ice cream. I like to lick it up slowly, especially when it runs down the cone.” She takes Max’s hand and licks his finger slowly. Max’s eye flutter closed and he looks like he’s in pain.

We’re all laughing so hysterically.

Ghost doesn’t look impressed.

Nat puts Max’s hand in his lap and he adjusts himself through his pants.

“Damn girl, you gave me a semi.” She bursts out laughing and says, “Okay, Nik. What’s the most embarrassing thing you’ve ever done?”

He stretches his arms over his head and smiles. “When I was in fourth grade I had a crush on my teacher.” He chuckles at himself. “I wanted her to be my girlfriend. So, one afternoon I went to her house with flowers and candy. I rang the doorbell.” He puts a hand over his face. “And her husband answered the door. I dropped the shit and ran like hell.” After we stop laughing, he says, “Mimi, have you ever masturbated?”

Trick puts his arm around her and tells her, “Coz you know I’d be happy to help.”

She flashes a huge grin and says, “Yep. At least twice a week. Sorry guys but sometimes you just need to please yourself.” The guys groan in agony. Mimi asks, “Lola, who was the first guy you let touch your boobs?”

Lola looks up and thinks hard. She tells us, “I think I was fifteen and barely had any boobs. It was my cousin’s best friend Frankie, he was sixteen and

he gave me my first kiss and went in for a feelski. I didn't mind though 'coz he was hot." She looks around the table. "Meanwhile, I saw him at church the other week. He was sporting a bald head and a pot belly! So lucky I didn't end up with him. Trick, have you ever peed in a pool?"

Trick leans back in his chair with a goofy grin and says, "Yep! Just the other day at the gym."

We all scoff in disgust and he defends himself with, "It don't matter, all the chemicals kill the pee! Max, what was the worst pick up line you ever used and did it work?"

Max smiles and says, "I told a girl once I'd lost my bed and asked if I could borrow hers. She wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. But I did get laid that night."

We all boo and hiss. Max looks right at me and asks, "Teeny Tina, have you ever watched porn?"

Crap on a biscuit!

"Uh. I- Uh." I cover my face with my hands and nod. I hear everyone laugh and can feel Nik's arm tighten around my body shaking. I drop my hands and turn my flushed face and bright red neck to Ghost. "Ghost, what kind of underwear are you wearing?"

Ghost smirks at me and answers quietly, "I would tell you if I were wearin' any."

The girls whoop and the guys groan. He just smiles and asks, “Lola, what’s the strangest name someone’s asked to call you in bed?”

Lola’s shoulders shake with silent laughter and she replies, “There was a guy who called me puppy and wanted me to bark like a dog.” Her body shakes and tears fall down her smiling face. “I didn’t like him enough to put up with that shit.” Lola looks at Trick with a shy smile and asks, “Trick, what do you find most sexy in a woman?”

He looks up at her with a slow smile. It’s a genuine smile and says softly, “I’m not sure, little Lola. Look in a mirror and let me know.”

We all whoop and Lola blushes as red as a tomato.

Trick looks at Nik and smirks, “What’s the fastest you’ve ever come?” Everyone bursts into laughter. Nik chuckles and says, “I think the first time I ever had sex I lasted about twenty seconds.” We’re all in hysterics. Nik interrupts our laughter with, “I’d like to let everyone know I’ve vastly improved since then!”

Nik tugs my hair and I’m afraid to look at him. I know I’m next. He asks, “Tina, how many men have you slept with?” The whole table quiets down and my girls send me sympathetic smiles. I clear my throat and answer, “I’ve only ever slept with one guy. And it was a while ago.” I feel Nik’s body still against me.

Max looks shocked but continues to probe, “Well then that question’s not

valid. When is the last time you had sex?”

Thirty seconds pass and I hold up my hand extending my thumb and all my fingers. Max looks at my hand and says, “Five months? That’s rough.”

Nat shifts in her chair. Lola looks at the table. Mimi shoots me an apologetic look.

I whisper, “F- Five years.” I feel Nik’s body stiffen. Rock solid.

The silence is deafening. And I think I saw a tumble weed roll past.

Max whispers loudly, “No Fuckin’ Way!” He leans closer to me and asks, “How are you not masturbating at the table right now?! You must have a will of steel. That’s amazing, babe.” He sounds respectful.

Ahh, Thanks Max.

I avoid the shocked stares of the guys and sympathetic smiles of the girls. I shrug and ask, “Anyone need a fresh drink? I certainly do.”

Before anyone can answer I walk over to the bar and order another cherry bomb. I’m stumbling slightly and feeling loose. I’m tipsy and it feels good.

I walk back to the booth. Trick and Ghost have left to do some work. Nat has gone to the bathroom. Nik pats his lap. I lower myself and sit sideways on him. He lifts my hair, puts his mouth to my ear and says, “I’m sorry for putting you on the spot, honey. If I knew it would make you uncomfortable I would never have asked that question.”

I put a hand on his chest and with a smile say, “That’s okay Niki. It is what

it is. I can't deny it." I lift my drink to sip at it and miss my mouth completely. I may be a little more than tipsy. I spill my drink down the front of Nik's shirt.

I trill, "Holy buckets! I'm so sorry, Nik." I use my hand to wipe the drink off his shirt but all I do is smear the bright orange liquid over even more of it. He takes my hands and I look up at him. He's smiling hard at me, dimple and all. He says, "I keep a spare shirt in my office. I'll go change."

I move off his lap and as he goes to move away I hold on to his hand. "I'll go with you."

Nik smiles and pulls me closer to him. "C'mon, honey." He leads me into a hall behind the bar and opens the door.

Wow!

It opens opposite the 'chill out' room. I follow him to his office and he starts unbuttoning his shirt. I know I should look away but I'm a bit drunk and I want to see what he's got hiding there. He has all the buttons down the front open and he's working on the sleeves.

He asks, "Can you please get my other shirt from over there?" He nods to the clothes hanger in the corner. I grab the freshly laundered garment and take off the wrapper. Underneath is the silk lilac shirt he was wearing the day we met.

I state, "You were wearing this the day I met you."

He smirks and says softly, "I know."

Then he takes off his wet shirt.

Holy smokes!

Nik is even better looking without a shirt. His abs are clearly defined. He has a small smatter of chest hair. His arms are amazing! They're muscular and have veins running up them. He has tattoos, too. His jeans fall low on his hips. On his right hip is a tattoo of a cross. On his right bicep is a large printed tattoo that looks like XAOC. I have no idea what that is. He's removed his watch. His wrist has a tattoo on the inside. It says Ceecee.

Aww, I love Ceecee, too!

Behind his left ear is a tribal tattoo that comes down to his neck. Still shirtless, he turns and I think I gasp out loud. His entire back is tattooed. One big picture. It's a bit scary actually. There are seven blank eyed angels up in the clouds holding swords of flame. They're fighting off five devil-like creatures with horns on their heads and pointy tails that are reaching in to the clouds. It literally gives me shivers.

Nik breaks me out of my spell when he pulls the lilac shirt on. Once he's buttoned up he holds out his hand, I take it and we exit his office. As we make our way down the hall Nik stops suddenly. He puts a finger to his mouth and I quiet myself. There are banging noises coming from the opposite end of the hall.

We tiptoe to the conference room and the noise get louder.

Bang-Clink-Moan-Thump-Groan

Nik smirks and puts his ear to the door. His body shakes with silent laughter and he motions for me to come closer.

Eyes wide, I put my ear to the door and listen.

A girl. "Oh my god." *Thump-Clink-Bang.*

A guy. "Fuck, you feel good." *Moan-Groan.*

The girl. "Oh God. You're amazing!" *Moan.* "I still hate you. Ooooh."
Thump-Clink-Bang.

The guy. "I hate you too, pretty girl." *Groan.* "Fuck me, do that again."
Groan.

I know that voice.

It's Nat.

I look up to Nik with a hand over my mouth. His eyes are dancing. He mouths, "Ghost."

Ghost moans again then says, "Say my name, pretty girl." *Thump-Bang-Thump.*

Nat groans, "Ghost! Fuck me, Ghost!" *Bang-Clink-Thump.*

"No baby, say my *name.*" *Clink-Bang-Moan.*

Nat pants, "Ash- Asher! Oh God, Ash... Harder Ash." *Groan-Thump-Bang.*

Ghost states, "Any harder and I'll put you through the fuckin' table!"

Moan-Clink-Groan.

I giggle and Nik bursts into silent laughter. He pulls me back to his office, closes the door and we laugh hysterically.

My best friend is shtupping broody Ghost!

Nik has his arms around my waist. I hold on to the front of his shirt. We laugh til we're in tears. When we finally stop laughing we look into each other's faces. I stop smiling. I want him so badly. And it's not the booze talking. I want him to kiss me right *now*.

Nik's also stopped smiling. I see him swallow hard. His face serious puts a hand to my belly and pushes me back gently til my back hits the wall. His amber eyes bore into me, they search my face. He lifts a hand to the side of my neck and moves his fingers slowly up and down my collarbone. I close my eyes and shudder.

"Look at me." He says this firmly. It's not a request.

I open my eyes and he looks deeply into them before saying hoarsely, "I'm going to kiss you."

HURRAH!

And he does. He lowers his face til his lips softly touch mine. I huff in a shaky breath. Neither of us moves for seconds and its torture! It seems like days. My shoulders slump and my knees weaken when his tongue darts out to trace my lips. Luckily, the wall was doing a good job at holding me up.

I gasp and he takes my weakness as an opportunity to kiss me deeply. He groans when his tongue touches mine. They dance together and I want to weep with joy.

Wow! Like... Wow!

Warmth spreads through my belly to my core.

This is the best kiss I've ever had, hands down. It's amazing. Nik is amazing. His lips are soft and his tongue is wicked. Stroking mine gently and with precision.

He tastes like mint and cognac. He's delicious. I'm lost and my hands move of their own accord. One hand cups his cheek while the other grips the lapel of his shirt. I pull him closer to me and I feel his bulge press into my belly. I unconsciously grind myself against it. I squeeze my legs together to stop the tingling. It doesn't help.

By thunder, he's huge!

The hand on my neck moves down my arm, around my naked lower back. He opens his palm and slides it down further into my dress. He massages my bare ass softly then grips it tight. My breath hitches and I bite back a moan. I nip his bottom lip then suck on it lightly. His other hand moves from my waist. His fingers creep up my ribs. His hand lightly cups my breast. I can't stop it, I moan into his mouth. Nik stiffens. His hands fall to my sides then grip my hips tight.

No! Put your damn hand on my boob!

Breathing heavily he puts his forehead to mine and closes his eyes. He whispers, "I'm sorry." It's no more than a whisper but he may as well have yelled it at me.

He regrets kissing me. Which I suppose is good because friends don't kiss. Like, ever.

What a crying shame.

He kisses my cheek for a full second before he turns and leaves the office. My cheeks are flushed and I rest a hand on my heaving chest.

What the heck just happened?

I really have no idea because I'm tipsy from lust. But I know it changes everything.

Hell's bells.

I make my way back to the booth. The girls, Trick, and Max are there. Nat looks at me and I can't help but giggle. Yep, still tipsy. She looks at me wide eyed. We're both flushed. But at least she looks satisfied.

"Where's Nik?" I ask Max.

He shrugs and responds, "Said he had an emergency to take care of, babe. Probably won't be back tonight."

I nod and look to the table.

He's avoiding me.

If he thinks I'm giving up his friendship without a fight, he's got another thing coming.

He can't just give me four weeks of complete awesomeness and then rip it away from me because of a stupid kiss. Okay, it was an *amazing* stupid kiss.

I have to do something. I'm not losing Nik. I *will* fight for him.

You better watch yourself, Niki.

Chapter Twelve

Friendship can suck it

Today is Tuesday.

It's been three days since I've seen Tina and I'm very obviously avoiding her. She came to my office yesterday and I pleaded with Max to send her away. I told him to tell her I was so busy that I wasn't seeing anyone. That was a lie. I was sitting at my desk making paper planes and trying to fly them into my waste basket which I'd placed by the door. After she left, Max came into my office, sat at my desk and stared holes into my head. He said, "Whatever you did to fuck up," he pointed a finger at my chest, "make it better."

Without waiting for a reply, he left.

Today, I turn on my computer and find an instant message waiting for me.

TheTomicBomb: Hey stranger, remember me??! I want sushi 2day. U in?

What the hell?

I thought Tina was upset with me. It's the reason I didn't see her yesterday. I thought she was getting ready to tear me a new asshole. And it would've been deserved. Or cry, which would rip my heart to shreds. I mean I practically groped her while she was drunk. Not something a gentleman does. I took advantage of her.

It was the best kiss of my life but I still took advantage of her.

I'm ashamed of myself. My mom brought me up better than that.

This message doesn't sound like she's angry with me. In fact it sounds like she's the same old Tina just wanting to have lunch with her friend.

Ding

TheTomicBomb: If u ever resurface 4 air, let me know. I'll bring u sushi :)

I can't help my chuckle. I run my hand through my hair.

The weight I've been carrying around all weekend disappears.

I'm so relieved she isn't pissed at me. She should be. Thank god she's doing the mature thing and pretending it never happened.

Can you pretend it never happened?

I can still feel her suck my bottom lip. When I put my hand down the back of her dress and realized she wasn't wearing underwear I just about had a stroke. Sweet Jesus, that ass. It's a nice ass. Soft as silk but firm, too. The perfect ass. Well, my idea of the perfect ass.

Her lips are soft, pouty, and so sweet they taste like bubble gum. I want to kiss her again and again.

Yeah, I like kissing Tina. No, I *love* kissing Tina. Then she pushed herself up on my hard-on. I almost came like the story I told about my fifteen year old self losing my virginity.

...aaand you're hard. Happy now?

Knowing she'd only ever been with the one guy and hasn't been with him in five years. It made me feel good. Too good. Like, good that you shouldn't feel about your friends good.

Goddamn it. I don't know how it even happened. One minute we were laughing, the next I was pushing her up against the wall.

A sudden urge overcomes me.

I have to see her. I need to try and explain myself. I don't know how I'm going to do that without explaining I'm getting some really strong feelings

for her. And I know that's not what she wants.

But what if she does want it?

If I knew Tina wanted to be with me, I'd snatch her up in a heartbeat. I got *those* kinds of feelings for her. The *one* feelings. I can't believe it myself. The thought of her being with someone else makes acid burn my gut. I want to punch the wall just thinking about it.

What a mess.

All because of goofy wax lips. I smile at the memory. This adorable little woman being dragged into my office by Max, too shy to even look at me then declaring me her friend... So much has changed. Never met anyone like her in my life. So giving with her heart. I'll do anything to protect that heart. I want it to be mine to protect.

I smile to myself.

Got to go see my girl.

I see Nik exit The White Rabbit and a chill sweeps through me as my hands start to sweat.

What if he tells me we can't be friends anymore?

I would just die. Actually drop dead and *die*.

I knew he was in his office yesterday and if I really wanted to I know Max wouldn't have stopped me from barging in and demanding he talk to me.

But I wanted to respect his privacy. He didn't want to see me for a reason.

This morning when I sent him a message asking to get sushi together I was hoping we could get on like nothing happened.

I know he regrets the most amazing kiss of my life. Which kind of sucks but having thought about it over the past two days, I'm okay with it. I was hoping Nik would be my *one*. I built him up so much in my mind I didn't stop to protect myself from him. After all, look at how he treats Sissy? If he were to screw me and leave me, I'd be broken. I've been there before, it isn't nice. I'm damaged goods because of it. It sucks to feel safe with someone and have them walk away like you're nothing to them. That hurts. Like, *really* hurts. But I would've taken the risk with Nik.

Am I destined to be *that* girl?

You know, that girl who loves once and then hates love and everybody in love when her relationship takes a nose dive?

No! Hell, I hope not.

I don't want to become a crazy cat lady!

Nik regrets the kiss. That's fine. I'll be his friend if he'll let me. I miss him already.

Rawr Raaawr

"Gotta fix that damn bell, babe." I look over to the doorway and Nik is flashing that charming smile at me. I don't know why but I run over to him

and jump into his arms. I wrap my legs high on his waist and hug him hard.

It's that damn dimple. It's magical!

“Holy hell, babe. It’s only been three days,” he chuckles at me.

The nerve!

I relax my grip on his neck, frown into his face and ask, “Where have you been?”

I must look pathetic because his face softens. He holds under my butt with one forearm and puts stray hair behind my ear with the other. His face shows he doesn’t want to end our friendship. In fact, there shines some intense emotion. But I can’t name it.

Hooray!

He looks me in the eye and says, “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I was snowed under.” His soft face smiles into mine and I want him to kiss me again. My eyes lower and I feel my heart beat faster.

Nat yells out, “Will you two get a damn room already?” I look over to the counter and find Mimi and Nat smiling like a pair of clowns at me. Nat waves her fingertips daringly.

I mock-sowl at them and boom, “Get back to work!” Nik’s face moves to my neck and feel the puffs of breath as he laughs.

He lifts his head and grins saying, “I think you said you wanted sushi today.” I nod. He whispers, “What my girl wants, my girl gets.”

My heart skips a beat.

He means you're his friend and a girl, dumdass.

Oh yeah! Of course he does. I wasn't at all thinking how nice it would be being Nik's girl.

Not. At. All. Nope. Not even a bit.

I say, "I should get my purse." I let go of his neck but he doesn't set me down. He holds me like a weigh about as much as a paperclip. And it's nice.

Really nice.

He quips, "You know you aren't paying so you don't need your purse." He grins at me then looks to Nat and Mimi and inquires, "You girls want sushi?"

They both nod and look at Nik like he's oh-so-dreamy. My friends have been replaced by robots.

I roll my eyes at them then turn back to him and utter, "You can put me down now, Nik."

He nods his head to the side and raises one brow, "I could. But I don't want to. I like you in my arms." He says the last bit on a whisper and my core spasms. Surely he's not referring to the other night.

He ran out of the room like it was on fire. Only he left me in the fire.

No, definitely not.

I chuckle and slap his shoulder and whine, "C'mon Niki, I'm hungry."

He reluctantly sets me down and puts an arm around my shoulder. He turns to the girls and says, “We’ll bring you back sushi, girls. See ya.” He lifts his fingers as a goodbye and drags me out of Safira without my purse.

We walk along, my arm tight around his waist the other resting on his belly, his wrapped around my shoulder. It feels so right.

I love this. It’s totally natural.

We walk silently to the sushi bar. I dread talking about what happened. We’re seated at the bar and watching out for things we like on the conveyor. It’s time. I don’t look at him when I begin, “So, Saturday night was pretty intense, huh?”

He stiffens beside me. He sighs and says, “Yeah, about that, I’m so sorry Tina. I don’t know what came over me. I…”

I cut him off with a fake laugh, “It’s fine Nik, really. Let’s just call it curiosity between friends. Now that it’s out of our systems we can get on with our lives, right?” I glance over at him and I become confused.

It looks like Nik is in pain. His brows pull in, his eyes are unfocused at my shoulder, and his lips turn hard. He quickly removes the look and plasters on a smile. His eyes still hard.

“Yes. Sure. I’m still very sorry.” He says softly, almost mournfully, “It won’t happen again.”

It won’t happen again.

Why is my heart silently breaking if all I want is Nik's friendship?

I want his kisses. I want it to happen again and again. I want more with Nik. I want his love. I don't think I'd ever get enough of him. Or maybe I just think that because I wanted him to be the one for me. The one who helps me get passed my fears.

Let it go.

"So, are we still invited to Poker night?" I ask and wiggle my brows at him in a fake display of composure.

He smiles softly, "Yeah. Wouldn't be the same without you."

Huzzah! Friends are we!

Wednesday night I invited the girls over for a girl's night at my apartment.

I baked caramel mud cupcakes with fudge sauce in the middle. These are Mimi's all-time favorite.

I only have the one sofa so we spend it under the covers of my king sized bed.

Me and Nat on one side of the mattress, Lola and Meems on the other with Bear accepting cuddles and pats from all sides smack dab in the middle.

Mimi starts the questioning as soon as we're in bed. "Okay. I'm bringing something up that I know we are all curious about." She looks right at me.

“What’s the deal with you and Nik?”

I chew my tongue for a second. I don’t know what to tell them. I decide honesty is the best choice. I scratch the side of my neck, look down and tell them, “I thought Nik might be the one.”

I hear multiple gasps. I look up and see three pairs of wide eyes and open mouths gaping like fishes out of water.

I giggle.

Lola chides, “How can you laugh at a time like this?!”

Nat speaks softly, “That’s great, babe. He’s totally into you. Go for it.” She smiles.

When I make a scoffing sound she scowls at me and says, “What’s that all about?”

I play with the cover of my quilt and assure them, “He’s not into me. Not even a little.”

The girls all look at each other and burst into hysterical laughter.

I feel myself becoming flushed. I like people laughing with me but I don’t like being laughed at.

I steel my voice and growl, “Don’t laugh at me.”

Nat immediately stops laughing and responds, “I’m sorry honey, we aren’t laughing at you. You’re just so sweet you can’t even see Nik is head over heels for you.”

Lola smiles and confirms, “He is Tina. You should see him. When you’re in a room he doesn’t even pay attention to anyone else.”

Mimi nudges my foot with hers and swears, “Yeah, doll, he loves being wrapped up in all that is Tina. In a big way.”

I throw my head back on my pillow and blurt, “Oh yeah, so into me he kisses me then tries to escape. Then avoids me for three days? Then re-appears sweeter than ever! God, Nik, you suck!”

The silence goes on a long while before I hear someone clear their throat.

Mimi whispers, “He kissed you on Saturday night?”

Lola squeals, “I knew it! See, he likes you Teeny!”

Nat squawks, “Where the hell was I?”

I sigh deeply, “Yes. He kissed me in his office. He backed me up into a wall and kissed the heck out of me. And grabbed my ass. And my boob. And I really liked it.” I end on a whine.

Nat grins like the Cheshire cat and says, “From the beginning, if you please.”

I spend the next ten minutes explaining in detail what happened. When I’m finished Nat asks, “I don’t get why you guys were laughing so hard. What happened?”

I bite my lip to stop from giggling and say, “Well, we heard something really funny.” I shoot her a look and go on. “In the conference room.” Her

eyes widen, I continue with, “It was really loud.” Nat swallows hard and turns beet red.

Hehe...yeah, I know you naughty girl.

Lola looks thoughtful and slowly says, “I think I know what happened.” I lean closer to her and widen my eyes like she will reveal to me all the secrets of the universe. She reminds me, “You were pretty tipsy, Tina, and you just got put on the spot with all the sex questions. I think maybe he thought he was taking advantage of you.”

Mimi and Nat both nod in agreement.

Could it be?

No, I’d made my intentions clear.

I wanted him.

I was rubbing up against him like a cat in heat for god sake! I moaned into his mouth. Those all say *take me now!* Could it be he thought I’d been drinking too much?

Mimi shoots me a sultry look and asks, “So, how good of a kisser is he?”

My eyes roll in to the back of my head and I moan. The girls laugh at my dramatics.

I smile a small smile and explain softly, “It was the type of kiss where your knees turn to jelly. And you feel electricity running through your veins. And your stomach flips around like a fish.” I sigh and say, “The type that made

me believe he could possibly be the one."

Lola pouts her lips and puts her hands over her heart. Nat smiles a happy smile. Mimi bites her tongue and nods her head. "Righteous."

I smile to myself and whisper, "Yeah, it was."

Totally.

Max speaks around a caramel mud cupcake. "Glad to see you and Tina made up."

Tina brought us six of the honest to god best cupcakes I've *ever* had. Out of all her cakes, these are my favorite so far.

Ambrosia...Food of the gods.

She walked into the 'chill out' room and as soon as Trick saw her carrying a container he jumped up, kissed her cheek and took the container from her.

She laughed, "Trick, save some for your brothers, please."

Ghost even squeezed her shoulder when he walked in to the room. She's a part of our family. All the girls are. I consider them my sisters. Well, not Tina, which would be weird...because she would be an adorable sister with a great ass that I like to kiss.

Uh, Yuk.

"We had a girl's night last night and these were left over," she says as she picks one up and holds it out to me. "Try it."

God, she looks like Eve holding a shiny red apple.

Tempting temptress.

One bite of that morsel of caramel fudgy goodness and I could've asked Tina to marry me.

That's strange. Thoughts of marriage usually make me sweat. Somehow that doesn't seem to happen when I think of Tina as my little wifey.

Tina in my kitchen. Tina snuggling with me on my sofa. Tina in my bed on her kne—

Don't even go there.

I finish chewing, swallow, and declare, "This one's my favorite, sweetheart."

Her smile beams like morning sunshine and she says, "I'll remember that, Niki."

After instructing us not to work too hard she'd gone back to work.

When I'd come back from our sushi lunch yesterday, I was annoyed and pissy as hell.

Tina laughed off the kiss like it was nothing. To me, it was the best kiss I've even had so it made me mad as a hatter that she didn't feel that way. I was ready to ask Tina to be my girl which is a huge deal for me. I thought everything was going good. I walk into Safira and bam! She jumps on my like I've come home from war. I enjoyed holding her like that. She's so

small. Her breasts pushed up against my chest and her face a hair's breadth away. Nice.

Then she writes off the kiss as 'curiosity between friends'...like hell!

I wanted to kiss her right there on the sushi bar enough to leave her breathless!

I turn to Max and tell him, "Yeah, we're good."

Poker night is awesome! Again!

We all got together at Nik's house at eight thirty. I decided to try a few new cupcake flavors today and went with strawberries and cream cupcakes and white chocolate cranberry cupcakes. Both were a hit. Ceecee had one of each before dinner. Max tried to look angry but couldn't stop himself from grinning at her.

Totally got him wrapped!

I snuck her one more that he didn't see. Pizza came at nine. We all ate, drank, and chatted together, including my little angel Ceecee. Max ended up putting Ceecee to bed a little later than usual because I'd managed to talk him into letting her play a few rounds of Uno with the girls. We cheered her on when she won twice and she was absolutely beaming with pride. Max couldn't stop smiling at her. I knew why he was smiling.

As soon as I walked into the house, I greeted everyone and went straight to

the kitchen to sort out my cupcakes. I was just about done when I almost had a heart attack.

“Tina! Tina! Tina! Tinaaaa!!!!” That yelling was coming from Ceecee. My heart clenched in fear.

I ran out of the kitchen with wide eyes and a pale face. Everyone else looked just as afraid as I was.

Only when I was her huge smiling face did I begin to relax. I held a hand on my chest and said, “Geez Louise, Ceecee. You just about sent me to an early grave!”

She stopped right at my legs, looked up and burst out, “I did it!”

Confusion set in. I shook my head slightly, shrugged and asked, “Did what, angel?”

She beamed, “I made a friend! All on my own. I just saw a girl from my class in the library and went over to her and said hi, I told her my name and you know what she said?” Excitement was leaping off her face.

I widened my eyes, leaned closer to her and whispered, “What’d she say?”

Ceecee smiled my favorite crooked smile, “She said she saw my art project up on display and thought it was awesome!”

That. Is. Awesome!

Ceecee took my silence as permission to continue, “She told me to eat lunch with her tomorrow so I can meet her friends!”

Totally. Freakin'. Awesome!

Still in a rush of excitement, she went on, "I did what you said and it worked! You're the best, Tina. Love you!" After she dropped that bomb I like to call a miracle, she rolled on down to the hallway and out of sight.

Jiminy Crickets! We did it!

I was too busy watching my little friend stroll away to see Max bounding towards me. I let out a small yelp when I was picked up from behind.

He was laughing in my ear, "Only you, teeny Tina."

When he'd had enough of holding me, he set me down and I turned to face him. I was stunned to see his eyes bright and shining, not so stunned to see the huge smile on his face.

I turned to face the others and they were all silently cheering, doing victory dances and making touchdown motions.

I whispered a reverent, "Wow."

Nik walked up to me, face serious and pecked a quick kiss on my lips before hugging the life out of me.

Niiice!

After Max put Ceecee down for the night, we snuck into the studio again and sang some songs along to the piano. We were just starting 'Don't Stop Believing' by Journey when Trick came skidding into the room on his knees belting out the words. The other guys came in shortly after and we

somehow ended up singing Sir Mix-A-Lot's 'Baby Got Back' which included Max sticking out his ass and booty shaking. It was so hilarious, I actually peed a little.

After listening to Nat play a few more songs, the guys went back to Poker. We've become so comfortable together that when the guys were playing their last round we girls got bored and fired up a DVD without even asking. This seemed to please Nik who was giving me the dimple. We took the same places on the sofas as last week and watched 'Old School'. The guys would stop playing every time we burst out laughing and eventually gave up on Poker to come and watch with us.

Nik sat with his back to the arm rest and pulled me onto my belly with my head resting on his chest, Max using my butt as a pillow. Mimi sitting with her feet under her body, Trick using Lola's lap as a pillow while Lola stroked Trick's hair. Nat sitting on the end of the sofa, her legs pulled up to her chest with Ghost leaning back on her and using her legs as a recliner.

Watching Will Ferrell streak naked down the street by himself had me in stitches. I was laughing so hard I'd snort, every time I'd snort everyone would laugh at me and I'd laugh harder causing more snorts. Still laughing and snorting, I begged for everyone to stop because I was actually going to pee myself.

I settled back down and found myself falling asleep. Nik asked me if I

wanted to sleep in an actual bed and I shook my head. In a sleep filled haze, I turn my head to his, took my fingers and traced his lips. Without a second more of thinking, I put my lips on his. Whisper soft. I could've imagined it. I sure thought I did. I pull away and smile at his confused expression.

Nik, y u so dreamy?

I rest my head under his chin and promptly pass out.

Chapter Thirteen

Free Rein

“What the heck is that?”

I look up from my Friday rush paperwork to see Tina in the doorway of my office, face pale with wide eyes.

Confusion passes through me. I look down to see I’ve forgotten to put away my .45 caliber pistol which sits on my desk.

Oh, crap.

“I... Uh...” I’m not sure what to tell her. This pistol is my baby. My dad gave it to me when I fifteen. He wouldn’t let me use it, though. It was just for protection. Only to be used in life or death situations. The very first

thing he taught me was to never point your gun at someone you don't plan to use it on. I'm not saying I haven't ever used it. I have.

It's a regular semi-automatic pistol with steel casing. The handle, however, is wooden with a solid gold Mary Magdalene on the right side. It's a piece of art. This was my dad's gun which he brought over from Russia. He taught me how to use it. It's my only connection to my dad apart from our baby grand piano.

I decide to play it cool. I can trust Tina.

She makes her way over to me slowly, still obviously petrified of the object on my desk and says quietly, "Please tell me you have a permit for that."

I smile and shake my head at her. Not in a 'No' way but in a "Nawww, you're too cute" way.

I smirk up at her, "You wanna hold it?"

She gasps, her body rears back, and she shoves her hands under her armpits looking like she's about to do the chicken dance then leans forward and whispers fiercely, "I don't want my prints on it!"

I burst into laughter. My god, she is a goofball.

Taking the pistol, I stand and place it into the top drawer of the filing cabinet in the corner before locking it. I walk up to Tina, put my hands on her shoulders and assure her, "Nothing to worry about, sweetheart. It's just for protection."

Still wary, she looks into my eyes and tries to joke, “You must have some large enemies.”

I lean down and kiss her forehead. I whisper, “You have no idea.”

Tina doesn’t know it but I’m very serious when I say that.

She sounds anxious when she asks, “Who do you need protection from, Nik?”

I vow, “I’ll explain it to you one day, babe. I promise.” Tina doesn’t look any less guarded but she nods.

Good girl. Pick your battles.

I ask, “Did you need something, teeny Tina?” I pull on a lock of her dark silky hair.

Her face brightens when she remembers what she came for. She says, “Yes! I wanted to get a turkey sub for lunch from Silvio’s so I came to see if you wanted one, too.”

My stomach rumbles and I respond, “That’d be great. I’ve got a ton of work to get through with a 1pm deadline so that’s perfect.”

As soon as I reach for my wallet, the naughty girl actually runs out the door and yells, “It’s on me!”

I’m up and around my desk in a second with a twenty dollar bill in hand. I see her trying to open the heavy security door quickly but nothing happens.

It has a one second time lock. The more she jiggles the more the time lock starts over. She turns her head and sees me coming towards her. Her eyes widen to the size of saucers. She looks left then right trying to find an escape route, her eyebrows lift even further and I see an idea form in her head. She bolts down to the elevator and presses the button over and over. I laugh internally.

You keep doin' that, sweetheart.

The elevator doesn't work without a swipe card. She's pressing the button a mile a minute saying "c'mon, c'mon!" Nothing happens.

I'm a few feet away from her when she decides to try and run past me in the narrow hallway.

What a freakin' nut!

Her eyes are wide and her cheeks are the color of cotton candy. Still, she tries her hardest to slip by me. My arm shoots out and wraps around her waist.

Tina lets out a yelp. I pull her back to my chest and whisper in her ear, "That was a very bad idea, sweetheart."

Her body stills immediately and she whispers back, "What are you going to do to me?"

Oh shit. Don't tempt me, baby.

I think she's still scared about seeing my gun. She's adorable. I smile

cruelly even though she can't see it. I loosen my arm around her waist and move it to her hip. Then I move my free hand to her other hip.

Commence tickle-fest three thousand.

Tina starts howling with laughter, then giggles so high-pitched she sounds like a little dog yapping away. She struggles against me, it's so cute I can't help but laugh with her.

She begs, "NIK! STOP! PLEASE STOP!"

But I don't stop. She needs to be taught a lesson. I continue tickling her hips and ribs.

Then come the snorts.

It's only then I hear other people laughing. I look over to the doorway of the 'chill out' room. Max, Trick, and Ghost are all chuckling clearly enjoying the show.

Tina squeals, "NIK I'M GOING TO PEE!" At this point she's laughing as well as crying and pee sounds like pee-hee-hee.

My body shakes with laughter as I finally let up. I let go of her and she steps away from me huffing and puffing.

I take her in. Her hair is a mess, her makeup has slightly smudged under her eyes and she's beautifully flushed.

I wonder if this is how she looks after she comes.

"Well," *Huff*

“I’ll just,” *Puff*

“go get,” *Huff*

“lunch then.” And she turns to walk away.

I firmly warn, “Tina, stop.”

She stops and her shoulders stiffen. I walk over to her, take her hand and place the twenty in it. She looks at it then scowls at me.

I smile, “I want a cookie, too.” She glares at me then continues down the hall. I yell out, “If I find out you didn’t use that to buy *both* our lunches. I swear I’ll tickle you again even harder...and this time I’ll let you pee.”

I’m so shocked when she smiles an acid smile and flips me the bird, I roar with laughter.

My little goof.

Nik told us to come to The White Rabbit on a Sunday this week. He explained it’s not as busy as Saturday night and the music is more relaxing and chill. I spoke to the girls and they were down for that.

After Nik tickled the life out of me for trying to buy our lunches on Friday, I almost got tomato on his sub as payback. Silvio was just about to put the tomato on the sub when I shrieked, “STOP!” The entire store turned to look at me. I shuffled up to the counter and whispered, “No tomato, please.”

But I did get the choc chip cookie for him instead of his preferred white

choc almond.

Yeah, I'm badass.

It's now Sunday night and we're getting ready for the club.

While the girls share the bathroom mirror, I go about feeding Bear his dinner and giving him sweet cuddles. He thanks me with a *Mrrraaowww* and I make my way to the bathroom to get ready.

The girls are finished and waiting on me. I lightly apply my makeup and smear my lips thickly with clear gloss.

I then check my wardrobe for something to wear. I decide on a slimming black pencil skirt with a high waist and a white long sleeved linen shirt. I finish it off with a thick white belt and white suede pumps. Mimi is wearing black wide legged pants and a grey tank with black flats. Lola is wearing a denim mini skirt and a black long sleeved shirt with black heels. Nat is wearing white linen pants and a black tank with charcoal grey heels. They all look amazing.

We arrive at the club just after ten and I'm surprised to see a fairly large line up. The way Nik spoke about Sunday nights at the club was like it was dead. We approach the beginning of the line and B-Rock greets us with a large smile, "There they are. Gimme some love, ladies."

He doesn't ask for our VIP passes anymore. We each give him a kiss on the cheek as we pass him, Nat puckers up her bright red lips and kisses him

smack on the forehead. We laugh as he scowls at her.

As soon as we're in, we make our way to the stairs to the VIP area and are greeted by a smiling African American Alice tonight.

And she is smoking hot!

She greets us with, "Good evening ladies, you wouldn't happen to be the Safira party would you?" She has a deliciously husky voice that's almost hypnotizing.

We all smile at her when Mimi speaks, "That would be us." She leans closer to A.A. Alice and says, "You're gorgeous. If you want to meet for a drink later, let me know." When Mimi told me she was bi-sexual I was shocked. She didn't look the type. Don't get me wrong, I'm good with it. I *love* love. In all shapes and forms. And I love Mimi as a lesbian. She becomes a vixen.

A.A. Alice smiles a small smile and says quietly, "Well, shazam. I think I might just do that."

She shows us to our booth which the guys are already seated at. We all take an outer seat and I scowl at Mimi when she tries to sit next to Nik.

That's my seat Meems! It's always my seat!

Just as her ass descends, I put my hand on my hip, clear my throat and tap my foot.

Mimi looks up at me and chuckles, "This is your seat right, doll?"

I poke her in the chest lightly, scowl at her, and whisper loudly, “You know it is, you sneak!”

She puts her arms up in defeat and moves to sit next to Max.

Max asks me, “What, do I smell or some shit?” He actually looks distraught.

I laugh and lean over the table to kiss his cheek. As I lean back he whistles loudly and smirks, “You just made up for it with that excellent view of your cleavage, babe.” And then he winks at me.

I’m just about to unleash a really bad word followed by the word *you* when Nik throws a peanut at his head and warns, “That’s enough, knucklehead.”

I scrunch my nose at Max and nod.

Take that, Max!

He puts his hands up in surrender and says, “Yeesh. Alright, alright.”

Max puts his arm around Meems and they start chatting. I look over at Nat and she sits next to Ghost so Lola can play footsie with Trick. She leans over the table to reach for some nuts, her violet hair right in Ghosts face and I swear, *I swear*, he closed his eyes and inhaled.

It was kind of cute.

I hope it wasn’t a creepy stalker sniffy thing though.

That would be bad.

I slide my butt into the booth and Nik puts his arm around my waist, pulls

me close to him and smiles “You don’t like when someone else sits next to me?” He sounds curious.

I lamely try to defend myself for my childish actions. I point at Mimi and whine, “She *knew* it was my seat, Nik. My seat is always next to yours. That’s how we roll!”

His eyes crinkle at me and I love how it changes his whole face. He puts his face in my neck and laughs. I feel his warm breath on me and fight the shudder that threatens. Against my neck he whispers, “Okay, sweetheart.”

We drink cherry bombs, laugh and joke together, then I suggest we go dance.

We’ve been here a few times but haven’t danced because the dance floor has been bananas.

The guys decline and the girls follow me down the stairs. As soon as we push our way to the middle of the dance floor Kiss starts playing I was made for loving you.

I love the music being played tonight. It’s a mash up of disco, rock, and relaxing pop.

Freakin’ awesome!

I’m having a blast.

I move to the edge of the VIP area where a short barrier overlooks the dance floor.

The girls are dancing their asses off in the most stupid ways possible. They look ridiculous. I chuckle at them.

Mimi does the sprinkler, Lola does pulp fiction, Nat does the robot, and Tina does the running man.

They are laughing so hard they can't even finish their moves. I shake my head and smile to myself.

These girls are the shit.

They love to have fun and don't care if people think they look crazy. They just want to make each other laugh. They're good friends to have. I am lucky to have them.

You sure as shit are, and don't forget it.

They take a break. Nat, Lola, and Mimi make their way to the ladies room while Tina waits at the bar.

I see a guy approach her and extend his hand for her to shake it. She does.

Get your hands off my girl, asshole.

When she shakes her head and he puts a hand over his chest and looks pathetically at her, I know she refused whatever he just offered her. He concedes but not before taking her hand and kissing it. Tina smiles politely and the guy walks away.

That's right, jerkoff. Keep walking.

I see another man approach her, this one African American. He extends his hand to her and she takes it, smiling politely yet again. The man turns to the side and I freeze.

FUUUUUUUUUCK ME!

After refusing a drink from a man I don't know (yeah, not that stupid!), I felt a hand on my arm. I turn to a very handsome African American man. He looks about my age and wears his hair in short, neat dreadlocks. He's dressed nicely in black jeans and a tight white t-shirt and his eyes are the color of toffee, warm and easy.

He smiles at me and I'm temporarily blinded. This guy has a killer smile! Its wide and his teeth are bright and gleaming.

He says, "Excuse me, miss. I couldn't help but notice you were with an old friend of mine upstairs. Nikolai Leokov."

His voice is smooth as aged whisky. I like it.

I take his extended hand in mine and shake it. I confirm, "Yes, you'd be right. I'm a friend of Nik's."

He smiles wider and says, "That's great. My name's Omarr. Nice to meet you."

I respond "Nice to meet you too, Omarr. I'm Tina."

“Tina.” He says it like he’s trying it out and I like the way it sounds in his voice. He asks, “Can I get you a drink, Tina?”

I explain, “Thanks but I’m a VIP so my drinks are on the house.” I give him a small shrug.

He chuckles and shakes his head, “You don’t make it easy for a guy to get an in, do you?”

Uh, What?

Confusion settles over me. I ask, “Um, sorry...what?”

He steps closer to me responds quietly, “I think you’re beautiful. I want to get to know you. And I definitely want you in my bed, mami.” I felt myself shrink away from him. The odd thing is what he just said appealed to me.

He leans even closer and whispers, “The things I could do to you, baby.”

Wow...Maybe he’ll help you get over Nik?

Yes.

No.

No.

Maybe.

Possibly?

I was about to excuse myself when I felt an arm around my waist.

Oh, thank god.

Nik found me.

I'm stunned to see Ghost when I look up and he is glaring at Omarr.

His voice is steely as he says, "You in the wrong hood, O."

All the warmth I saw in Omarr's eyes seconds ago fizzles. With hard eyes he says, "Ghost. Haven't seen you in an age, man." With a chin lift in my direction he continues, "This one yours?"

Ghost replies, "We don't play that way anymore. Tina is hers. Not ours."

I am so confused.

Omarr smiles a completely ugly smile so different from the one I saw just a minute ago that I wonder who this man really is. He utters, "Then she's free rein and you know it."

Ghost's body stiffens and he moves to step closer to him. I quickly put a hand on Ghost's chest.

I say softly, "Ghost, honey, let's go back upstairs now. I don't want to dance anymore." I end on a whisper.

Ghost's eyes soften when he looks at me. "Yeah."

Omarr stops me with a hand on my arm. He offers, "I meant what I said. Think about it."

He hands me a business card and I take it more to placate him than anything. Ghost looks like he wants to pound this guy into the ground.

Ghost doesn't let go of my waist til we're upstairs. He drops his arm but takes my hand in his and walks quickly. When I dig my heels in to stop him

from taking me wherever in the hell he's trying to take me, he turns to face me and says urgently, "We need to talk. Now." When I still hesitate, he goes on, "I can carry you across the goddamn club, Tina. Your choice."

Okey Dokey!

I nod. Ghost drags me along to a hidden door in the corner of the club. He's angry and I'm not sure what I've done wrong here.

He opens the door and we step inside the security room. My eyes widen in wonder.

I whisper an astonished, "Wow."

Before I'm given a chance to press buttons and break things, Ghost ushers me into a chair.

He sits opposite me and drags my chair forward til I'm face to face with him.

Then he sits there leaning forward with his elbows on his legs and his hands pressed together on his lips for a long while.

I'm freaking out!

My neck is hot and itchy. Just as I'm about to confess to whatever crime he accuses me of just to get out of there, he speaks, "Ever met that man before?"

I quickly shake my head no.

He sighs, "Damn it, Tina. Out of all the guys in the club."

He stops suddenly and I lean closer to him wide eyed hoping he'd continue. He does but it's not what I was hoping to hear. "Omarr wants to claim you. He wants you to be one of his girls."

When my brow furrows and I purse my lips in disgust, he keeps talking, "Oh yeah, *one* of his girls. One of many. He contacts you again, you need to call me. I don't care what time of day, just fuckin' call. You feel me?"

I can't speak. I'm temporarily voiceless. So, I just nod.

He holds out his hand and I give him the business card Omarr gave me. He puts it in his pocket.

Ghost opens the door and guides me to it. As I'm about to exit, he says, "I'll text you my numbers. Be smart, Tina, and be safe."

I look at him like *what the heck is that meant to mean?*

He gives me a curt nod and closes the door behind him.

Jiminy Crickets!

I'm back at the booth and everyone is chatting away.

I look around for Nik.

My mood has changed dramatically and I'm sure everyone at the booth can feel it. There is a huge tension in me that I can't shake and Nik has disappeared on me. I really need a hug. Not from just anyone. From Nik. I need a warm, comforting embrace.

Right. Now.

I feel the booth cushion depress and Nik slides in next to me. He hasn't been in the booth a second before I'm on him. I'm not entirely sure why but I feel like I'm about to burst into tears.

And I do.

The first of the tears streak my face and I bury my face in Nik's neck. Nik stands, holds me close to his side and leads me to the door behind the bar. When we're in the familiar hall Nik stops, picks me up bridal style and carries me over to the sofa in the 'chill out' room. As soon as we sit, I cry a river.

Nik coos in my ear and gently rocks me, "You're breakin' my heart, sweetheart. I'm so sorry. He's not even allowed here, I let his uncle know and he's pissed as hell."

"He- he- he- he said he was your fr- fr- friend!" I hiccup my reply.

Nik strokes my hair and says, "He lied, baby. Omarr is bad people. I need to know what he said to you. Can you tell me?"

I nod. Still crying, I respond, "He asked if I was one of your women, th- th- then he told Ghost I was free rein a- a- and he told me he wanted me in his b- b- bed!" I finish on a wail.

When I mention the last bit, I feel Nik's body stiffen so solid I'm sure he's turned to bronze.

Nik would look *great* as a bronzed statue.

Getting off the subject, my dear.

Nik says carefully, “If that’s something you don’t want to happen, Tina. I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen. Omarr doesn’t take the word no very easily though, so he might need some persuading.”

I sputter, “Th- th- this is why you need the gun, isn’t it?”

I lift my head and I see conflicted emotions run across Nik’s face. He whispers, “There are a lot of things you don’t know about me, Tina. I’ll tell you all about ‘em one day, I promise. But not yet.”

I nod under his chin and whisper back, “Okay, Niki.”

Chapter Fourteen

Sleepover

After my sob fest on Nik's lap at the club on Sunday night, he held me in a way I've never been held before. It was so loving and almost desperate. I'm developing some pretty intense feelings for Nik. And while this scares the bejeezus out of me I remind myself that everything will be alright as long as he never finds out.

I find myself watching him when he's not looking, just doing everyday mundane things like how he stirs his coffee clockwise then counter clockwise. Or how his eyes narrow and he scratches his chin when he's thinking hard about something. Or how he rolls up his shirt sleeves to his

elbows when he's stressed out.

I can't believe I've worked across the street from The White Rabbit for two years and never knew him. All that time I could've known him seems wasted.

That makes me sad.

But I was a different person two years ago. There is no way I would've let him in then the way I have now. I'm glad he's a part of my life now. I'm not letting him go.

And Omarr can shove it!

There is something about being played by someone that leaves you feeling broken. I'm sure that's why I was so emotional on Sunday after the Omarr fiasco. I remember similar feelings from a long time past. It just triggered a rush of emotions in me that I couldn't halt. I felt overwhelmed.

Nik came to my rescue.

My dark knight in Versace armor.

We held each other for a long time before I told him I wanted to leave. He got me back to my girls and we left a little after midnight.

This morning Nat and I open up the store and a little past nine a flower arrangement delivery comes to the store.

I smile because I assume it's for Lola from Trick. Things are heating up between them and I wish they'd just get together already. They're smitten.

I sign for the delivery and Nat bounds over. I set the arrangement on the counter and we both take a good look at it. There are approximately eighteen perfectly white lilies surrounded by baby's breath.

Good going, Trick!

That's an expensive arrangement. At least two hundred dollars' worth of lilies.

Nat and I look at each other and smile huge. She takes the card, looks over it then hands it to me.

I take in her frown and hard eyes. This is not going to be good.

Think about what I said. You can do better than him. I can give you everything you've ever dreamed of. Come see me. –O

Oh, for the love of all things holy!

They're from bad guy Omarr. I don't like the situation he's putting me in. He's coming between me and my friend. I hate that!

I told Nat what had happened and she was livid. I told her Ghost and Nik took care of me and she seemed slightly placated. I think she didn't like to think about me being upset while everyone else was having a good time.

We look at each other a long time before she motions to the phone.

I sigh and walk over to the phone, dial the number and wait.

“Ghost? Yeah, I’m okay. Can you come over here please? Thanks.”

Within a minute Ghost is at the store with a garbage bag in hand. He doesn’t greet us, just walks straight over to the beautiful arrangement and shoves it roughly into the garbage bag. Then he walks over to me and says in a kind voice, “Good girl.” Then he leaves, garbage bag in tow.

“I’m going to kill that motherfucker!” I roar.

Max puts a hand on my shoulder and quietly replies “Calm down, bro. You know Tina, he isn’t gonna take her away from us. No way. We’re family.”

Omarr is a dead man.

First, he comes into my club knowing he isn’t meant to be there. Second, he comes on to my girl.

...not that she knows she’s my girl. But, anyway...

Third, tries to treat my girl like a free rein whore. And, lastly, sends her expensive flowers with promises when he really just wants to fuck her and leave her broken as a message to me.

The only thing Omarr wants is for me to suffer. He blames me for his brother’s death. This all goes way back to when I was just a teenager. Dad had just died and I was given a choice to join Chaos.

Chaos are a Russian-American gang. My dad was what you could call the vice president of the gang. They were criminals but my dad was a good

man. I joined them and to my complete disapproval, so did Ghost and Max. We we're just kids doing the hard lifting for old men. When I say hard lifting, I mean we were enforcers. We would go out and collect drug money, debt money, and bribes. They would give us a list and we would collect. By any means necessary. Mom was devastated when she found out. She didn't want that life for us. My dad was trying to get out when he died.

Omarr is a part of the Sixes. Most of them went to school with me and we were all cool til Marcus died.

Marcus was Omarr's older brother. He broke into our family home to steal something Chaos related from my dad's office. My dad shot him and he died in hospital later that night. My dad was going to go to jail. I had to do something. Just as the officers asked who fired the first shot, I spoke up and said, "I did."

I was just about to turn sixteen. I got a suspended sentence. I would do it again in a heartbeat. Anything for my dad.

Ghost, Max, and Trick all know this. Ghost and Max were there. I told Trick some years later.

Omarr is out for revenge. His uncle has forbidden any retaliation on me.

Uncle Jerm leads the sixes. The first time we met he questioned me about Marcus' death. I know he knows I didn't kill Marcus. I was flustered and defensive. I left too many questions unanswered because I simply didn't

know the answers to them. This is why Uncle Jerm has forbidden any vengeance. He knows I didn't do it. But I confessed. I've made my bed, now I have to lie in it.

It never bothered me before. Just carry a gun and hope for them best.

This is different.

This affects Tina.

Ghost and Trick are delivering a garbage bag of half dead flowers to Uncle Jerm right now. If Omarr keeps going against Jerm, he'll end up dead.

The anger makes my voice harder than it should be, "Yeah. I know, Max. But he's toying with her. Fucking with Tina. I don't like it."

Max shakes his head and concedes, "Me either. But let Uncle Jerm take care of it. You know he'll fix it."

I do. I know Uncle Jerm is good people.

You see, there are good people who do bad things out of obligation. That's Uncle Jerm. He looks after his family. His family are the Sixes.

As soon as I recognized Omarr on Sunday night I sent Ghost to get Tina the fuck away from him.

I knew he wouldn't touch Ghost. If I had gone down there, anything could've gone down and there was no way I was putting Tina in danger.

Omarr is what you would call unstable.

I left the booth to cool off. Once I had got myself under control, I went

back. I saw Tina's face on the way. She looked lost. So fragile and miserable. It broke my heart.

Once I sat, she threw herself at me and I felt her tears on my neck. I took her to the 'chill out' room to hold her on the sofa and comfort her. As soon as we sat, the dam burst.

The fucker told Tina we we're friends. And that he wanted her in his bed.

Rage boils in the center of me.

That cocky asshole is going to pay.

Nat and I have just walked into our apartment after a long day's work. We stopped to get burgers on the way home. It was a burger kind of day. You know, the kind of day were psychopaths send you expensive flower arrangements and your friend across the street ignores you?

Yeah, that kind of day.

We enter and put our things down on the dining table. The only light on in the house is the kitchen down light. We leave this on so it looks like someone is home because we get home late some nights. Like robbers don't know people do that.

You're such a bright bulb.

As soon as I step in to the kitchen to flip the rest of the lights on, I freeze.

I can hear something in my bedroom. It sounds like shuffling footsteps.

Anxiety chews at my gut.

Crapstastic.

I stop Nat with a hand on her arm, when she turns to look at my petrified face I motion to my bedroom and put a finger over my mouth.

Immediately, her eyes widen and she listens. When she hears what I hear, we have a silent conversation.

She makes a phone with her hand and puts it to her ear. *Let's call the cops.*

I point to my wrist in the universal sign of time and shake my head. *No, it will take too long for them to get here.*

She puts her fists up in a boxing stance. *Should we fight them?*

I use my index and middle finger to point in both my eyes then wave my hand around the room. *Sure, if we can find something to fight with.*

A thump comes from my bedroom and we both stiffen in fright. I grab the closest thing to me. I don't even look at it. It's long and thin. I see Nat grab an encyclopedia off my bookshelf and holds it high over her head.

We tiptoe to my bedroom door holding hands. My heart is racing a mile a minute. This is not Bear. I know Bear sounds.

We stand at the door with our weapons raised and wait. The door opens.

It's on.

I reach behind my head with my weapon and smack the tall person over the head repeatedly. Nat does the same with her trusty encyclopedia. We do this

while shrieking our heads off.

The tall person has fallen backwards. I stand over them and repeatedly hit them on the legs and chest with my long defensive instrument as hard as I can. The man is yelling, “Ow, stop it!” and “Fuck, Tina, quit hittin’ me!”

Wait.

Robbers don’t usually know the people they’re robbing, right?

I reach over with a shaking hand and flip on the light.

Max is on the floor in a fetal position moaning and groaning. He has a bloody nose and busted lip.

I haven’t even noticed Nat has disappeared til I look behind me. Ghost has her wrapped up in his arms, one hand over her mouth. And get this. He looks like he wants to burst out laughing.

Of all things!

I want to hit him, so I do.

I reach over and smack him right over the head with my stick thing. Which I now see is a mop.

He rubs his head and his body shakes with silent laughter. He says, “What are you gonna do, clean me to death?”

Ghost releases Nat and we both crouch over Max. I’m can’t believe we beat him up.

“Max, honey, are you okay?” I touch his face and he looks up at me.

He must see the worry in my eyes. He responds, “Fuck, am I proud of you.”

Um, what?

“What?” I don’t hide my confusion.

Max whispers, “Didn’t even quit fighting. Not for a second. Balls of steel, teeny Tina.” He smiles big revealing blood stained teeth.

Oh, yeah. He’s left the building.

I turn to Ghost and sigh, “Can you get him on the sofa so I can clean him up?”

He smirks at Max but nods.

I go into the kitchen to retrieve my first aid kit when someone knocks on the door.

Just great.

I have two would-be breaking and entering suspects in my house and one of them is bloody and bruised.

I hear Nat opens the door and Molly steps inside. She looks at Ghost then Max and says, “Sounds like a party I wasn’t invited to.”

I rest my forearms on the kitchen counter, lean forward and chuckle “I’m so sorry about the yelling, Molly. I hope we didn’t wake you.”

She takes in my exhausted appearance and tuts, “Child, you need to sit yourself down before you fall asleep standin’ up. Let Molly make you a tea and fix the boy up.”

I take her hand in mine and kiss it. I quietly say, “Thanks, Miss Molly.”

Molly makes tea for me and Nat. Ghost declined and she brought Max a glass of water and some aspirin. She takes her time cleaning Max’s wounds with peroxide. And when he doesn’t flinch she pats his cheek and tells him, “You earned yourself some cupcakes, young man.”

Max smiles and splits his lip again. He turns to me and says, “Hear that, Tina. Molly says I get cupcakes.”

I chuckle as Molly takes her leave. I hug her for a long time.

Best neighbor ever.

As soon as I shut the door I point a finger to Ghost. “Explain.”

Ghost leans back on the sofa and shrugs, “Nik wanted you protected so we came to see how secure your apartment is.” He points to himself. “And here we are. Inside your apartment. So, it’s safe to say it’s not so secure.” He looks at Max and says, “I didn’t want Max to come but he insisted.” He looks at me and smirks “And you beat him up.”

I feel panic swell in my gut.

Oh, Nik is going to kill me. I beat up his brother. Who is now slightly loopy on my sofa.

I fall into a dining chair with my shoulders slumped.

Today has not been a good day.

I cover my face with my hands. Ghost starts to talk again, “Listen, I’ve

taken note of everything you need for your place to be secured. I'll get all the stuff tomorrow and install it during the day. When you get home tomorrow night, I'll be waiting for you to show you how to use it." He squeezes my knee, I remove my hands from my face and open my eyes. He says softly, "You don't want to fuck with Omarr. He's unpredictable. We're just taking precautions. If today went as planned, you won't ever hear from him again. But we're not taking the risk. He's taken a liking to you, Tina."

Nat reaches over to take my hand and says rasps, "That sucks, babe."

I lower my head and nod. I say dejectedly, "Okay. When you find out how much the security stuff costs just sent an invoice over to the store and I'll pay for it."

His eyes narrow and he tilts his head. He looks at me for a few seconds then shakes his head softly and orders, "Okay, so get your shit. We're leaving."

Excuse me?

"Excuse me?" I reply.

He glares and repeats slowly, "Get. Your. Shit. You aren't staying here tonight."

I don't know what to do about this. I don't want to stay anywhere else. This is *my* apartment!

So I say the first stupid thing that comes to my mind. "But I have a cat!"

Ghost looks to Bear who is sitting on Max's lap staring stupidly at him.

Max is staring stupidly right back at Bear.

He asks patiently, “Do you have a cage for your beast?”

I nod.

He nods right back as if to say *I don't see what the problem is.*

Nat squeezes my hand and I look up at her. She gifts me a sympathetic smile. I'll go. For her.

I sigh and say quietly, “Okay, let me pack some things.”

Nat stands to walk with me and puts an arm around my waist. It's not a big gesture but the significance is great. She'll be my crutch when I need help standing. I always have her care and support.

We each pack a bag, I pop Bear in his cage, and then we're off.

I just assumed Ghost would take us to a hotel.

I definitely was not expecting to find myself at Nik's for a sleepover.

As soon as we enter the house, a smiling Ceecee comes over to see us and I panic.

OH SHIT! I BEAT UP HER DAD!

She takes one look at daddy-o and her face crumples. Max quickly walks over to her, kneels, and asks “Would you believe me if I told you Tina did this to me?”

WHAT THE FRICK, MAX?!?

I'm absolutely devastated that he would throw me under the bus like that. My heart pounds and my neck heats with nervousness. I *love* Ceecee. Now she'll hate me.

I'm shocked when Ceecee narrows her eyes at her father and puts her hands on her hips and asks warily, "What did you do to Tina?"

Max chuckles and shakes his head as he says "Daddy was very silly. I went into Tina's house without asking and she thought I was a bad person trying to take things."

I'm even more shocked when a now frowning Ceecee comes over to me and hugs me one handed around the waist. She looks up at me and says, "You must've been really scared, Tina." She scowls at her father and sternly commands, "Don't ever do that again daddy, she must've been really scared!"

Bless her!

Max looks properly chastened and says, "Believe me, sweetie. Never again. I might lose a leg next time."

I look down at her concerned face and smile, "I was really scared, angel. And I'm really sorry I hit your dad. I thought I was protecting myself. If I knew it was your dad, I would've never hit him."

She smiles up at me before looking past me and squealing, "IS THAT A KITTY?!"

I chuckle at her enthusiasm. I make introductions. “Ceecee meet Bear. He loves hugs so you better cuddle him well, okay?”

Ghost opens the cage and Nat takes Bear out and puts him on the ground. Bear strolls right up to Ceecee’s chair, looks up at her and meows.

I realize he hasn’t had his dinner yet so I open my bag to pull out a few cans of wet food, hand them to Ceecee and say, “You think you can feed him, honey?”

She looks up at me with a face full of awe; you’d think I just told her we were taking a trip to Never Land.

She whispers, “Really?”

I act as casual as possible. I toss my arms up in a forget-about-it motion and say, “Oh yeah, he’ll love you forever if you feed him.”

Just as I finish saying this Bear hops onto Ceecee’s lap, purrs loudly and rubs his cheeks on the cans of food in her hand. She looks up at me and smiles so beautifully. You can’t buy happiness like that. Bear is going to be well loved tonight.

Ceecee rolls her way over to the kitchen and Ghost motions for Nat and I to follow him.

Ghost opens the first door on the left hand side of the hallway. He escorts me in and I look around. It’s a beautiful guest bedroom. The walls are a rich burgundy color, it has a black feature wall behind the huge sleigh king bed

on the right hand side of the room. There is a built in wardrobe on the left side. Long burgundy curtains cover the whole opposite side of the wall. There are framed tasteful prints around the walls and a door in the top left hand corner. Ghost points to it. "Shower."

I nod. Great, I really need a shower. Badly.

They leave me and I shut the door. I'm so tired I could fall asleep standing up. I force myself to snap out of it, taking my underwear and pajamas from my bag and head to the shower.

It's a neat bathroom. Everything is in its place and there is decent soap and shampoo in the shower. It's all manly fragranced, though.

I turn on the shower to hot. I want it to scorch my skin. I like my showers blistering hot. It makes me feel clean. I undress, hop in, and wash my body and hair in record time. I only sang 'Working 9 to 5' once. That's how I know.

I wrap my hair in a towel and put my clothes on. I love my pajamas. They're a tank and short shorts combo, silky satin and the color of copper.

I take my hair down, brush it and dry it with a hairdryer I found in the one of the drawers. And I'm finally ready to sleep.

I walk out of the bathroom over to the bed and face plant.

I come home from the club pretty late tonight.

I walk into my bedroom and see Tina face down spread eagle on my bed. I'd recognize that ass anywhere. Her shorts are so short I can see the swell of her butt cheeks.

I actually turned around and looked at the doorway to my room.

Am I in the right house?

I go back out as quietly as I can and find Ghost. He tells me Tina's apartment isn't secure so he brought Nat and Tina here.

He tells me Nat is sleeping in Max's room and he'll share with Max because he's concussed and needs to be woken every hour tonight.

What the hell?

I ask what happened and Ghost tells me that Nat and Tina went all Rambo on him. Tina beat the shit out of Max with a mop. I actually burst into laughter.

Ghost tells me Tina's cat is somewhere in the house, most likely in bed with Ceecee. And that he put Tina in my room because I wasn't home at the time.

I call bullshit.

I think my friend is playing matchmaker.

I bid him goodnight, go back to my room and take in Tina's sleeping form.

My fantasies are coming to life right before me. If only she would lift her

head and invite me over. This is slightly awkward. I usually sleep naked. I probably shouldn't tonight though.

Perhaps she won't mind.

Nope. Not a good idea.

I go into the bathroom and shower quickly. I walk back into my room naked and think about what I can wear to bed. I don't wear underwear a lot of the time but I do have some boxers somewhere.

After searching the drawers for a few minutes I find some plain black silky boxers.

They'll do.

I walk over to the bed, pick Tina up, pull back the covers and settle us both in. She doesn't even stir.

Poor baby. So tired.

I pull her body back into mine so her back is firmly joined with my chest. I put my arms around her waist, push my knees into the back of hers and inhale the scent of her hair. She smells like me.

I like that.

I like that Tina is in my bed with me and we haven't had sex. It's more than that with her. I want to be her protector and the one who she comes to with her problems.

She feels so good against me. So soft and lush. I could get used to this.

Contentment washes over me.

I smile into her hair, inhale once more, and fall into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter Fifteen

Best dream ever

I wake with a start. It's still pitch black.

Where the frick am I?

This is not my room. My room is smaller. My bed is slightly smaller. And there is usually no man snoring next to my ear in my bed.

Well, it's not quite a snore. It's more of a snuffle.

The man has his arms wrapped tightly around my waist and my bottom is pressed back against his crotch.

My body turns stock still.

Who the hell is that?

It's definitely not Ghost. He doesn't seem like the cuddling type. Besides, he's sexing up Nat. Max's frame is somewhat leaner than this man's muscular build. By process of elimination, I figure it's Nik.

I smile to myself.

It's like my fantasies are coming to life!

I snuggle back in to him and hear him moan lightly. My eyes widen and I still for a moment. I do it again and his arms tighten further around my waist. I feel a growing hardness in between my ass cheeks.

Oh My Lord!

Nik is asleep and has an erection!

An erection that is sitting between my butt cheeks and that is oh so close to my lady bits!

And it feels delicious.

When he softly rubs his hard length against me, I fight the urge to not come on the spot.

Moisture seeps from my core and I become fidgety.

I want this. I want Nik to rip my panties off and take me.

Take me, Nik!

One of his hands brush under my breast, I still again and my mouth forms an O.

Touch my boob, you boob!

He does one better. The hand under my breast moves up a little and he runs his thumb over the hard sensitive peak. His other hand moves down my ribs and belly, between my legs and his large hand cups my damp mound.

My eyes roll back in my head and I sigh. I hear snuffles in my ear and realize Nik is still asleep.

Regardless, he grinds the palm of his hand right on my sweet spot. I bite my lip to stop a moan. My heart rate accelerates and I sweat.

I need this so badly!

Nik shifts in his sleep and I use every bit of will left in my body to still. He sighs and mutters sleepily, “Best dream ever.”

I agree, Nik!

His muscular arm tightens across my stomach and his palm continues to rub me while he pushes his cock up and down my behind. The friction is wicked.

I’m flushed and the tingles start low in my spine. My mouth opens slightly and I breathe heavily.

This *cannot* be happening!

My first orgasm in five years and it’s with a sleeping man!

White dots spot my vision and my head lolls forward. The contractions of my orgasm start and it’s so intense I think I’m going to pass out. This is pure bliss.

If this is what he can do asleep just imagine how good he’ll be awake!

Oh, dear god, what have I done?!

I’ll tell you what...I just humped a sleeping person!

I haven't noticed Nik stiffen and but I have noticed his arms tighten around me. I feel wetness on my naked lower back.

Did he...? He came!

Phew, now you're even!

Oh, god!

I feel ill. I literally feel like I could be sick. My stomach knots. I'm embarrassed and ashamed.

Nik relaxes against my back and his hands move from my most private areas back around my waist.

His mouth is at my ear and he whispers dreamily, "Tina."

Oh wow!

He wasn't just having a dirty dream. He was having a dirty dream about *me*! I want to jump with joy. I smile as big as I can without splitting my face, then yawn.

Wow. Five years' worth of orgasm really takes it out of a person.

I relax in Nik's perfect arms, snuggle back closer to him and fall asleep.

Oh god. Best dream ever.

Kind of weird that the star of my fantasy is sleeping right next to me, though. I wonder what Tina would think if she knew what I was doing to her in my dream? It felt so real.

I love Tina's ass. Soft, round but still firm.

It's no shocker than I dreamt of her. I usually do. And I was pressed up against her all night.

Normally she's doing dirtier things to me though. This dream was mild.

But hot damn, it was like I was actually touching her. I can still feel her curves.

Thinking of my fantasy girl, where is she?

I open my eyes and look around. I can see sunshine behind the curtain and my bed is empty.

She must have slipped out trying not to wake me.

I sit up and rub my face. Then I smile. I liked Tina in bed with me.

I never spend the night with girls. My bedroom is my sanctuary. My place to relax and unwind.

I never wanted to bring a girl into my bed. Until now.

If I thought she'd agree to it, I'd ask Tina to move in with me and share my bed permanently.

Who knew sleep could be so enjoyable?

I flip the sheet off and make my way to the bathroom to shower. I undress and I swear there's come on my boxers.

What the hell? Did I have a wet dream? What am I fifteen?!

After I shower I find another pair of boxers to wear and head out to the

place I'm sure Tina will be.

I walk into the kitchen and find Tina with her back to me. Her pajamas look so sexy on her. When she stretches up to reach into the cupboard for spices, the hem of the shorts rides up. Nice.

She's got a batter made and is getting ready to cook up pancakes. I love pancakes. My mom makes me pancakes whenever I'm there for the morning.

I walk up behind her, put my arms around her waist and chuckle when she yelps.

She turns around, pushes my shoulder and shouts, "God, Nik! You scared the life out of me!"

Her face is trying to hold a look of contempt but she's smiling. I move closer to her, hold her hips in my hands and ask, "How'd you sleep, sweetheart?"

Tina swallows hard. In a quiet voice she says, "Just fine. How'd you sleep?"

I smile big and say, "Best sleep I've had in a long time."

Her cheeks flush and she turns to the skillet. She clears her throat then speaks, "I'm making pancakes for everyone. Can you see if they're up?"

I walk over to the bedrooms and knock. Max is the first up and when the door opens I burst out laughing. He's black and blue. His nose is swollen

and his lip is split. I'm laughing so hard I use one hand to hold onto the door frame and hold my stomach with the other. I can't believe little Tina inflicted this much damage on such a big guy.

He scowls at me and says, "Laugh it up, knucklehead." Then he goes to Ceecee's room to wake her.

I walk back into the kitchen. Tina has a stack of pancakes ready. She hums while she cooks. It sounds like she's humming 'The way' by Fastball. I like that song.

Tina holds the platter of pancakes out to me and asks, "Could you please put this on the dining table?"

We never eat at the dining table. I don't even know why we have a dining table. We normally eat on the go, at the breakfast bar, or on the sofa. But I nod and take the platter over for her.

When everyone takes a seat at the dining table, Tina emerges from the kitchen with another stack of thinner, wider crepe-like things.

Nat, who looked barely alive when she emerged from Max's bedroom, sees them and gasps "Palačinke?!" It sounds like Pa-lah-chink-eh. Nat groans "You know I'm a Palačinke-holic."

Tina smiles and places them right in front of Nat then walks over to a seated Max. She touches his face softly and says, "I'm so sorry, honey. I know they aren't cupcakes but this is all I could find the ingredients for in the

kitchen. And I'm going to serve you. I'll be your waitress this morning."

Max takes her hand and kisses it. He assures, "Don't worry about it, doll. I'm a big boy."

Tina looks at him with adoration and kisses his head.

She sits and claps her hands together. She looks at the food and says, "Well, c'mon, don't leave your tummies rumbling. Dig in!"

Ghost is the first to take a pancake and that's everyone else's cue to attack the food with gusto. There's Pancakes, Palačinke, fruit salad, orange juice, coffee, butter, syrup, and jelly on the table. And it's all wonderful.

The pancakes have cinnamon in them and taste great. We all try the Palačinke which you spread jelly on and roll them up before eating them, they're good. The cantaloupe in the fruit salad is perfectly sweet. And the coffee is heavenly.

I'm a little surprised that Ceecee has managed two pancakes, one Palačinke, fruit, and juice. She never eats well in the morning. I look closer at her and she takes bits of pancake and puts it over the side of her chair. I don't hide it when I look under the table and she stiffens.

I see a black and white cat sitting next to her chair, licking its mouth and purring. And that's where Ceecee's extra pancake got to.

I smile at her and shake my head. She lowers her head and bites her lip to stop from giggling. She looks back up and I wink at her.

Our little secret, baby girl.

I see Tina look around the table. She wears a smile and looks content. I like it.

It takes me back to the day she explained why she didn't open a bakery. How she explained that baking for people is a gift she likes to give and everything she makes contains a small piece of her. I guess cooking for friends makes her feel the same.

She turns her face to look at me and catches me staring. She pokes her tongue out at me.

I want to suck on that tongue.

I totally do. I think about that kiss all the freakin' time; her soft lips and sweet tongue on my lips and in my mouth. And, dammit, I want it to happen again. But Tina made it clear she was only settling some curiosity in her, that's all. Which sucks ass.

We've finished eating and I motion for Max and Ghost to help me clear up. The girls get up too, but I quickly explain, "In our family, whoever cooks does *not* clean up. Mom's rules. You girls get ready for work."

Nat walks over to Ghost and smacks his butt hard. She kisses Max's cheek then mine. Tina kisses all of our cheeks and Ghost even smiled at her. Then they walk down to their rooms to get ready for work.

When we get to the store, I send Nat to Winnie's for coffee. As soon as she returns, we open up and I tell Nat how I molested Nik while he has sleeping.

She laughs a full minute at me then says chuckling, "I'm pretty sure you consensually molested each other!" She looks happy for me. "So, you finally found your big O again! How was it?"

I couldn't put it into words. It was indescribable. I respond, "Absolutely amazing. Too bad he didn't even know about it, though."

Nat's face turns thoughtful. "You trust Nik, right?"

I don't hesitate and answer, "Yes."

She turns my shoulders so we're face to face and strokes my hair. She asks, "Then why can't you have some fun with him. You have amazing chemistry together. You can't deny that. And personally, I like the idea of you two together. He's a family man."

I know what she means by this. She means he would take care of me if I were to get pregnant. He wouldn't be like Jace. And she's right. But I don't want children again. Never again.

I stroke her hair right back and smile as I say, "Why don't you tell me what's going on with Ghost?"

She sighs dramatically and replies, "Don't even go there. It was a one-time thing. We hate each other."

I put my hand on her shoulder, squeeze and remind her, “Hate is such a strong word. Don’t you think? Besides, you know what they say, there’s a thin line between love and hate. How was the sex?”

Nat’s eyes squint, she bunches her face and smiles. She whispers, “It was incredible. I’ve never had crazy monkey sex before. But I don’t know if it was good because it was intense or because it was with Ghost. I don’t even know what happened. One second I was walking back to the booth from the bathroom the next Ghost was dragging me to the conference room. It was out of this world.” Her face turns serious. “He said he didn’t like me playing with Max when I should be playing with him.”

I lean back and fan myself with my hand then I lean forward and whisper, “Holy smokes! I don’t know about that dominant stuff but that made me hot just from talking about it!” And we giggle our asses off.

Still smiling, she questions, “Why not just sleep with Nik and see where it goes? If nothing comes of it you’re both mature enough to walk away being friends. Even if nothing serious comes of it you can have a lot of fun together.” She wiggles her brows at me.

Because he’ll break my heart, that’s why.

I focus away from her eyes and say softly, “I don’t know hon. I like him enough to know if we sleep together I would get too involved and pretty much set myself up for a whole bunch of disappointments.” I lower my face

and play with a piece of paper on the counter and whisper, “I can’t do another Jace. I don’t know how much is left of my heart to break but I know enough to say next time would destroy me. Right now I’m bent, not broken. Next time will break me. I don’t need a perfect relationship. I just need someone who won’t give up on me.”

Her face flashes disbelief. She puts an arm around my waist, pulls me next to her and says, “You think Nik is capable of hurting you?”

I shrug and utter, “You didn’t see how he treated Sissy at the restaurant. It was like she was nothing. Less than nothing! And he was sleeping with her for four months!”

She shakes her head and says softly, “That’s because she *was* nothing to him. He told her exactly how it was and she tried to force something else.”

I’m exasperated and respond a little too loudly, “Exactly! That’s how it’ll end up with us, too! I’ll get too involved and he’ll tell me to move along and then I’ll become She-Devil Teeny and Sissy and I will start the sisterhood of Nik’s Anonymous for women who are having trouble getting over Nik then we’ll have to hire a church and make sandwiches and punch for the thousands of women who come!”

Nat giggles and hugs me. She whispers into my ear, “Why not go out on a limb? Isn’t that where the fruit is?”

Holy Cannoli! She’s right...I want fruit!

But the question remains, can I have the fruit I desire?

And will the fruit treat me right.

10:16am

Thinking about Tina.

11:04am

Thinking about Tina's perfect ass.

12:37pm

Thinking about Tina panting under me in my bed.

1:02pm

Going to the bathroom to jerk off.

I walk back into my office after finally getting some much needed relief.

Not hard anymore, are you?! Take that, penis!

Tina sits behind my desk with the chair turned sideways. She hasn't seen me come in.

She looks so cute behind my huge desk. I chuckle quietly. She's adorable.

I clear my throat to get her attention and say, "Excuse me, Miss Tomic, I think you wanted to see me."

She turns and flashes me a beaming smile.

I like that smile. She's so beautiful. I think I could fall in love with that smile.

"Of course, Mr. Leokov, please take a seat." She points to the seat she normally sits in when she visits. When I sit, she continues. "I believe it's someone's birthday coming up..."

Max! I'll fuckin' kill him!

"...and I wanted to know which cake you'd like me to make for you!"

I run a hand over my face. Her smile is killing me. She's not someone you can say no to easily. I rub the back of my neck and begin, "Sweetheart, I don't do birthdays. I mean, I do other people's birthdays. Not my own."

Her face falls dismally and I feel like an asshole. She speaks so softly and the light in her eyes she came in with has faded. She replies, "Oh...Okay. Ceecee wanted you to have a nice cake but if you don't want one I'll just have to—"

My back straightens and I ask, "Wait, what? Cricket wants me to have a cake?" I'm stunned.

Tina gets up and walks over to me then sits on my knee. She explains, "Yeah. Ceecee stopped me this morning when we were heading out. She said you never have a cake on your birthday and it makes her sad." She pouts her lips. Not in an I'm-so-cute way but in an I'm-really-sad-for-you way and it makes my heart clench.

My two favorite girls are ganging up on me.

You're so fucked.

I pull her more firmly on to my lap and hesitate, “Uh, I really hate the whole birthday thing, babe.”

She leans her forehead on my cheek and sighs, “I don’t want to *force* you to do something you don’t want.” She pulls on my lapel. “What if I just make you some cupcakes and you take one home to Ceecee? That would work.”

The thought of disappointing Cricket makes me ill. I love my niece with all my heart and soul. I would do anything to make her happy. It’s got nothing to do with what happened to her either, just the fact that she’s a good kid who loves her family.

It’s only a damn cake.

I breathe in Tina’s sweet scent and pull on a lock of her hair. I concede, “Tell you what. You make a cake and bring it over. We’ll sing happy birthday and she’ll be good for another year.”

I feel Tina’s body still. She pulls back with wide eyes and whispers, “Really?”

I lean back in the chair, shrug and say nonchalantly, “Sure. I mean, it’s only a cake, right?”

Tina leans closer to me. She puts her hands on my cheeks and smiles sweetly, “No. It’s not just a cake. It’s a child’s happiness. You can’t buy

things like this, Nik. You're giving Ceecee a gift." She ends on a whisper.

Then she does something that surprises me.

She leans forward and tilts her head, places her lips on mine and kisses me.

A sweet, soft kiss which lasts for approximately thirty seconds, not that I was counting.

Just as I'm about to lose control and bend her over my desk, she slowly pulls back.

Her face is flushed and her eyes are hooded. She looks stunning. I like this look on her.

She smiles a shy smile and says softly, "You're a good man, Nik. I'm so glad we're friends."

Friend-zone level infinity.

I want to yell fuck friendship! Let's get it on!

But instead I pull her close to me and hug her. I whisper to her, "Me too, sweetheart"

Chapter Sixteen

Go, Niki, It's yo birthday

Last night when Nat and I came home, Ghost was waiting on us. Inside my apartment.

That doofus broke in again!

At least he brought Bear back with him.

He showed us how to use the new alarm and panic button. We caught on pretty easily.

He said firmly, "If you're not sure, press the panic button. It's better to tell the cops you made a mistake then for them to come pick up your bloody corpse."

Good advice, me thinks.

He left shortly after and I told Nat that we were going to Nik's on Wednesday night for his birthday.

She was excited about that. Nat loves a good party.

I also had to tell her a bit of news I didn't dare tell her today at work.

It was around three o'clock this afternoon and I was getting a life-saving fix of caramel latte at Winnie's when I was stopped by a very good looking man. He asked me out.

And here's the weird thing.

I said yes.

What the heck, you say?

Well, after today's lunchtime kiss with Nik, my heart was fluttering.

Not a good sign.

I think I agreed to go on this date to distract myself from Nik.

If he wanted something with me, he'd let me know. And even then I wouldn't be with him til I was sure he could be what I need.

So I have a date with Chad the Accountant on Thursday night. Which means I'll miss Poker night.

I'm sure I won't be missed anyways.

Nat sits on the sofa reading my e-reader. I clear my throat and begin, "So, I've got a date on Thursday."

Nat's body stills, she looks up from the e-reader and stares at me. After

about ten seconds she does the exact opposite of what I think she'll do. She smiles huge and yells out, "Finally! For the love of Pete, it's about time woman!"

Uh, what?

"Uh, what are you talking about? I thought you'd be pissed!" I tell her.

She looks confused and utters, "Pissed? Why would I be pissed? I told you this morning to try things with Nik..."

I lower my eyes and cut her off with, "The date's not with Nik."

Silence.

A tormenting, long silence.

Then she sits up straight and explodes, "What the HELL is wrong with YOU?"

I flinch and start, "His name's Chad and he's an accountant. I met him at Winnie's this afternoon."

She lowers her eyes and shakes her head in disbelief. She queries, "Let me get this straight. The day after Nik's birthday you're going on a date...with someone who isn't Nik."

I nod then shrug and say, "It's not like he cares. I've told you before he doesn't want me and I freaked him out by kissing him this afternoon..."

She squawks, "You WHAT??!"

"...and then Chad asked me out and it seemed the perfect distraction from

Nik...”

She flaps her arms in the air and wails, “Why would you *do that?!?*!”

“...and I think I might be in love with him!”

She gasps and covers her mouth with a hand. I hear a muffled sympathetic, “Oh, honey.”

I feel tears burn my eyes. I murmur, “Why does everything suck?!”

She stands up, walks to me and grips me tight in a bear hug. She tells me, “So you know when something really great comes along.”

My bff is Mister Miyagi.

Wednesday morning comes and I’m busy in the kitchen baking away. I sent Nat to Safira with my car so I can spend the entire morning preparing without rushing.

I can’t believe Nik gave in about the birthday cake!

Ceecee stopped me just before we had to leave to ask me, “Please make uncle Nik a birthday cake. He never gets one and it makes me sad. I want to show him how much we love him.”

So, here I am, baking a seven layer chocolate fudge caramel cake and I’m also baking a batch of white choc raspberry cupcakes to take as well. I made a last minute stop to the supermarket early this morning and came across some icing pens which I thought Ceecee would enjoy. So I’m taking

the cupcakes for her to decorate. That'll be her gift to her uncle who she loves more than anything.

I finish baking and turn off the oven. I have to wait a while to ice the cake. It needs to be completely cool.

I sit on the sofa and sigh with relief when I lift my legs onto it.

I didn't sleep very well last night. Nat told me my going on a date the day after his birthday will really cut Nik deep. The thought of hurting Nik is enough to make my heart squeeze. I'm not sure what to do. I want to believe her but he hasn't given me any indication that he's interested in me as more than a friend. He ran from me and regretted our amazing kiss! That's enough to say I've been friend-zoned, right?

I'm really regretting saying yes to going on a date with Chad. I'll still go and give him a shot but I don't see it going far.

I look up at the wall clock. Enough time has passed.

Le sigh.

Time to ice this monster cake.

I don't know how this happened.

I just assumed when I told Tina to make a cake that it would be just Tina, Max, Ceecee, and myself.

I look around the room and try to figure out why my mom and sisters,

Ghost, Trick, Nat, Lola, Mimi, and Tina are all here, too.

Ceecee sits at the dining table decorating the cupcakes Tina brought. That was nice of her.

I can't stop thinking about yesterday's soft kiss. I make the decision that I'll kiss her tonight and go with the flow of things. Hopefully, she'll tell me she wants me as much as I want her. But Tina's a hard nut to crack because she's normally affectionate. She's not one of those girls who throw around affection to show she wants more with someone like most of the other girls I know.

Also, something with Tina is off tonight.

I turn to see her talking and laughing with my mom and sisters in the kitchen. They're all busy bees tonight and if I'm being truthful. I've seen this scene in my head many times. I like it. But she's avoiding me. I think the soft kiss she planted on me has made her a bit shy.

Mom made three different types of Paella for everyone's dinner. I love my mom's cooking. She's Mexican and cooks with a lot of spices. Everything she makes is tasty and usually has a bit of heat to it. It's comfort food. Well, to me it is. During my childhood, Mom made Mexican food at least four times a week. She would make Russian food to appease Dad a few times a week, too. I think she makes more Russian food now that Dad's gone. Sort of making sure we still have the best of both cultures.

We eat, drink, and mingle. Then it's time to cut the cake.

Tina brings out a mammoth of a cake. It's really tall. And it's covered with thick and gooey chocolate fudge. She tells everyone it's a seven layer chocolate cake with alternating chocolate fudge and caramel cream throughout it. All the guys groan their approval.

I'm thirty five today.

It's been nineteen years since my dad died. If anything could make this night perfect it would be to have him back for even just a moment. I'd like to hear what advice he would give me on this particular birthday.

Ceecee watches me with a huge smile on her face and claps excitedly.

I smile right back at her.

This one's for you, kiddo.

The crowd sings happy birthday and I blow out my candles. According to Ceecee I need to make a wish, too. I close my eyes and wish.

I wish for Tina in my bed.

All the girls come up to me and kiss my forehead. After they're done they all laugh at the amount of colored lips there are on it. They guys slap me on the back and wish me well.

Tina cuts the cake and we eat it. It's the best thing I've ever tasted apart from Tina's mouth.

The sponge is soft and fluffy and the fudge is thick and sticky. It's perfect.

Not that I expected any less from Tina.

All the women help clean up the mess and wash the dishes to help out.

Mom and my sisters take their leave and Max puts Ceecee to bed over an hour after her bedtime. Cricket had a total ball tonight.

The rest of us move outside and we lounge on the outdoor patio drinking beer and joking around.

I look out to the yard and think about tonight.

I don't regret it. It's the first birthday I've celebrated in nineteen years and all that matters is that I've been surrounded by all the people who are important to me.

Splat

I have no idea which direction it came from.

I stand and cake falls off my face onto the floor.

What the heck?

I wipe icing off my face and look around at my friends.

The girls have their backs to me with shaking shoulders. They're trying hard to contain their laughter. The guys don't try so hard. Max is pointing and laughing at me. Ghost and Trick chuckle into their beers.

Happy Birthday to me.

I notice one person missing.

The goddamn slip of a woman is trying to give me the slip!

Game on, amiga...You just wait.

It's getting really late and my friends start saying goodnight. But I haven't seen Tina in a while.

In fact, I haven't seen her since I got a face full of cake.

I seek out Nat and she explains, "She told me she was putting your present in your room. I don't know what's taking so long."

Mimi and Lola say goodnight and Nat tells me she'll get a ride with them so she won't have to wait.

And then everyone's gone.

I walk down the hall to my room and open the door. And there's Tina passed out on my bed.

Well, it might not have been what you had in mind but you got your wish.

The poor thing looks exhausted. I think for once in her life, baking has drained her.

I walk quietly over to the bed and look at her.

She's gorgeous. Lying on her side, her knees drawn up to her chest with an arm under her head as a pillow, her hair long dark hair sprawled out on the covers. Not a stitch of makeup on her face and still beautiful.

There is a blue bag resting slightly under her. I have to lift her hand by the

wrist to get it out. I empty the contents lightly on my bed so as not to wake her.

When I pick up the first item, I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing out loud.

She bought me pajamas. Not just any pajamas. The tops and bottoms have the young Simba from The Lion King on them. They're bright yellow and say 'I Just Can't Wait To Be King' all over it. They look like kids pajamas, only bigger.

The other item is wrapped. I open it as quietly as I can. It's a magic eight ball. There is a post-it note on it.

For all those times you need a second opinion at work. Keep it on your desk. Love Tina x

I smile to myself. I love it. I lean over her sleeping form and plant a whisper soft kiss on her lips.

Looks like that will have to do as the kiss I promised I'd give her tonight because she's passed out cold.

I undress and put my new pajama pants on. They're actually comfortable.

I make a snap decision and start undressing Tina. I take off her sandals, unbutton her jeans and slowly lower them down her legs. When I straighten

myself slightly, I realize my face is right in front of her panty covered sex. I don't know what possesses me but I lean forward and bury my nose lightly in all that is Tina. I breathe her in like she's an inhaler to an asthmatic.

My pupils dilate and within seconds, I'm rock hard.

That was smart. Bravo.

She smells perfect and I want to taste her. I'm drunk on her.

I busy myself with removing her blouse and once that's off all I can do is stare at her.

All she's left wearing is a white lace bra and plain white cotton panties. Her body is curvy and soft and her skin is pale as a porcelain doll. She looks innocent, almost virginal.

And I want to muss her up real bad.

Fuck me! Why did I think this was a good idea?

Restraining myself, I take the pajama top and slide it over her head and arms. I'm beginning to think a marching band could come through here and she still wouldn't wake.

I turn down the covers, pick her up and set her back down on the sheet. I hop in behind her and pull her back to my chest.

I sigh. My body warms and I'm instantly relaxed.

I smile, shut my eyes, and fall asleep.

I wake to find I'm in bed alone and there is a note on the pillow beside me.

I'm so sorry for passing out on you last night. Glad to see you're wearing your new jammies, though! Thank you for taking care of me. You're the best. Love Tina xxxxxxxxxx P.S. Cake in the face is a tradition in my family...now you'll have good luck for a whole year :)

Cake in the face is a family tradition? I smile. I'll have to get her back on her birthday.

And I got ten kisses that time. Nice.

I wonder what she thought when she woke up seeing I'd undressed her. She didn't sound angry in the note. She even thanked me for looking after her.

I smile like an idiot.

It's Thursday. Poker night tonight.

Can't wait to see her.

It's eight thirty-ish. The Thai restaurant I'm at is really nice. I caught a cab over so Nat could take my car home then to Nik's.

I'm sitting across from Chad the Accountant who is telling me about his stamp collection. He says I can come see it some time. He just needs to

make sure his Mom isn't home.

If someone were telling me this, I'd be in fits of laughter. But it's not so funny when you're a part of said funny story.

Merlin's beard...How did I get in this mess?

"So, you work at a clothing store?" he asks while picking at his food.

I look up and smile enthusiastically, "Yeah. I own the store. It's called Safira. I work with my best friends. I love it."

He looks thoughtful then asks, "Would there be any changing your mind about your profession?"

I lean back in my chair and try not to glare at him. Instead, I inquire, "What do you mean, Chad?"

It's such a shame. He's a great looking guy. But when he opens his mouth and the verbal diarrhea shoots out at you, you realize why he's still single. Well, that, and the stamp collection...and still living with his Mom at thirty eight.

He smiles at me and says, "Well, I don't know if I could be with a woman who spends all her time around clothing. There is a huge problem in America regarding women who obsessively shop. I'd like to know that wouldn't be an option with my wife. So, would changing your profession be an option?" He raises his eyebrows expectantly.

Say what? Oh, hell no.

Buying myself some time I reach for my water and sip at it.

This guy who I've known all of two seconds has asked me to change my profession and basically proposed to me?

Sweet Baby Jesus!

I need to get out of here. I need Nat. Emergency bail time.

I don't believe what I just heard.

Rage boils in the pit of my stomach. I clench my hands together by my sides and stop myself from punching something.

I planned to spend the day avoiding Tina. It worked out fine when she instant messaged me to say she was a little busy to do lunch today. Perfect, I thought.

I planned on kissing the life out of her tonight and putting myself out there. I want Tina. It was as simple as that. I made the decision that tonight is the night. Or it *was*.

The guys came to the house a little earlier to set up the Poker table and the girls arrived shortly after eight, minus Tina. I could see Nat avoiding making eye contact with me and thought that was a little odd. She looked really uncomfortable, too.

Then a few minutes ago when Max asked Nat where Tina was and all the girls stiffened, I knew something was up.

Nat tried to brush it off with a small shrug. She said, “Sorry guys, Tina sends her apologies. She had some last minute plans and had to bail on us.”

Max stood up taller looked at her with brows bunched and uttered, “What’s more important than Poker night? It’s family night!” He noticed her stiffen even further and said firmly, “Okay, guys, where is Tina tonight?”

Nat looked down and played with her earlobe. She whispered so quietly I could barely hear her, “She’s on a date.”

Silence enveloped the room.

A date?

A fucking date?

I have a thousand questions to ask but can’t bring myself to begin. Does she even know this guy? Where did they meet? How long has she known she’d be missing tonight? Aren’t these things friends tell one another?

This guy could be dangerous for, Christ sake!

I can’t help but wonder if this rage I’m feeling is a result of jealousy. I come up with the following reason for my reaction – Tina is a good friend who could be out having dinner with an axe murderer!

This brings us to now. I ask, “Does anyone know this guy?”

Nat, Meems, and Lola shake their heads at me. Nat says, “She met him at Winnie’s the other day. All I know is his name is Chad and he’s an Accountant.”

Chad. The name of an axe murderer.

Definitely.

Mimi looks around and offers, “Well, what did you expect? Tina’s a fox, Nik. She’s a great catch for any guy. The perfect catch.”

Lola nods her agreement and softly finishes, “And you guys are just friends, right?”

Rather than answer them, I walk down the hall into my room and shut the door.

Once I’m in I walk over to my bed and lay back on it.

Calm down. Everything will work itself out.

I hope.

After expertly avoiding answering Chad’s extremely invasive questions, I excuse myself to use the ladies room. Once inside, I take my cell phone out of my purse and text Nat.

Me: This guy is a fruitcake! Emergency bail procedure in T-Minus ten minutes.

Nat: Gotcha. Turn you cell phone volume up.

I walk back to the table with a bright smile and sit. I answer some of Chad’s

less invasive questions then my cell phone blasts ‘Thrift Shop’ by Macklemore.

Show time.

I take my cell phone out of the bag look at the display fake frowning. I say in an almost genuinely confused voice, “Oh. Please excuse me. This could be important.”

I furrow my brow and answer the phone, “Hello?”

Nat sounds amused when she says, “Blah blah blah. Dog hit by car.”

I widen my eyes and put a hand to my chest. I whisper loudly, “What? No! Not Fluffy!”

Nat answers in all seriousness, “I think we should get a dog. Or two.”

I lower my head, put the hand on my chest up to my forehead and wail, “Oh No! Not my precious baby!”

Nat sounds as though she’s made a decision, “We’ll get two.” More excitedly. “Pugs! We’ll call ‘em Pizza and Donut!”

I wipe tears I haven’t shed off my cheeks. I respond in a shaky voice, “Why? Dear God, why?”

Nat replies as though I answered her previous statement, “Because I get lonely sometimes, ya know!”

I slump my shoulders and force them to shake. I whisper softly, “Don’t make any decisions without me, doctor. I’m on my way.”

Nat giggles and dramatically says, “And the award for best acting under pressure goes to Teeny!” Then her voice turns serious. “But seriously, I want a dog.”

Dial tone.

She hung up on me!

Chapter Seventeen

I gets a boo-boo

It's Saturday Night.

I'm sure the girls will come to the club tonight. And for the first time in forever, I'm not excited about seeing Tina.

In fact, I'm dreading it.

Poker night went okay from what I could hear of it. I heard everyone laughing and talking from inside my room. The girls left about midnight. I pleaded a headache after I heard about Tina's date and spent the night on my bed like a stubborn child who didn't get his way.

Yesterday, I avoided Tina like the plague. She sent me an instant message

asking if I wanted to do lunch but I lied and told her I was drowning in work and would be off site most of the day.

Today, Tina came to the office but I had Max tell her I wasn't in. She brought some cupcakes for us but I didn't have one. You know shit just got serious when you refuse gooey caramel cupcakes which taste like heaven. I'm not sure what she wanted but I was in no mood to hear her tell me about her fantastic date with Super Chad, Accountant of the Year.

Okay, so call me sulky, but when the girl you really like is not into you, it sucks. And now I'm actually thinking about cutting her loose.

I think I'll just tell her that work is really busy and that I might not have as much time as I used to for our lunches and get-togethers. Then I'll cancel Poker night all together. And somehow cut the rest of the girls out of our lives. While somehow asking for the VIP passes back. Then we can all go back to how things were before. Uncomplicated.

I'm hanging out with Ghost in the security room watching the CCTV. I know the second the girls arrive.

B-Rock gets giddy and smiles like an idiot. Then I see them. Beautiful as always. Cutting them out of our lives is not going to be easy. Tina is the last in and kisses B-Rock on the cheek while looking at him like he personally shines the stars at night. I know how that look can make a guy feel. I'm normally on the receiving end of that look.

They disappear from camera view for a few minutes then reappear on the CCTV in the VIP area.

I can see they're looking around for us. After a few minutes, they give up.

Tina still sneaks looks though. She's frowning. I don't like it.

Knowing I'm putting that look on her face makes me feel like the world's biggest ass. Especially, when just a week ago I swore I'd do anything to protect her from looks like that. But that was before my epiphany this morning.

Who's going to protect me from her?

Ghost sighs and looks towards me. He says, "Clue in, man."

I'm confused. I reply, "Huh?"

He sits back in his chair and tells me like he thinks he sees it, "Tina likes you. More than likes you. Grow some damn balls and do something about it."

I scowl at him and spit out, "She had a date the other night. I don't think she likes me that much, bro."

He puts his hands behind his neck and smiles. He offers, "If I was a chick and I saw the guy I like every day having to act like I'm not interested, it would drive me nuts. I'd do anything to get my mind off it. Even go on a date."

I don't answer; just stare at Tina through the display.

God, why does she have to be so beautiful?

Ghost makes an impatient sound and barks, “Fuck, man, she bailed on the date half hour in. That sound like she had a good time?!”

What?

I frown. I’m confused. “What?”

Ghost sighs and leans forward slightly. He looks at the display and points to the girl of my dreams, “That girl of yours was itching to get out of there. Called Nat to get her out of it. The guy was a dud. Supreme dud. Still living at home and owns a fuckin’ stamp collection.” He chuckles on the last bit.

Are you fuckin’ serious?

“What the hell, man? Why didn’t you tell me any of this yesterday or today?” I demand. I’m pissed.

He leans back in his chair again and smiles cruelly. He shrugs and mutters, “You ask me?”

The fucker.

I narrow my eyes and ask, “Why are we friends again?” I’m genuinely curious.

He chuckles and reminds me, “I think it’s because I always had your back, brother.”

He’s right. He’s an asshole but he’s right. Not once in my life have I ever had to go through things alone. Before Ghost was Max. My little brother

always has my back regardless of the situation. Then I met Asher. He was a tall kid with scruffy blonde hair and untrusting brown eyes. Very much like he is today if I think about it. I didn't shoot up in height til after High School, now I'm taller than all the guys. He was getting taunted by some idiot jock. I went over, stood next to him and asked, "You need a hand?" He looked at me with narrowed eyes and shook his head. The next day I walked past him in the hall; he caught up to me and started walking with me. He said, "I'm Asher." Without looking at him I nodded my head and said, "I'm Nik." And that was that. Max, Ghost, and I have been friends ever since. He's been with us through everything; Marcus's shooting, Dad's death, Ceecee's accident. All the important things. And he's always been solid, good at helping you when you're at your worst and don't think you need anyone. He spent most of his childhood escaping family when he was embraced by mine.

Ghost won't say it, but he loved my dad as much as I did. The day Dad met Asher Collins he watched him closely. When Ghost was leaving dad pulled him aside and said, "You ever need any help, son, for anything at all. You call Niki and he'll tell me. I'll take care of it." He wasn't even shocked at what my dad was saying. Dad was telling Ghost if his parents didn't wise up and stop beating their kid they'd get themselves killed. And Ghost appreciated it. Ever since that moment, Dad was his idol. And Mom won

him over early by being over attentive of him. He acted like he didn't like it but I see how he looks at Mom, like he wishes she was his biological mother. Blood doesn't mean anything to us. Ghost *is* my brother.

Ghost looks closer at the monitor and whispers, "Oh shit."

I'm immediately alert. I look at the monitor. One of the waitresses is picking up a broken glass by Tina's feet. Mimi and Nat flank Tina and touch her in a gentle way and Lola is holding something on Tina's leg. The waitress is talking a mile a minute and looking up at Tina apologetically. Tina waves it off, smiles and replies. Lola has removed whatever she's holding on Tina's leg. I see her reach over the table and pick up a bunch of napkins and put them on Tina's leg. I realize she's been cut and is bleeding. Lightning fast I'm up and out the door. I run across the VIP area til I reach Tina's back. Without even assessing the situation I pick her up in a bridal hold and move towards the door behind the bar.

Tina starts with a shrill, "Nik, what on..."

But I cut her off by saying, "Just a second, sweetheart."

Tina softens her voice and utters, "Nik, I'm fi—"

And I cut her off again with a firm, "Tina, we're almost there. Quiet, babe."

She listens to me that time. She quiets and loosens in my hold. Her arm winds around my neck and her hand softly caresses the hair at the back of my head. It feels so nice I'm worried I'll push further into her hand and purr

like her cat.

On a mission, I carry her all the way to my office and set her down on my desk. Luckily, she's wearing a dress that comes to the knee. It's a beautiful deep blue color with a V-neck and puffy short sleeves. She looks like a princess.

I kneel in front of her and hold her calf in my hands. There is a small nick there. It bleeds a little more than I'd like but it's nothing major. I look up to see her gorgeous green eyes looking down at me and they're dancing.

Covering my face with my hands, I lean my forehead on her knee and say a muffled, "Okay, I might've overreacted."

She places a hand on my head and her body shakes with silent laughter.

You're such a putz.

Nik lifts his head from my knee and runs a hand through his hair. He looks tense and says, "God, Tina, I was worried. Like, out of my mind, worried. I thought you were really hurt."

Wow.

The whole thing was my fault, I was talking to Mimi while walking backwards and stupidly walked right in to the poor waitress who dropped one glass but saved three others.

Good for her I say!

Nik was so worried he came flying out of nowhere, picked me up and carried me away so he could fix me up himself. That's ridiculously sweet. I didn't know he could be that way.

I love this man. Actually love him. With all my heart. There's no denying it anymore. I feel safe with him. Whatever sadness I feel living my life is gone as soon as I see Nik. He makes the days' worth getting up for in the morning. My heart swells every time I see him shoot that dimple my way.

Please kiss me.

I touch his cheek and whisper, "Niki."

As soon as I say his name he takes my calf in his big hands and massages it. It feels so good I close my eyes and bite my tongue to stop myself from moaning. He smiles, "Well, I guess I better fix you up, huh?"

I nod and he walks around his desk and reaches underneath it. He pulls out a first aid kit and sets it down next to me. He opens it and digs around. His hands emerge with two things, an antiseptic wipe and a Band-Aid. He wipes the little cut with the antiseptic wipe, it stings a little but nothing enough to make me flinch. I had an eighteen hour natural birth! Nothing will ever be as painful as that.

Wiping the cut with gentle strokes, he blows on it and it makes my lady bits tremble. He smiles up at me and hands me the Band-Aid. I'm a little confused but I open it for him and see it's a bright pink Barbie Band-Aid

with flowers and hearts on it. I chuckle and hand it to him. He sticks it on and kisses my boo-boo gently.

He looks up at me smiling. After a long moment his face suddenly turns serious and he states, “You and me, Tina. It’s gonna happen.” I gasp softly. He smiles and continues on a whisper, “Mark my words, baby.”

Oh, wow!

I like how he said baby. All breathy and sexy. I like that he called *me* baby. My heart speeds up.

Nik holds my calf and plants soft, wet kisses up my leg. My breathing heavies and my eyes roll in to the back of my head. When he reaches my knee he says against it, “Tell me you want this as much as I do.”

I can’t believe my ears. I want to jump on the desk and do the Macarena!

But instead, I simply nod. He kisses my knee and I feel his tongue dart out to lick me there. He shakes his head slowly and quietly asks, “Nope. I need words, Tina. Do you want me?”

Hell yes!

My heart stops beating all together. I do want him. So damn much. And I’m scared but right now, I’m beyond that. I just want Nik in any way he’ll let me have him.

So I hold his eyes and whisper shakily, “I want you more than anything, Nik.”

His amber eyes flash and he stills for a long few seconds. Then he raises his head heavenward and yells out, “Thank Fuck!”

He stands and bends his tall, strong body over my sitting form forcing me to lean backwards and leaves me having to support myself back on my forearms so his face is right in mine. I expect him to kiss me but he doesn't. Instead he runs his nose lightly along mine. I feel it though my veins, there is so much care in that gesture. His day old stubble rubs lightly on my cheek. I love it.

He says softly, “I don't just want you in my dreams, baby. Been wanting you a long while.”

Fiddle sticks!

I whisper, “Niki.”

He puts his lips close to mine and breathes deep, “You're all I think about.”

I feel the tingles start in my nose. A sure sign I'm going to bawl. “Stop.”

But he just keeps coming with the sweet, “I thought I needed a woman like you. Turns out I just needed you.”

My breath hitches. “Stop.”

What he says next melts my frozen heart.

“You're it, Tina.”

I no longer have doubts.

My heart skips a beat and a whisper fiercely, “I want to kiss you. Real bad.”

I feel his smile half on my lips and cheek as he responds with, “Do it.”

I gulp hard and say, “Really?”

He nods.

I utter, “Oh, fudge. Okay.”

He moves his face slightly so his lips just touch mine. I move closer just a fraction and there it is. Connection.

And it jolts me. A kick start to my still heart.

I brush my lips softly against his and he makes a deep growling noise in his throat. My stomach clenches and my sex weeps with joy.

This is really happening. I’m not dreaming and Nik is awake!

Yippee!

I feel Nik’s mouth open against mine, he’s giving me permission to enter and I do. I lightly touch his tongue with mine and it’s incredible. He tastes so darn good. I press my mouth harder into his and reach up with one arm to circle his neck. I need to be closer to him.

I feel him use one hand to spread my knees apart and he moves between them bringing us even closer together. It’s then I remember I’m not wearing underwear tonight. But I’m having such a nice time nibbling at Nik’s honeyed mouth I can’t speak.

His crotch meets mine and we both moan into each other. He reaches behind me with both arms, one tangles in my hair holding it firm and the

other slides down to my bottom and squeezes. It feels incredible. With his hand on my behind he pulls me into him while grinding against me. I feel how big and hard he is through his pants. I gasp at the friction it makes.

If we continue this way, I'll come in mere seconds. I don't know why this is a bad thing. I just don't want Nik to stop. I want his hands everywhere.

I reach up with my free hand and wrap it around the back of his head then I circle his waist with my legs and hold on tight. One of my shoes has fallen off in the meantime. Nik groans into my mouth, I'm wrapped around him like a Koala bear. He puts both hands under my ass and lifts me up. He stands, turns us around and sits on the desk. He leans back slightly and I grind my bare sex onto his hard, covered bulge. He moans long.

He breathes heavily against my lips and whispers, "I have to touch you, baby."

I nod and continue nibbling his lips and tongue. He tastes so damn good! Tonight he tastes like mint and aged whisky.

Yummy!

I pull his bottom lip into my mouth and suck on it. His hand tightens in my hair and I gasp. The slight pain makes my core dripping wet.

He reaches down between my legs and touches the bare and most intimate part of me. He lets go of my mouth a few seconds to yell out, "Fuck me! Baby, you're killing me." Then returns his mouth to mine and he runs a

finger lightly up and down my shaved, wet cleft. I moan into him. His thumb finds my sensitive nub and works it in a gentle circular motion. I moan louder. I'm soaked and I'm sure the front of his pants are, too.

He stops kissing me and leans back to look at me through hooded eyes. He searches my face. I close my eyes and lift my head to the ceiling, my breathing is erratic and the tingles start low on my spine. The arm Nik holds me with tightens around me, he puts his mouth to my ear and whispers, "I want to watch you come, baby. This is mine. I earned it."

I nod and open my half-lidded eyes to look into his. His eyes flash the color of warm honey. I feel the tingles become stronger on my lower spine and my mouth parts. The first contraction of my orgasm starts and I buck against his thumb. Nik smiles a sly smile and lowers his hand further. Before I can think he puts a finger deep inside of me and I explode.

"Oh, shit, oh god, oh, oh Nik!"

I pulse around his finger and I see his face bunch in an almost painful way. He rubs my back in a gentle and comforting way. My head lolls forward onto his shoulder. He keeps his finger inside me waiting for me to ride out the waves of my orgasm.

When at last I'm done, I peek up at him. He smiles a tender smile at me and removes his finger from inside of me. He brings his finger up to his mouth and sucks my essence off of it. My mouth parts slightly and my crotch

contracts once more. I buck against him with wide eyes. And he smiles a small, sexy smile.

He brings his mouth to mine and says against my lips, “My baby likes that.”

Then he kisses me long and sweet. His tongue touches mine once more and I taste myself on him. It’s outrageously hot. I sigh lightly against his lips.

I don’t believe myself when I lower my hands and work on opening his leather belt. I’m out of control. I want to see him. Feel him.

He leans back with smiling eyes and lets me undo the buckle of his belt and the top button of his pants. I lower the zipper slowly and come into contact with his hot and hard erection.

He’s not wearing underpants either!

I lean back a little and look my fill.

It’s big. It’s long, really thick, hard as nails and beautiful.

Then I lean forward, put my head on his shoulder and cry.

What the hell just happened?

I make Tina come with my hand and it’s the most stunning thing I’ve ever seen. Just beautiful.

The little minx isn’t wearing any underwear tonight. I almost came when I reached down to touch her and felt her naked soaking wet pussy. Better than any dream.

So soft, warm and tight as hell. I felt her come around my finger and I wanted to do a victory dance.

She's mine now.

Then she undoes my pants, looks at my cock for a minute then bursts into tears.

I'm a little confused here.

I wrap her in a deep hug and say softly, "Baby, talk to me. What just happened?"

She looks up at me and she looks devastated. I think she regrets what just happened. If she does, I'll probably go jump off the Brooklyn Bridge but it'll be okay.

Her sweet, tear streaked face looks down at my somewhat deflated cock and she whispers brokenly "It- It- It- It's not going to fit!" She finishes on a soft wail.

I have to bite my lip to stop myself from laughing out loud.

I love this girl. Completely. With all my heart and soul.

I look in her sad green eyes and state, "It will, sweetheart. If you want me in, I'll get in."

She looks into my eyes and says fiercely, "I do. I really do. I want it so bad." I feel my cock inflate again.

I wipe under her eyes to remove those pesky tears then lean closer to her

and run my nose up hers.

I whisper, “We don’t have to do this. What we did. That’s enough for me. I don’t want you to do this out of some crazy thought of obligation.”

She shakes her head and lowers her eyes. She leans closer so her forehead touches mine and whispers back, “I dream about you, too.”

I lift my head suddenly and she smiles shyly. She says softly, “I want you, Nik. Please, please don’t stop now.”

Who could deny a request like that?

Wide eyed, I say, “I’ll never deny you, baby. Not ever.” And I mean it. She could ask for anything and I’d do everything in my power to get it for her.

My cock is harder than a rock and ready to go. I slide my hands under her delicious ass and lift her slightly. I prod at her slick entrance and lean back on the desk. I hold her hips in my hands and lower her onto my length.

I knew she would be tight but this is ridiculous. She feels like a warm, silken glove. So good, I’m worried I’ll embarrass myself and come like a teenager.

The head of my cock slips into her and she sighs. It’s a really nice sound. Her eyes are half-mast and she’s beautifully flushed.

I knew she’d look like that when she came.

Inch by torturous inch goes in as I lower her. She moans and I stop half way. It’s killing me but I have to ask her if she’s okay.

She lifts her eyes to me when I stop. I ask a straining ,“How does it feel, baby?”

She looks irritated, slaps my shoulder and shouts, “Keep going, Niki! God!” I chuckle and grant her wish. I hold her hips firmly and thrust up while pulling her down into me.

Oh, dear god in heaven.

She’s fully seated on me. She moans loudly and closes her eyes in ecstasy.

This makes me happy.

I’m right there with her.

I wait a few seconds for her to adjust to the extremely snug fit then use my hands on her hips to move her up and down on my hard member.

So tight and slick.

Her body is lax but her pussy is tightening around me.

Fuck me!

If she comes now I’ll come right with her. Not sure why this is a bad thing.

I’m finally with Tina. I’ll take her any way I can get her. I love her.

Tina’s eyes widen and she reaches up to place her hands flat on my chest, without warning she grinds against me and it feels so fucking amazing. I loosen my hold on her hips and she takes over. Using the desk for balance she rides me in a great rhythm. Up, down, grind.

Sex with Tina is even better than I ever imagined. She’s incredible.

I feel it building. My climax nears. I just hope Tina will be right there with me. If her moans are anything to go off, I'd say she's close. Her pussy contracts once around me and I lean up to take her mouth in a hard and demanding kiss.

She moans into my mouth and it sounds like mmmm mmmmmmmmm.

Nice.

I suck her tongue and she gasps. Her pussy becomes impossibly snug as she meets her release. I feel her throb tightly around my cock. She moans, bucks, and grinds against me. It's unbelievable.

I'm right there with her. I put an arm around her lower back to hold her as I thrust up into her. I feel the familiar prickling along my spine. I thrust faster, harder and reach higher, higher, higher into bliss. My balls tighten. The floodgates open. I groan into her mouth and begin coming and with every pulse of my orgasm I shoot into her. She sucks on my bottom lip and I feel it in my cock. I buck up into her.

Her kisses slow and I feel my body slacken. I'm in such a state of pleasure; I don't know where I am or what day it is.

Seriously, best sex ever.

This girl will be the death of me.

Still seated on Nik I feel him soften slightly in me.

Best sex ever!

I'm in a dreamland. Completely relaxed and utterly spent. Still, we can't take our mouths off of each other.

We kiss softly and sip at one another's lips. It's perfect.

I feel loved.

I've never felt this way about another person before. Not even Jace. And I thought I loved him.

Nik lies flat back on the desk and pulls me down with him so we don't break our tender kisses. I'm sure it's uncomfortable but he doesn't say a thing. My knees, which are aching from the position, surround his hips and we're impossible close together. Neither of us wants to disconnect from the other. Both my hands are on his chest and under them I feel his heavy breathing soften and his heart beat calm.

He whispers against my lips, "Missed out."

Huh?

I'm suddenly confused and slightly panicky. I thought the sex was pretty darn awesome. What does he mean *missed out*?

I lift my head a little and peer into his eyes which are soft and the color of fine whisky.

He clarifies, "Two years. Missed out on you."

Oh my!

I think I'm going to cry. I bite my bottom lip and my eyes mist.

I grip his lapels, sniffle, and lower my head. I run my nose up his and use his tender gesture to show him what I feel.

He got me.

Nik sighs softly and says against my mouth, "Doesn't matter. I got you now, Tina. You're mine."

Happiness seeps through me and warmth spread in my belly. How this happened, I'll never know. But I'm grateful.

Hurrah!

Chapter Eighteen

Wifey

After our sexed up love fest in Nik's office we stay joined together for a long while kissing and cuddling.

Sadly, the time comes for us to disconnect. I lift myself off of Nik and our warm combined juices flow down my legs.

I stand up on shaky legs with only one shoe. I look over at Nik who was still lying with his back on his desk. He puts his muscular arms behind his neck, dimple smiling at me with dancing eyes.

I'm not sure what I looked like then but Nik obviously found it amusing.

I must look like hell!

I can't help but stare at his still open pants to see his softening length and think *How did that fit in me?*

Nik bends forward at his waist, stands and leaves his pants open. He walks towards me, kisses my forehead and says, "C'mon sweetheart, let me clean you up."

I nod then pull my dress back down and take off my one shoe. I follow him into the bathroom and he lifts me under my arms to sit on the sink. He looks at the rough paper towels in the holder and looks thoughtful. He leaves the bathroom a minute and comes back with a tie. Not just any tie, a navy blue silk tie.

He holds it up and states, "I think this will work better than those" pointing at the towels. I'm confused.

Nik soaks the silk tie in warm water, wrings it out and spreads my legs. I put one of my feet on his shoulder and bend the other up on the counter. He wipes me lightly and cleans me up with his silk tie!

Wow...That tie must've cost around a hundred dollars and he's cleaning me up with it.

After he cleans me, he kisses the inside of my thigh and scrapes his cheek on it. I jolt in surprise. He chuckles and I feel his breath on my naked sex.

He says softly, "One day soon I'm going to taste you."

My belly quivers and my core spasms with pleasure.

Yes please!

He nips my thigh; I yelp and smack his shoulder. He chuckles again and I can't help but giggle.

I put my legs down but remain on the counter. He moves to clean himself but I take the tie from him and soak it. I squeeze out the excess water and take hold of him gently. I use the tie to clean him as he did me. I stroke up and down his length and I feel him harden under my touch. He moves closer to me and licks my lips which lead to more deep and passionate kisses.

After we've had a few minutes to hold each other and get ourselves organized. He kneels in front of me and puts my shoes back on my feet.

Just like Cinderella!

We exit the bathroom arm in arm. He puts an arm around me and pulls me close to his side. I put an arm around his waist and rest my other hand on his chest.

He stops walking suddenly, turns to me and asks, "You okay with this?"

I'm not sure what this is so I say quietly, "With what exactly?"

His brow furrows but he smiles and replies, "With us."

There's an us?!

I whisper wide eyed, "There's an us?"

Nik chuckles and pulls me even closer to him. He kisses me softly and says

against my lips, “Baby, there’s been an *us* since the day you sent me candy.”

Wow!

I whisper, “Wow.” And I feel his smile on my lips.

Rather than answer him, I kiss him deeply and nip his bottom lip. I nod.

He chuckles and says, “Finally. More than friends.”

I put on the most serious face I can muster and offer, “Yeah, more than friends...Best friends forever!”

His face turns terrified. I burst out laughing and kiss his pouting lips. I say, “Kidding, honey.”

Looking slightly relieved he mutters a sarcastic, “You’re so hilarious... Goofball.”

We resume walking and make our way back to the club.

We walk back to the booth wrapped up in each other. All the guys and gals are sitting at the booth talking, laughing, and sipping on drinks.

When they see us approach their faces turn serious. Nik sits then pulls me down sideways onto his lap. I put my arm around his back and play with the short hair on the nape of his neck. We mustn’t look any different than how we were acting before because no one is looking at us any differently.

Max is the first to ask, “Are you okay, T?”

I smile big and nod. It's genuine, too. I'm fine. I'm more than fine. I'm wonderful.

Mimi's face is still frowning. She looks really upset and says apologetically, "It was all my fault. Teasing you while you were walking away was dumb. I'm so sorry, Tina."

Lola softly asks, "How bad was it? There was a lot of blood."

Nat smiles and tells me, "I told them all you were a bleeder but they wouldn't listen to me. They thought you'd need to go to hospital. But luckily, Superman over here," she nods her head to Nik, "scooped you up and saved you."

I speak loudly so everyone can hear me, "I'm absolutely fine guys, really. Nat's right. I *am* a bleeder. I'm hemophilic. My blood doesn't clot like everyone else's. It was just a little cut and Nik cleaned me up. It was my fault, Meems. The poor waitress was mortified. I'm fine. Here look." I lift my leg to show them my bright pink Barbie Band-Aid and we all burst into laughter.

Ghost eyes Nik and me slyly and says, "You look like you're both out of your bad moods."

Nik and I lean away slightly to look at each other. We both share startled expression. At the same time we ask each other, "You were in a bad mood?"

Nik looks awkward and confirms, "Yeah, someone had a date the other

night.” He smiles then says, “Why were you in a bad mood?”

I lower my eyes, play with his lapel and say, “I couldn’t find you.”

He smiles big and whispers, “Sweetheart.” Then leans forward, runs his nose the length of mine and kisses me lightly on the lips.

The table quiets and everyone looks around at each other shocked.

Lola shrieks, “Does this mean...?” She doesn’t finish her question but nods her head vigorously.

Nik and I both smile like the idiots we are and nod and the table erupts into whoops and cheers. There is a chorus of “About damn time!”, “I knew it!”, and “That’s great you guys!”

All but one person looks happy. Natalie is wiping tears from her eyes. I’m so startled by this I hop off Nik’s lap, sit on hers and wrap her up tight. Her shoulders shake in to me as she cries. I feel myself become teary and I ask shakily, “Honey, what is it?”

She lifts her tear streaked face and puts her mouth to my ear. She whispers, “Never thought I’d see the day.” Even quieter she says, “After everything, you deserve to be happy, Tina. I love you.”

I lower my face to her neck and we cry together for a minute. Then I straighten up, clear my throat and tell everyone, “I think we need a round of drinks to celebrate!”

Trick smiles, winks, and shoots me with imaginary guns. He gets up and

walks over to the bar to place the order.

I kiss Nat's hand and she smiles an adorable wobbly smile. I touch her cheek affectionately, move off her and climb back onto Nik. I'm a little surprised when I see Ghost move to sit beside Nat and hand her a napkin. He puts an arm around her shoulders and pulls her to him. I'm even more surprised when she goes willingly. He whispers something in her ear and she nods into his chest. Ghost smiles a small smile at no one in particular and strokes her violet hair with his free hand. My heart swells. Nat somehow got through to this abrupt and broody man. She has a way of doing that and I'm glad Ghost has her as a friend.

I look around the table and wonder how my life got so perfect. I lean back into Nik. He nuzzles my neck.

Then I smile to myself.

Ahh, the power of candy.

It's almost been a week since Tina and I made it official.

I can't walk into my office without remembering what happened here and smiling. Who knew under that little sweet woman was a sexual vixen waiting to claw her way out. I can still smell her arousal and taste her sweet mouth. I like it, but sometimes being in here can be torture.

We haven't had sex again since and it doesn't bother me. Every day this

week we've been having lunch together and sneaking kisses when we can. Everyone seems genuinely happy for us.

On Sunday night I told Ceecee that Tina and I were now together and she went ballistic. If she could use her legs she would've been jumping for joy. She twirled around me in her chair and was cheering for me. She said she knew we would end up together because the princess always finds her prince.

My little Cricket almost made me cry.

Ceecee asked if Tina was her Aunt now and I told her she wasn't but she was still her fairy godmother, she seemed pleased by that. She can't wait for Tina to come over again so she can have a girl talk with her.

God, my niece is adorable.

Speaking of adorable, I have big plans for Tina this weekend. It's a covert operation and I've enlisted everyone's help.

This weekend will be special. And Tina and I will be alone. Not that I didn't enjoy sex on my desk, because it was out of this world. But I want to treat my woman better than that. She isn't some club groupie; she's my girlfriend. I want to let Tina know she's special to me. I love Tina but I'm not ready to tell her that yet, when I think she's ready to respond to it, that's when I'll tell her.

It's not even been a week for Christ sake!

Max and the girls cover the transport side of things while Ghost and Trick make reservations for me.

This weekend is going to be good.

Just me and my girl.

I can't stop smiling!

Gahh! Who knew Nik would be such a perfect boyfriend?

He looked like a crappy casual sex partner but I can already see that he treats me different than girls like Sissy. His eyes shine with adoration every time he looks at me and I'm afraid I'm just as gooey with him.

It's Saturday night and the girls are here at the apartment getting ready. I could be wrong but it seems like the girls are a little quiet tonight.

Mimi, Lola, and Nat all keep sending each other secret smiles but I'm sure we're all just happy because it's Saturday and we're going to The White Rabbit.

I've tried on three dresses and with every one of them, the girls found something wrong with it. Just as I'm about to shriek from frustration Mimi appears with a garment bag.

My hand goes to my chest and my eyes widen because I'm sure the garment bag says Armani on it.

Mimi, Lola, and Nat can't contain their smiles and giggles. As Mimi walks

further over to me with the bag, I back away from it. I finally reach the wall and Mimi makes her way towards me. Once in front of me, Nat and Lola hold the garment bag up by the sides and Mimi lowers the zip.

Oh My Freakin' God!

I know this dress! I've seen it online and at the Armani store which I like to browse in on occasion. It's a long tight black dress with an extremely low back. The design is simple and elegant. It's beautiful!

I'm normally too short for these types of dresses but when Mimi holds it onto my body, it's perfect. It looks as though it's been made to my measurements.

I'm speechless.

My brow furrows; this is not clubbing wear. Why on earth would I wear such a classy dress to a club?

What is Nik thinking?

This is a three thousand dollar dress. I know this because I've looked at this dress many times.

The girls are ready and waiting on me. Nat does my makeup. A little more than what I'd normally wear. She applies a smoky grey shadow around the eyes and lots of mascara.

Lola does my hair. She leaves it mostly natural in my long, dark waves but slightly curls the ends and finishes with some product to keep it from

frizzing.

Mimi slips the dress over my head, careful to avoid my makeup covered face. Then Nat and Lola hold my arms while Mimi slips on my stunning new black Valentino pumps.

They all stand back and look at me as if assessing me. I feel flushed and I'm nervous.

What the hell is going on?

Every time I ask questions all I get is "Patience is a virtue."

Screw patience! I'm dying of curiosity. They won't even let me look in a mirror until what Lola calls the final reveal.

I think I'm just about ready to go when Mimi comes up behind me and takes out my earrings.

Curioser and curioser.

I feel like Alice in Wonderland. Maybe The White Rabbit is the perfect place for me to be tonight.

Finally, I'm allowed to look in the floor length mirror. So I do.

And my heart stops.

I'm dying.

I've died.

Am I dead?

That woman in the mirror is *not* me. It can't be. I've never been sexy. Not

like this.

My three dearest friends are getting choked up behind me. Even Mimi fights tears. Unbelievable.

I take a closer look at myself.

I look like an actress at an awards ceremony. The long black dress has a small train at the back and this dress was definitely made for my measurements. I'm a little too bootylicious for these types of dresses to fit me properly. I look like a dark angel. The way Nat has done my makeup makes my normally light green eyes pop a vivid green apple color. Lola has parted my hair at the side. It falls in long, dark, sleek waves which end in curls at my hip. Thanks to Mimi I wear no jewellery but I look good.

They all silently cheer, clap and I hug them all tight and thank them.

When your friends are happy because of your happiness...those are true friends.

The doorbell rings and I look out the doorway to the direction of the front door.

All the girls squeal and jump up and down.

Now I'm really confused.

I'm even more confused when I'm blindfolded. I hear Max enter the apartment and whistle long and low. I feel him press his body to my side, kiss my cheek and he whisper in my ear, "T, you sure you're with the right

Leokov?”

I giggle at his silliness.

He tells the girls, “You all look beautiful tonight. I’ll see you all at the club.

I have to take the princess to her prince.”

And we’re off.

Max brings Tina to the house, blindfolded as requested.

As soon as I see her I almost have a heart attack.

I knew she was beautiful but tonight I’m blown away for how stunning she is.

The dress is a perfect fit on her. Her body is nice and curvy and this dress showcases her perfectly.

I’m dressed up in a suit, shirt, and tie. Tonight we dine like royalty.

Max walks her toward me smiling, I take her hand from his and he hugs me.

Then we’re alone and I say, “Hello Princess.”

She’s blindfolded but she can’t hide her smile. She responds, “Hello Prince Charming.”

I pull her close to me and hug her tight without messing her up. I whisper, “You are stunning. Absolutely beautiful.”

She kisses my chin and drawls, “Well, a three thousand dollar dress and eight hundred dollar shoes will do that to a girl.”

Damn, I forgot she owned a boutique and would probably know how much these things cost.

Yes, it did cost a little. Is Tina worth it?

Hell, yes.

I kiss her lips lightly and say against them, “Ready to go, baby.”

She replies, “Always, honey.”

Nik undoes my blindfold and I gasp when I see him.

Crap on a biscuit!

He looks amazing! He’s wearing a dark grey suit (I think it’s Armani, too), a white linen shirt, I see platinum onyx cufflinks on his wrists and black Italian dress shoes. I know he wears things like this to work all the time but tonight he looks different. He looks classy and chic. As he turns I see the tribal tattoo behind his ear and I just want to lick him. He looks delectable.

He smiles down at me and takes my hand. He leads me to a car. I’m not very knowledgeable when it comes to cars but this one looks expensive. He opens the door for me and kisses my hand when I’m in. I strap myself into this rocket car and when he seats himself behind the driver’s side I ask, “What kind of car is this?”

Nik’s eyes light up as he tells me, “A Maserati Granturismo MC Stradale.”

I raise my brows and nod to make it look like it’s a very impressive choice

but I obviously have no idea about cars and Nik chuckles at my obvious attempt to act as if I know what he's talking about.

We drive for about half hour sharing a comfortable silence. I close my eyes and enjoy the ride.

After a while I feel Nik's hand on my leg and he says, "We're here, baby."

I open my eyes and I'm immediately confused.

It looks like we've arrived to a nice house. A lovely house, actually. A mansion even.

Yes, it is a mansion. There is a long cobblestone driveway, which takes us a while to drive down. When we arrive at the entrance I see there are valets.

I'm helped out of the car by Nik and step on to a sapphire blue carpet.

Where the heck are we?

Nik smiles big at my obvious confusion. He takes my hand and we walk inside. Upon entering, the smell of food assaults my taste buds.

It's divine.

It smells of assorted roasted meats and sauces. I'm salivating. Nik walks me from the hall to another room and I see we're actually at a restaurant.

I've never been to a restaurant like this before. This is too classy for the likes of me.

We're approached by the host and Nik speaks to him in what I assume is Russian. The host smiles widely at him and he motions for us to follow

him.

The dining area is stunning. There are small tables, large tables, and booths. The chairs look hand carved and alone would cost a few hundred dollars per each. There are white tablecloths one way with black tablecloths thrown the opposite way on the tables. You can just see the corners of the white tablecloths sitting underneath the black. The plates all have gold rims. The cutlery is definitely silverware.

I'm a little intimidated, to tell you the truth. I don't want to embarrass myself but mostly I don't want to embarrass Nik.

Nik helps me into my seat then seats himself and asks, "Do you trust me to order for you, sweetheart?"

I answer immediately, "Yes, of course. You know what I like."

He takes my hand and kisses it. I notice his body stiffen slightly as he looks over my shoulder but tries to cover it.

The waiter comes to our table and takes our orders. I'm just about to thank Nik for the beautiful evening when I see him smile behind me and I hear heavily accented voice say, "Privet bratu."

I look to my right and there are two men smiling with genuine affection at Nik. Nik stands, hugs and kisses both men on both cheeks. They converse for a minute or two in Russian and I smile up at both men as my greeting.

The younger man is medium height with blonde hair and striking blue eyes.

He looks around my age. When he notices me for the first time his face turns awestruck, he puts a hand to his chest and kneels next to my chair. He whispers an accented, “An angel. An honest to God angel.”

I can’t stop the giggle that forms in my throat. I look at Nik to see he is shaking his head and smirking at his friend.

The older man is tall but not as tall as Nik. He has messy brown hair, soft brown eyes and an easy smile. He smacks the younger man across the head and says a heavily accented, “Get off the floor, you are embarrassing the angel.”

I don’t know who these men are but I can see Nik hold them in high esteem and I can see why. They’re sweet and hilarious.

Nik raises a brow at me in question. I smile and nod. Nik invites his friends to sit with us a while which they do.

They introduce themselves. The younger man is Alexei and the older man is Lev.

Alexei asks Nik something is Russian and Nik replies in English, “You can talk in front of Tina. We don’t have secrets.”

Wow.

I love this man. I feel warm all over.

Alexei smirks and nods his head ,“So, she is not a date, huh? She is a wifey.”

Nik looks thoughtful and replies, “Yes. She is.”

I reel back in my chair. My face pales and my heart beats faster.

Holy Hell...Nik and I are married?! When did that happen?!

Nik sees my face and chuckles. Lev and Alexei smile at me and Lev explains, “A wifey is what we call a woman who is important to us. She may not be an actual wife.”

I can breathe again. I respond a breathy, “Okey Dokey.”

Nik, Alexei, and Lev all smile at me but the looks on their faces say *you’re a dork*.

Alexei starts, “We hear you’ve had some problems with the Sixes.”

Nik shakes his head and says, “No. No problems with the Sixes. Just with Omarr. He seems to have taken a liking to my Tina.”

His Tina?! Aww!

Lev puts his hand on Nik’s arm and says kindly, “I know you are not part of our brotherhood anymore, but you will always be our brother. If you need any help, all you need to do is call. We look after our own.”

Nik pats the Lev’s hand and offers, “The same goes to you, brother.”

Lev says softly, “Ilia would be proud of what you have become, Nikolai.”

I notice a flash of pain cross Nik’s face. He covers it quickly, though. Our food has arrived and both men stand. They kiss my hand and tell me it was a pleasure. Then they both kiss and hug Nik.

Nik smiles a small smile my way and we eat our meals. It is hands down the best meal I've ever eaten.

Nik ordered the duck for us both. The meat is pink, moist and tasted like oranges, the vegetables are fresh and cooked perfectly and I want to lick the sauce of the plate but I think that would be a faux pas.

We chat about nothing in particular when our desert arrives and I venture into murky water by asking, "Nik, who is Ilia?"

Nik smiles a genuine smile. The first I've seen in half an hour.

He responds quietly, "My dad, baby."

I leave it at that because he looks happier now.

And Nik's happiness is my happiness.

Chapter Nineteen

We are family

Last night with Nik was ah-maze-ing!

The best night I've had in years. I can't actually remember ever having a night like that in my life.

Our evening started at the mansion restaurant which was honestly the best meal I've ever eaten followed by a desert of salted praline parfait.

This was not American parfait.

This parfait was a French recipe. There were no layers, it was only one flavor, and it was light and smooth as a cloud. Absolutely delicious. It was like eating a piece of heaven.

Nik seemed a little down after seeing his friends Alexei and Lev. I think the

mention of his father brought him down. Even though I want to know more about this I left the subject alone.

When dinner was done I was a little surprised when we ended up back at Nik's house. But as soon as we walked through the door Nik backed me into the hallway wall and said, "Just us tonight. Ceecee is with Mom and Max is staying with Trick."

Oooh, I like this night so much better already.

I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his chin. Even with heels on the man is ridiculously tall.

I whispered, "Can I get a better look at your room?"

He stilled a moment before he picked me up and threw me over his shoulder. I giggled as he stomped towards his room.

I teased, "Hey, this is a three thousand dollar dress, buddy!"

He smacked me on my butt hard and chuckled when I yelped. He replied, "I'll buy you another. No, I'll buy you another ten. Quiet, baby!"

But Nik-In-A-Rush changed when he set me down in his room. This was Take-It-Slow-Nik.

He went over to his bedside cabinet and switched on a lamp. The low light was perfect. Not too much dark but not too light that I would feel self-conscience.

Then suddenly, I became nervous.

I was naked under this dress apart from thigh high lace-trimmed stockings and my new fabulous shoes!

Nik must have seen me tense because he came to me and put his arms around my waist, held me close and assured ,“We only go as far as you want, sweetheart.”

I gave him a nod and moved back out of his arms. He looked a little sad but that changed to lust as soon as I removed his suit jacket. Next, I unbuttoned his linen shirt, taking my time, and when it was open at the front I put my hands on his stomach which I felt tense under my touch. I moved my hands up slowly up his sculpted stomach, lightly over his ribs, up his broad chest to rest at the sides of his neck.

I planted a soft wet kiss on his chest and I felt him groan through it. I removed his cufflinks and slid his shirt off and onto the floor. I was close to him and at perfect height that I could kiss his nipple.

I did just that, very lightly.

His body went rigid. I continued. I poked out my tongue and licked it softly. When his response was to moan I became bolder. I licked one nipple, than the other and sucked on it. He hisses in a breath and his body went rigid. He put his hands on my shoulders and moved me away from him.

I was a little disappointed until he choked out, “Tina, baby, if you want me to last I need to you to stop that. Right now.”

I lowered my head and smiled. I felt Nik step towards me. With a hand under my chin he lifted my face up to his and kissed me deeply. His tongue traced my lips and I moaned into his mouth.

The man is good with his tongue.

We kiss some more and I managed to unbuckle his belt and pants. He kicked off his shoes. I knelt in front of him and lowered his pants from his waist down to the floor. He stepped out of them and I helped him get his socks off. Which almost ended in a stumble and we both laughed.

And there he was. Demi-god Nik in all his naked glory.

My god is this man gorgeous.

Totally, gorgeous.

Mmmm Hmmm.

He held his hands out to me and I took them. He pulled me up and I stand fully dressed in front of naked Nik.

He smiled a lovingly at me then lowered the top of my dress slowly down to my belly bearing my breasts.

My boobs aren't huge but they're nothing to sneeze at. They're still pretty firm but loosened the tiniest bit from almost a year of breastfeeding Mia. I like my boobs.

But in front of Nik, I became shy. This wasn't intense I-Need-To-Fuck-You-Now sex. This was slow and sensual. An extreme baring of a person's soul.

I lower my head and he said firmly, “Tina, look at me.”

I do and all I can see written on his face is lust. Maybe a little more than that but I can't seem to read it.

He puts his hands on my hips, lowers his head to mine and runs his nose lightly along mine. He assures on a firm whisper, “You are beautiful. You are perfect to me.”

I nod. He sips at my lips in the sweetest way.

Using my hips for leverage, he kneels, fists the dress in his palms and slowly works it down my legs. Once he gets past my bare sex, he groans for a long while.

He looks up into my flushed face and mumbles, “You're trying to kill me.”

I giggle at the look of desperation on his face. He rubs a hand over his face and sighs.

The dress pools and my feet and Nik holds out a hand to help me step out of it. All I'm left in is black thigh high lace-trimmed stockings and my pumps. Once I'm out of my dress, Nik drops my hand and steps back. I sneak a peek at his crotch. He's fully erect. He actually looks painfully erect. The head of his manhood has turned a deep purple color.

I bite my lip and look up to Nik, who is looking over every inch of my body, his face bunched in a needy way.

On a mission, he walks over to me with desire written all over his face and

puts a hand on my belly. He gently pushes me back a little til the backs of my knees hit the bed. I sit. He kneels again and removes one shoe then the other but leaves on my silky stockings.

He picks me up and places me softly in the middle of his huge king-size sleigh bed.

I love this bed. I've slept in it twice now and it's so comfortable it's like sleeping on a cloud.

Nik climbs over my body, lowers his head and kisses my belly. He plants wet, sucking kisses til gets to my cleavage. He kisses a line to my nipple. Once he reaches my happily erect nipple, he licks it very much like I did to him. My core twitches and I dampen.

Jiminy Crickets!

My nipples are *very* sensitive.

He licks it again and I sigh deeply. Then he takes my breast into his big hand, slightly parts his lips and lowers it over my nipple. He sucks lightly at first, but as my body starts to jolt around, he increases the pressure. I place my hands on his shoulders and squeeze. He sucks my nipple hard for a long few minutes then does the same to the other.

It feels incredible. I could come from this. I am soaked.

He treats my other nipple to the same wonderful treatment then lifts his head. I look into his honey eyes. He lowers his mouth to my chest right

above my heart and kisses. With his lips still on me he utters, “Perfect. I knew you would be perfect.”

My belly clenches with delight and before I know can register what’s happening Nik has lifted both my stocking covered legs over his shoulders. His face right above my mound.

He groans. I feel his breath on me as he says, “You smell so good, sweetheart. I’m going to taste you now.”

I try to say okay but all I manage is a small high-pitched choked sound, Nik chuckles at my speechlessness.

He lowers his mouth and licks a long swipe at my folds. I moan loudly.

He groans softly, “So sweet. You taste good, baby.”

He kisses my nub lightly before gently spreading my lips with his thumbs and kissing me deeply and open mouthed at my most intimate place.

My legs have gone rigid and I hold the back of Nik’s head to ground me.

He sucks lightly on my nub and the tingles start just above my bottom. I can’t stop the persistent moans that escape me. He takes this as a sign to keep doing what he’s doing. He lifts a hand to my breast and rolls my nipple between his thumb and forefinger. And that does it.

I moan, “Oh shit. Nik, don’t stop, please baby.” Nik sucks a little harder on my nub and my orgasm starts. I contract over his mouth and we both moan loudly. My body jerks and spasms but Nik holds me firmly over his mouth

til the last of the contractions subside.

What the heck was *that*?

I've never come like that before. I've never had a man treat me with such care or play my body like a finely tuned instrument.

That was insane.

I whisper, "That was insane." I feel Nik's laughter on my mound.

It tickles and I giggle.

Nik wipes his prickly cheeks on my thighs before lifting his smiling face, leaning back over me and taking my mouth in a deep kiss.

It's a little weird that it tastes good. But on Nik, everything tastes good.

All of a sudden I'm not shy or nervous. I lift my upper body, place a hand on Nik's upper arm and push him sideways. He laughs as he lands on his back. He stops laughing when he sees my sly smiling face go down the length of his body to his crotch.

I look at his *very* large shaft and wonder how I'm going to fit it in my mouth.

I decide to lick it first. I take it in my small hands and lift it to my mouth. I lick slowly up his shaft. He puts a hand over his face and growls deep. I become bolder. I put the head in my mouth and suck lightly while slowly bobbing up and down. Nik's leg muscles stiffen; he shoots up and pushes at my shoulders gently.

I'm confused until he looks at me with wide eyes, shakes his head and states, "Nope. Not coming in your mouth tonight, sweetheart. I need to be in you."

I smile big and crawl over to the top of the bed on my hands and knees. I remain on my hands and knees. I wiggle my butt, look back at him and blow him a kiss.

Mouth parted slightly, he blinks. Then, lightning quick he's behind me. Shaft in hand he runs it back and forth through my arousal. He presses his knees into the outsides of mine and I feel him prod at my slick entrance. I lower my upper body to the bed.

Nik groans, "Fuck me. You're flawless, Tina. I *love* this ass. This is the perfect ass." He squeezes one of my cheeks and my eyes roll back.

The head of his length slides into me and I gasp. It feels so much bigger this way.

Nik strokes my back and keeps entering me. I moan once I'm fully seated. It feels heavenly.

Nik leans over my body, puts an arm around my waist and moves in and out of me *very* slowly.

It's torture.

I feel his face by mine and he asks quietly, "Ready, baby?"

My head nods jerkily.

Just do it! Dammit!

Using the arm around my waist to hold me firmly he thrusts into me once. I gasp and he groans. He starts thrusting slowly and I become impatient. I start pushing myself back onto him but he doesn't quicken his pace.

I turn my head and frown at him. I shout, "Nik, Faster! Harder, Dammit!"

I catch his dimpled smile, "That's it baby, tell me what you want."

Wait, what?

My sneaky man is forcing me out of my comfort zone to play.

I smile to myself. I like that. I chuckle quietly.

Nik grips my waist and thrusts into me in a perfect rhythm. Harder and faster. He feels so good in me. So deep.

I'm already tightening around him. It won't be long for me. I moan long and reach down to pinch my nipples.

Nik catches it and growls a loud, "Fuuuuuck!"

I continue to pinch and twist my nipples when the familiar tingling starts. I push back onto Nik and he pushes harder into me. He grinds against me. I become tighter and tighter then suddenly I'm falling.

Bliss.

I moan and pulse around him. I feel him swell inside of me. Nik holds me tight against him, he groans long and I feel him jerk against me, I become wetter and wetter. His orgasm spurs mine on further. I buck against him til

the pulses of my pleasure subside. Then we still.

Nik lifts me by the waist, lies on his side and pulls me back into his body. Still connected, he kisses my neck sweetly a while before exhaustion sets in.

Lights out.

I was woken by Nik twice during the night to make sweet, sweet love. The first time I was on top. The second time he was on top and realized that was the first time we'd done it missionary.

And it was mmm mmm good.

That way we could kiss and be firmly pressed together while doing it.

It. Was. *Awesome.*

We've now been together a week. And it's been wonderful.

I have no idea why I thought it would be bad if we slept together.

Okay, so I was scared of becoming one of Nik's many women but he's made it clear I'm the only one.

Yay!

I love him. I can say it to myself easily now but I'm not ready to tell him yet. I'm quite happy basking in the glow that is Nik.

The man is insatiable, which is good for me because I like sex with Nik.

No, I *love* sex with Nik.

I woke this morning and turned to look at my handsome man. And I had a seriously hard time containing my laughter.

Nik had slept on his stomach with an arm under his pillow. His face was pressed so tightly into the pillow that his lips had smooched and pursed together making his face look squished.

Seriously, cute.

So I did the only thing I could.

I grabbed his face and planted wet, smoochy kisses on his cheek, eye and forehead while messing up his hair.

He groaned all the while but was smiling.

I smacked his butt, got out of bed and told him I was going to have a shower. As expected, within a few minutes he'd joined me. So my rendition of 'Working 9 to 5' somehow became a duet. Then we played around in the shower.

It was *hot*.

Nik can really use his mouth. And I showed him I can use mine, too.

This brings us to now.

I'm in Nik's kitchen making crispy bacon and French toast for breakfast. I'm making a lot because I don't know when Ceecee and Max will come home.

Nik has gone to shave and get dressed. It turns out I distract him in the

shower and he forgets what he needs to do in there.

Smiling to myself, I turn on the oven to keep our breakfast warm. I look at the amount I made and cringe. I cooked enough to feed an army.

Arms close around my waist and lift me. I yelp.

I turn to a chuckling Nik and push at his shoulder, “Dammit, Nik. Every freakin’ time! You’re like a cat. I need to put a bell on you.”

He’s dressed only in sweats so all his tattoos are on display.

Yum.

With dancing eyes he kisses the frown lines on my forehead and says, “Sorry, baby. You’re just too easy.”

I sigh and ask, “Do you know when Max and Ceecee are getting home?”

He looks at the oven clock which reads 9:37am. He replies, “Soon. Keep the food warm and we’ll eat together. Even if they’ve already eaten they’ll want food if you cooked it.” He squeezes my waist and I smile at him.

My man is sweet as sugar. Lucky me.

He pulls me over to the closest sofa. We collapse onto it and tangle together.

I grab the remote and turn on the TV. We watch TV for a while and chat.

I ask, “Does this feel weird to you?”

He tilts his head and says, “Nope, just the opposite. It feels right.”

I whisper, “Yeah. I know. Isn’t *that* weird?”

He smiles big and responds, “I wanted you since I met you, baby. From the

first time I saw your ass in that sexy skirt.” I frown and he chuckles. “The best thing that could’ve happened to us was you insisting we be friends. Now I *really* know you. You never acted like a woman trying to impress a man. You were my friend.” He lightly flicks my nose. “My really good friend. And now that we’re more its feels like it’s just an extension of our friendship. So, no. it’s not weird. It’s amazing.”

Wow. See? Sweet.

I smile, lean forward and peck his lips. I say quietly, “You’re too good for me, Niki. I’ll never know what I did to deserve you but I’ll thank god for it every day.”

He hugs me tighter and says, “Tell me about your family.”

I stiffen at this. I quickly relax and answer as vaguely as I can. “Mom died a couple of years ago. No brothers or sisters. I’ve got some aunts, uncles, and cousins in Cali and even more in Croatia. Dad still lives in Cali. He’s pretty close with his sister and her husband.”

He strokes my hair and asks curiously, “It must’ve been hard leaving him. Why did you come to New York?”

I force a laugh and say, “Cali just wasn’t my scene anymore. It was hard leaving Dad and Nat. Dad loves Cali, though. He’s got his friends and some family there. He’s heavily involved with the Croatian community. He has a life there.” I shrug lightly.

This is true. Dad, or Tata, is involved with the Croatian Club in Cali. My dad has lived in America for about 30 years and still has a heavy accent. This is because he's friends with Croats, he works with Croats, and he speaks more Croatian than he does English.

Nik remains thoughtful. He knows I'm avoiding his question. Nik isn't dumb.

Before he can question me further I play with the fingers on one of his hands and ask, "What happened to your Dad, Nik?"

He sighs and leans back further into the sofa. He smiles as he explains, "Dad was awesome. Best dad anyone could ask for. He came over from Russia, met and fell in love with Mom, a Mexican immigrant, and never left. His name was Ilia." He softens his voice a little and holds me tight.

"Dad was a good man. A really good man, baby. He didn't like all the small injustices of the world and did whatever he could to fix 'em. That's how Ghost came to live with us. Dad got through to him." He sighs heavily and runs his hand down his face as if he's about to drop a bomb on me. And does.

He says, "In saying that, my father was the vice president of the Russian gang, Chaos. He was high up in organized crime, baby."

My mouth falls open and I whisper, "No. *Freakin'*. Way."

He nods solemnly. "Yeah. Dad died of a heart attack. Just dropped dead one

day. I was recruited into Chaos shortly after. I did it so I would have money to give my Mom. Max and Ghost wouldn't let me join alone so we all joined together and til I turned twenty, we were enforcers for them."

No way!

That is crazy. I'm speechless at the moment so Nik continues. "That's this tattoo right here." He points to the tattoo on his upper arm that spells XAOC. "It's Chaos in Russian. Max, Ghost, and I all have them. The guys you met last night, Alexei and Lev, are a part of the Chaos brotherhood."

I'm silent a moment then ask quietly, "Did you ever kill anyone?"

He smiles and shakes his head. He explains, "As enforcers we used force to get our money *if* necessary. And yes, I've shot people but never to kill. I've broken bones, baby. I've shot people and done that shit without flinching."

He looks ashamed. "That is who your man is. A street thug."

No!

No way.

That isn't the Nik I know.

The Nik I know is lovable, sexy and funny.

The Nik I know loves his niece so much he'll do anything to keep her happy. Even have a birthday cake and blow out candles when he really doesn't want to. The Nik I know takes his brother and paraplegic niece into his home without question. The Nik I know had no time for a childhood

because he was too busy doing all the things his dad would've done for his family.

That is the Nik I know. My Nik is *not* a street thug.

I lift my head and look right at him.

I startle him when I push at his shoulder a little too roughly and blurt, "Nuh uh! You are *not* a street thug. You are an entrepreneur. You are a family man. You are a *survivor*. And that makes you sexy as hell. You are wonderful." I stroke his cheek softly and say firmly, "And I am proud that you're mine."

His eyes search my face and his brow furrows.

He whispers, "Fuck me." Then he holds my face in his hands and kisses me deeply.

After a few seconds of bliss I break away and place my forehead on his.

I whisper, "I won't have you talking about my man like that. My man is big and strong and he'll kick your ass."

He blinks. Then bursts out laughing and squeezes me.

I smile big. I love when he laughs.

Still chuckling he says, "I love you."

We both freeze.

My heart stops.

I have died. Just a little.

He cringes and says, “Too soon, huh?”

I smile and shrug. He sighs and pulls me into him. I’m wrapped in a Nik blanket and it feels great.

Screw soon!

I turn my head a little so our lips touch. I hold his jaw with my fingertips and peck at his lips one- two- three times.

Here goes nothin’.

I close my eyes and whisper against his lips, “I love you more.”

I feel his smile against my lips and he wraps me up tight.

Warmth washes over my body. I forgot what being in love with someone felt like.

We stay tangled together until Max and Ceecee got home.

As soon as Ceecee comes through the door she yells out, “Tina! Tina! Tina!”

Nik and I laugh into each other’s necks before separating. We both stand and watch Ceecee come towards us wearing the most beautiful crooked smile.

She looks happy. That makes me happy. I lean down and give her a big hug.

I push her hair behind her ear and tell her, “We were waiting for you to get home. I cooked breakfast for all of us.”

Max looks to the ceiling, throws his arms in the air and whoops. He walks

toward me and kisses me on the cheek and says, “I knew there was a reason I liked you, T.”

Ceecee’s face has dropped. She replies quietly, “I already ate breakfast with grandma.”

Max peeks in the oven and yells out, “French toast *and* bacon? You’re a goddess, Tina.”

Ceecee’s face lifts a little. She whispers to me, “I *love* French toast.”

I smile at her and offer, “Well how about this, you go ahead and get yourself a piece and whatever you can’t eat, I’ll eat for you.”

She smiles shyly and responds, “Okay.”

I bring the food over to the dining table and go back into the kitchen. I peek out and see Max cutting Ceecee’s food for her. Ceecee doesn’t look happy.

I call Max into the kitchen and say, “Max, honey, Ceecee is nine years old. She doesn’t need you to cut her food for her anymore.”

He frowns and returns petulantly, “I like cutting her food for her. I’m her daddy.”

If there were dirt on the floor, he would’ve kicked at it.

Too cute.

I cup his cheek and ask, “You want her to be independent, right?”

He sighs, “Right.”

I kiss his cheek and say, “Help her by allowing her to help herself.” I hand

him the syrup and butter to take to the table and he skulks away.

We all sit and I look over to see Ceecee cutting a strip of bacon.

She smiles big at Max and tells him, “See, daddy? I can do it!”

I shoot him a smothered smile. He smiles and shakes his head at me.

He responds, “I know, angel. You’re not a baby anymore.”

Nik looks at us through narrowed eyes then winks at me.

We eat and when we finish the boys clear the plates. Ceecee and I go to watch some TV.

Ceecee sits next the sofa in her chair and I sit on the edge of the sofa with an arm around my little friend stroking her hair.

Still watching the TV, she says softly, “Is this what it’s like?”

I’m immediately confused.

I ask, “What what’s like, angel?”

She leans her head on my shoulder and whispers, “To have a family.”

I freeze.

Cue waterworks.

I clear my throat to steady my voice and turn my misty eyes away from her.

I say shakily, “Yes, angel. We are a family.”

Chapter Twenty

All good Bear's go to heaven

Monday morning at Safira is busy for the first time in...ever.

We had a new shipment come in. It included a popular blazer worn by one of Hollywood's elite actresses and there is a crush of women calling and showing up to the store to place orders or buy them. This price of each blazer is close to two hundred dollars and I ordered twenty of them so even though we're extremely busy, I'm mentally doing the nutbush.

I make my way over to Winnie's and place a coffee order. I chat to the young girl at the counter for a minute before making my way back to the store.

Rawr Raaawr

Crap. Damn. Poop! I forgot to change the batteries in the doorbell sensor which is slowly dying.

I glare up at it and turn and look to the counter and freeze.

There is another expensive flower arrangement on the counter. Nat stands there glaring because on the opposite side of the counter stands Omarr.

Oh, Crudsickles.

He delivered them by hand this time.

I mentally prepare myself then walk over. He turns and shoots me a beautiful smile. There is no malice in his eyes like the last time I saw him. He looks like a different man.

Nat disappears from the counter. I force a small smile and greet, "Hello, Omarr."

He looks good. He's wearing black jeans, sneakers and a polo shirt. His hair still styled in short neat dreadlocks. He walks over to me and surprises me when he kisses my cheek.

He says, "Hi Tina, how are you beautiful?"

I flush.

I'm confused. Why is he here?

I respond quietly, "I'm fine thanks. How are you?"

He smiles and says, "I'm good but I'd be better if you'd come to dinner

with me tonight.”

My face falls.

What the heck? Didn't he get the delivery of crushed flowers the last time he tried this?

I put a hand on his arm and reply, “Omarr. I'm sorry. I'm with Nik. We're together.”

His eyes flash hatred and I'm immediately panicked.

He gently removes my hand from him and says, “You made the wrong choice, mami.”

Now I'm getting pissed.

No I didn't. Nik is good to me.

I stand taller and state, “No, Omarr. I made the best choice.”

He shakes his head, looks up with sad eyes and replies “Tina, you don't know your man. He isn't right. You should be with me. I'd treat you like a princess.”

I'm fuming now.

I spit, “Why would I be with you and get treated like a princess when Nik treats me like a queen. And like in a game of chess, the queen protects her king.”

Take that, Omarr!

Uh oh...he's pissed now.

He shoots me an acid smile, “Wrong choice, babe.”

I’m on the verge of tears now. My neck is red and itchy as hell and all I want to do is scratch it to death with a pen.

I whisper, “I could never be with you. You have hatred seeping out of your pores.”

His eyes flash pain and he responds, “Maybe there’s a reason for my hatred. Maybe you should ask your boy about Marcus.”

Marcus? Who is Marcus?

“Is there a problem here?” This sounds terribly bored and coming from the store entry.

There stands Ghost leaning in the door frame.

He says to Omarr, “You lost?”

Omarr replies, “Naw, man. Just catchin’ up with a friend.”

Ghost looks my way than back at Omarr.

He says, “Friends don’t make each other look like Tina looks right now.”

He steps closer to Omarr and whispers, “Do I need to take this to Uncle Jerm or are you going to let it go with some dignity?”

Omarr stands taller, forces a smile, and responds “Naw, man. No problems here. Just visiting.” Omarr turns to me and says, “Sorry I upset you, Tina. Won’t happen again.”

And then he’s gone.

I walk backwards to the wall, put a hand on the wall, and place the other on my chest. I think I'm having a panic attack.

Ghost walks towards me, puts his hands on my cheeks, and forces my face to look into his.

Calmly he instructs me, "Breathe, Tina. Just breathe. Nice and easy. There you go."

I try control my breathing as Nat appears with an ice pack for my flushed face and neck.

Ghost takes the ice pack from Nat and gently runs it along my neck and cheeks.

He looks at her and says, "Thanks for calling."

She nods but remains focused on me. I haven't had a panic attack in a year. I don't feel like I'm in control of my own body and that sucks. I definitely did *not* miss these.

Nat puts a hand on my forehead and whispers, "You're safe. You're grounded. Calm yourself, babe."

I nod and close my eyes. My heart won't stop racing.

Nat comes closer to my ear and whispers, "Remember how Mia always said *My* instead of *I* so when she would ask for something it would come out *My* want to watch a movie or *My* want candy?"

I smile at the memory. I nod and my breathing slows slightly.

She goes on, “Or how she couldn’t say the letter *L* properly so she would say Mia wants *yunch* instead of *lunch*?”

I chuckle. I’m sweating like a pig but I can breathe deeply now. I nod.

Nat chuckles quietly, “Remember when she emptied a whole container of baby powder on the couch and was throwing it around like snow?”

I burst into laughter but it quickly dissolves into silent sobs. I slide down the wall and sink to the floor. My body is boneless.

Mia is gone. My precious baby. All I have are those memories.

Nat sits down next to me and holds my limp, shaking body. I feel her body shake with mine. Mourning my daughter together. A true friend feels your pain and knows nothing they say can compose you, but a simple embrace can be worth more than any words ever could.

Without warning I stand, take the flower arrangement, and walk out the door. My blood boils and my breathing heavies. I shriek as I throw into the street and watch as a car runs over it.

It was a two hundred dollar gift. Now it’s nothing but trash. Just like the person who gave them to me.

I turn on the sidewalk to see Ghost and Natalie standing in Safira’s entry smiling.

I close my eyes and breathe deep.

After gathering back what is left of my mind, I walk over to Ghost and kiss

his cheek. I kiss Nat's right after.

I walk right into the stock room, close the door, sit on my desk and sob.

“What exactly did he say to her?” I ask.

Ghost replies, “I don't know, Nik. She was wound up tight when I got there. She had tears in her eyes.”

My heart clenches.

He looks uneasy as he continues, “That's nothing compared to what happened after he left. Your girl had a meltdown. Shaking like a leaf, flushed, sweatin' like a fountain, out of control panic attack. Had to cool her down with an ice pack. Nat said a few things to her I couldn't hear but whatever she was saying seemed to be working. They both ended up in tears.” He smirks. “Then Tina gets the flowers, walks out of the store and throws it into oncoming traffic. Beautiful, man.”

That is funny.

I just can't bring myself to think about anything other than Tina having a breakdown. This is why I got out of Chaos. It affects your family. Now, I'm not even a part of the brotherhood anymore and it's still affecting my girl.

Nope. I don't like it.

So many thoughts are running through my head. I ask, “You think this is the last we see of Omarr?”

Ghost furrows his brow and responds, “They call him unpredictable for a reason, brother. I just hope Tina didn’t diss him. He’ll take it as a personal insult.”

Tina is sweet as pie. No way she dissed him.

I shake my head and point out, “This is Tina we’re talking about. She hates confrontation. No way.”

Ghost nods his head in agreement.

So why do I still have a bad feeling?

My phone pings.

I check it and see I’ve received a text from Nik asking me if I’m okay. He called a few times but I didn’t have it in me to pretend I was.

I’m feeling a little better now. I’ve drowned my sorrows in coffee and candy. I decide to go see him. I leave Nat in charge and she waves me out the door.

Probably look like death warmed over.

I walk into his office. Nik’s sitting behind his desk on the phone. He spots me and his face softens. He waves me over. I reach him and he pulls me down sideways onto his lap. He tucks me deeper into him and continues to talk on the phone all the while rubbing my back and planting whisper-soft kisses on the side of my head.

I'm suddenly relaxed. Nothing compares to this. Nik is my personal form of stress relief.

My body becomes lax and I feel sleepy.

Nik ends his phone call, puts his phone on the desk and wraps me up tight.

He asks, "You okay, baby?"

I nod into his chest. I don't trust myself to speak. It's been an emotional day and I've been known to cry at the drop of a hat.

I feel his breath on my ear as he sighs and continues to hold me.

I decide to break the silence with, "Who's Marcus?"

Nik's body stiffens. And there it is. Not good.

He softens his body and explains, "Marcus was Omarr's older brother. He was killed years ago."

I don't believe that. There's more to this and, gosh darn it, I want to know.

I whisper, "How did he die, Nik?"

He sighs and tightens his hold on me as if he thinks I'm about to go berserk.

He starts the story, "Marcus broke into our family home when I was fifteen.

He tried to get into my dad's office to steal something. Dad heard someone in the house. Dad shot Marcus and he died later that night."

I gasp and grip him tight. I'm not sure how I feel about this.

Nik continues, "When the police arrived to take statements and asked who took the first shot, I said it was me. Omarr thinks I shot his brother dead. I

was just a kid and protecting my dad, babe. I got a suspended sentence and a few months later my dad was dead. So it didn't make any difference anyway. Omarr is a part of the Sixes. Uncle Jerm leads them and he knows I didn't do it. That's all that matters."

I stay silent while I process this. It explains a lot of the tension between Omarr and Nik. Maybe Omarr just wanted to use me to get back at Nik.

"I'm sorry baby, this is all my fault," he whispers on a shoulder squeeze.

I whisper back, "No, it's not. Your dad was protecting your family and you were protecting your dad. I would do the same for my dad, Nik. Really, I would."

We don't speak again. Just find solace in each other's embrace.

A few minutes pass and I yelp as my cell phone blasts 'Little Talks' by Of Monsters and Men from my pocket.

I jump up, fish it out of my pocket and answer. "Hello Miss Molly, everything okay?"

I'm shocked when I hear her snuffle. "Oh child. I tried to get him down but I can't reach him. And the blood...so much blood. He's tangled up. I can't get to him. I'm so sorry, child." She says this all in a rush and it's hard to decipher.

My heart races. I'm so confused. She sounds shaken and distraught.

I coo, "Molly, tell me what happened. There's blood. Someone's hurt?"

Nik jumps up and is by my side in a flash. He turns me to face him. His face questioning. I shrug. Molly isn't making any sense.

Molly splutters, "Bear, child. Bear is dead."

No.

I watch Tina's body go rigid and her face drains of color.

She whispers, "Okay, Molly. I'll be home soon." Her face is blank, void of emotion and her eyes lose focus.

Tina has turned into a droid.

I wrap a hand around her waist, squeeze and ask softly, "Sweetheart, what happened?"

She pulls my arms off of her slowly and stands there a moment looking like she's close to losing her mind.

Her eyes are empty. My Tina isn't here right now.

I watch helplessly as her face shifts into a grimace, crumples, and she bursts into tears.

I don't do tears well but the first thing that comes to mind is 'whoever made my girl cry is going to pay in a big way'. I pull her into my arms and rock her while she cries.

She repeats softly, "He's all I had left of her..." like a mantra.

Tina cries for a while. I hold her tight and let her.

She stops crying after a few minutes and I ask her what happened but Tina is vacant. The lights are on but she's long left the building. And I'm worried.

I call Nat, who closes down Safira and within minutes she's in my office. She asks if she can use the 'chill out' room for a while. I approve. She asks for some alone time with Tina. I nod and return to pace in my office.

Half hour passes and Nat comes into my office. Her eyes are puffy and she whispers, "Bear's dead."

My face falls. Damn. I know Tina loved her cat but I'm unsure why it caused this reaction.

Nat says, "There is more to this you don't know. Bear wasn't just any cat. He belonged to someone Tina loved very much. He was all she had left of that person and now he's gone and Tina feels disconnected." My brow furrows. She continues quietly, "Tina carries a lot of baggage. You'd never tell by looking at her now but she's had a tough time over the past five years. Be patient, Nik. She'll let you in, just treat her with care."

I'm surprised.

Tina seems like the most together person I know. Finding out she's had it tough breaks my heart. I'm desperately curious now but I won't ask. It's Tina's story to tell.

I nod and say, "I'll send Ghost over to the apartment to get Bear."

Nat nods and goes back to the 'chill out' room to be with Tina.

My poor girl.

This was a bad day for her. I'd do anything to make it better.

Ghost returns from Tina's apartment glowering.

Fuck me. This is not good.

He closes the door to my office and I know it's worse than what I thought.

He sits down putting a leg on his knee and shaking it. He says, "Cat was decapitated."

My body stiffens.

What the fuck?

Ghost continues, "Body was strung up by its tail on the back porch like a lantern. I spoke to Nat. She knows. No way is she telling Tina. She mentioned that Tina said some shit to Omarr. She dissed him. A few times. This looks like a message to me, brother."

It was. A very clear message that read *Don't fuck with me.*

I nod. I only have one choice.

I have to kill Omarr.

For the first time in two years, I closed Safira early. Nat called Mimi and told her not to come in for her shift. I'll still pay her, of course. It's not her fault I broke down today.

Nat drives me home in my car, she orders Chinese food but I can't stomach it. I just want to go to bed and pretend today didn't happen.

Bear is gone.

My only link to Mia is gone. And I know he went in a bad way because no one will tell me about it. Nat told me Ghost picked him up and took care of him.

I can see someone's tried to clean blood off my back porch. Thinking of Bear in pain makes me want to retch. He was the best cat and a great companion. All those lonely nights felt okay as long as Bear was purring around the place. The apartment feels empty without him. I walk passed his food bowl. There will be no feeding him tomorrow. I will never see him dance again. Or hear his sweet meow. Or cuddle him.

Nik asked me if I wanted to stay with him tonight but I refused. I wouldn't be great company and I'm thankful he didn't push. The last thing I need would be to get angry with him. I need space.

He got me.

Today was a really bad day. And I'm over it.

Time to hit the hay.

I excuse myself without eating and kiss Nat on the cheek.

Finally, in my nice warm bed I'm allowed to feel whatever I should be feeling.

I'm hurting. Real bad.

A silent sob takes over me. I thought I was passed days of feeling like this.

Like I don't want to wake up tomorrow.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not suicidal. Some days are just hard and you want to go to sleep and wake up a week from now knowing the problem is gone. Everyone feels like that once in a while.

Life can be overwhelming.

I sniffle and bury my face under my covers. I hear the door creak and Nat hops into bed with me. She snuggles close and without a word, we fall asleep.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!” Nat shrieks.

I jump up on my bed in a Kung Fu pose preparing to kick some ass. My head is throbbing and my eyes sting from crying. I see a shadowed outline of a person at the edge of the bed.

I throw myself onto the large individual's back and put them in a choke hold. My arms are shaking but it's better than sitting around waiting to be killed. Like Bear.

I yell out, “Call the cops!”

Natalie turns on the bedroom light and we both freeze.

Nik’s face is red and veins are popping out on his forehead. To top it off, he’s dressed only in underwear.

I quickly loosen my arms but wrap my legs around his waist and hug his shoulders.

I squeal, “Honey! What are you doing here?”

Still with me attached to him he doubles over to catch his breath.

He puffs out, “I,” *puff* “came to see,” *huff* “if you’re okay.”

I look at the digital clock on my bedside which reads 1:46am.

I’m still in a state of shock.

I ask in disbelief, “At one forty six in the morning?”

He stands up and breathily replies, “Yeah. I didn’t think this through, huh?”

Nat replies sternly, “Uh, no. No, Nik. You didn’t. You broke into the apartment a few hours after someone broke in and killed Bear! Not the smartest thing you’ve ever done.”

Nik nods and looks apologetic, “I’m sorry, guys. I couldn’t sleep knowing Tina was upset. So rather than be up all night I came over, and Ghost had a key made for me, by the way, and gave me the security codes.”

That makes sense.

Ghost breaks into our apartment every other week. Why wouldn’t he give

out spare keys and security codes to the public?

I kiss Nik's neck and whisper, "Thank you for thinking of me. Let's go to bed."

Nik nods and looks at Nat as if expecting her to leave.

She shakes her head and says, "Nuh uh. You must be out of your mind if you think I'm sleeping alone after that."

I jump in the middle of the bed, my best friend climbs in on one side and my boyfriend jumps in on the other.

You know what? Life isn't so bad after all.

Then I think about what just happened and burst out laughing.

The bed shakes as Nat and Nik laugh with me.

I don't think we'll get much sleep tonight.

Chapter Twenty-one

Naughty Nooner

I wake up a little before the alarm is set to go off. I feel smothered.

I look to my left to see Nat has an arm on my belly and both her legs tangled in mine.

Wait. One, two, three, four, five, six legs.

I look to my right and Nik is on his stomach, smooshed faced with his legs also tangled in mine.

We're a gigantic pretzel.

I try to wake Nik first. I pinch his nose closed but all this does is make his smooshed lips flap and vibrate as he breathes heavier out of his mouth.

I can't stop the hysterical laughter that bursts out of me.

I'm so tired. My head and eyes hurt like a mother. Bear is gone but I know he's with my Mom and Mia. And I had the most uncomfortable sleep. But at least I was surrounded by two of the most important people in my life. And the way Nik sleeps is absolutely hilarious. I'm running on empty and absolutely hyper.

Nat and Nik both awaken to my loopy laughter and snorts. They lift their heads up and look at me like I've lost my mind. And, truthfully, I think I might have.

Nik excuses himself to shower and change clothes. We spend the morning getting ready for work. I ask Nik if he brought his car but he said he came by cab because his car makes too much noise and he didn't want to wake Ceecee.

Once we're ready we got out to my car. After I battle with her for five minutes to please open for me, we squeeze into my baby. Nat climbs through to the back so Nik can take the front seat.

I try the ignition.

Nothing.

Nat is already laughing. We go through this every morning. She tells Nik I own a clown car.

I glower at her while I put my foot up onto Nik's lap and kick the passenger

door while turning the ignition.

She starts.

Works every time.

Nik looks like he's not sure whether to laugh or get the hell out of the car.

We're on our way to work and Nat says, "Nik, turn on the radio."

He shakes his head and replies cynically, "I would but I'm scared the roof might fly off."

Nat and I burst into laughter. We laugh so much we both sob and laugh at the same time.

By the time we get to work our moods have lightened.

Nat kisses Nik on the cheek before moving to open the store. Nik stays behind with me and wraps his arms around my lower back.

He says, "I'm so sorry yesterday was bad for you, sweetheart. I'll spend forever making it up to you."

What?

I'm confused.

I ask, "What do you mean, honey?"

He answers on a squeeze. "Omarr. He's my problem, not yours. I'll fix it. I promise."

Sweet Lincoln's Mullet!

Nik blames himself for yesterday. I know Bear's death is Omarr's doing.

No one needed to tell me that. But still, no one will tell me how and, quite frankly, I'm okay with that. Some things are better left not knowing.

I pull back a little and hold his face in my hands. I say, "It's not your fault, honey. Don't think that, not for a second. Omarr killed Bear. Not you. He is a psychopath. Again, not your fault. He can spend his life blaming the way he is on his brother's death but that only makes him a weak person. Not. Your. Fault. Got it?"

I see emotion flicker over his face. He puts his lips on mine and whispers against them, "God, I love you." Then he kisses me deeply. I wrap my arms around his neck and stand on my tiptoes.

I pull away from the kiss and bury my face in his neck. I breathe him in.

As long as I have Nik, nothing will ever seem that bad.

I whisper into his neck, "You make life better."

His body stills a moment before he squeezes me.

I turn and walk without looking back.

Time for work.

You make life better.

Whoa.

If there ever was a compliment to beat all compliments, it would be that.

Sneaking into Tina's apartment last night was a dumb idea. I didn't think it

through. But I spent most of the night tossing and turning. I couldn't stop thinking about her. I kept wondering if she was okay or what if she felt uncomfortable sleeping there after what happened.

I made the quick decision to call a cab and head on over. I used my spare key and typed in the security code. It went haywire when I kissed Nat's forehead thinking she was Tina.

All hell breaks loose.

Nat starts screaming. Tina jumps up onto the bed like she's Bruce Lee then throws herself on my back and starts choking me.

Yeah, not good.

Thank god Nat turned on the light otherwise I might've passed out. I could feel Tina shaking against me but she had me in a tight grip. Adrenaline gives people strength they didn't know they had. I didn't want to hurt her so I just let her choke me. I'm surprised I'm not purple this morning.

Then Nat refuses to leave and we had some weird sleepover in Tina's bed which is luckily a king. Just when I'm about to fall asleep, Tina bursts out laughing.

I couldn't help but laugh, too. Then Nat joined in. The whole thing was pretty amusing, though.

Weird sleepover aside, I'm glad I was close to Tina last night. As soon as we settled in bed, I felt calm wash over me. If I'm being completely

truthful, I'm glad Nat was there too. Because if I were Tina, having two people I love in bed with me after a bad night would have made me feel a whole lot better.

I've decided not to do anything stupid regarding Omarr. Killing him will bring up a bunch of questions by the Sixes and I'm sure Tina would know. I don't want her to ever feel unsafe around me. I'm her protector.

I'll have to set up a meet with Uncle Jerm and work this out the right way. But I swear to god, if that asshole comes near my girl again I don't know if I'll be able to control myself.

I think I'll have to talk to Tina about her kamikaze defense methods.

And that damn clown car. One day, she'll start to open the door and it'll take off without her.

I smile at this morning's shenanigans but I quickly sober.

Time to set up a meet.

The store is still crowded with potential blazer buyers. A lot of them see the price and slowly back away. Which I can't say I blame them; it's a lot to pay for one item.

Mimi and Lola are both at the store today because Nat asked for the morning off to get a physical.

I asked if everything was okay and she said she thinks it is but no harm in a

check-up. Which I immediately approved of. You don't mess around with your health.

I walk out of the store room and find Mimi at the counter with an irate looking She-Devil Sissy.

Son of a Big Mac!

Just when I thought I was having a good morning.

I walk over and ask Mimi, "There a problem, Meems?"

Mimi doesn't take her eyes off Sissy but replies, "Just fine boss lady. Sissy here wants to buy a blazer. I told her the price and she freaked."

Oh, woe is she! Cry me a damn river!

This woman is becoming a permanent pain in my backside.

I turn to Sissy and say, "I'm sorry, Sissy. The blazers are expensive but they are what they are. Take it or leave it. Do not bring drama to the store."

Sissy flips her platinum blonde hair over one shoulder and replies "Fine. Two hundred and fifty dollars for a blazer, I must be out of my mind. Whatever. Wrap it up."

Holy buckets!

Mimi charged her sixty dollars more than I planned on charging. I'll tell her off later. Not that she'll give a flying poop.

Mimi starts wrapping up her purchase when I remember something and tell her, "Sissy, there is absolutely *no* refund on this item. You bring it back and

it won't be like last time. I won't be nice."

Sissy glares at me. I take this as an *okay* and turn to head back to the store room.

I halfway there when I hear Sissy yell out, "How did you do it?"

What?

I turn and take a few steps towards the counter. I ask, "How did I do what?"

She makes an exasperated noise. She says slowly, "Nik. I worked on him for months and ended up with zip. How did you get him? You pregnant or somethin'?"

The nerve of this woman!

I decide to be a little cruel. Which is never nice but this woman is insinuating the only way I could have Nik is if he got me pregnant.

I say acidly, "No, Sissy. I'm just not you. Which, not surprisingly, Nik likes." I lean closer and whisper, "Nik loves me, Sissy. HeHH told me I'm *it.*"

I see her face flash painfully and without waiting for a response, I turn and head back to the store room.

I didn't like doing that. Sometimes I wish my mouth had a backspace key.

Nat comes back in to the store sometime after three. She doesn't stop to look at anyone, just walks on through to the store room and ignores the

greetings we all yell out to her.

That's odd.

Nat is a people person. Even on the worst day she's at least mildly social. I decide to investigate.

I walk over to the store room and just as I'm about to knock I hear muffled crying come from behind the closed door.

My heart clenches painfully.

Oh God.

What if the doctor's appointment went bad? What if she's really sick? Or even dying?

My face pales and I start to sweat.

No way in hell I'm losing Nat without a fight.

I barge into the store room, close the door behind me and lock it.

Her back is to me and she's quieted down a little but I can hear her sniffle.

It takes a lot for Nat to cry. She isn't a sooky baby like me.

I walk over to her and put an arm around her. She places her head on my shoulder and howls out uncontrollable sobs. Of course, this means I cry quietly right along with her.

Still sobbing she sputters, "I can't...I can't have them. I thought I was but then I wasn't and now I can't have them."

Uh, Wha...?

I hold her and coo to her until she calms and I try to decipher what she just said.

“What’s the matter, honey?” I ask quietly.

She straightens a little and replies, “I thought I was pregnant. Ghost would’ve been the father.”

I balk.

Oh Em Gee!

Nat being pregnant would be awesome! She absolutely adored kids. I know she wants a lot of them.

I say, “Well, honey, that’s nothing be upset about. That’s...”

She interrupts me “No. It would’ve been fine. I would’ve been happy. But the doctor did an ultrasound. I’m not pregnant. But he found over *eighty* cysts on my ovaries, Tina. I have PCOS.”

My face falls and I put a hand to my chest.

She isn’t pregnant. They did find something.

She tries to be strong but her lip is quivering. “The doctor says it’s a high probability that I won’t be able to have children. Like, ever.” She looks at me through glassy eyes. “I’ll never have kids, Tina. And that sucks so bad. Eighty fucking cysts. That’s why my period didn’t come.”

Oh, God. You totally suck sometimes.

I cry right along with her. I pull her close and coo, “Oh, honey. There are

options for people who can't have children. We'll research everything we can. We'll call specialists and doctors. We'll go online and talk to other people with PCOS. We'll figure it out! I promise."

She nods into me. After a minute I gasp lightly and smile.

I whisper, "I'll have your baby for you."

Her body stiffens and she lifts her head. Her pretty face is distorted by sorrow and I don't like it.

She whispers back, "You'd do that for me?"

I nod, "Yes. Absolutely. No question. I don't think I'd do it for anyone else but you're my sister. So, yes."

She bursts into tear again and we cry together.

Mourning her loss. Celebrating our friendship. Together, like always.

Take that, PCOS. You can't win.

I'm finishing some paperwork when I hear the familiar *clip clop* in the hall.

I smile.

My baby has come for a visit.

I walk to the office door and just as I get there, I see her smiling face grace the doorway.

Smiling big, I step closer, grip her hips and lean down to kiss her neck.

I place slow, sensual kisses on her neck and she sighs. Her hands move to my shoulders and squeeze.

Still working on her neck, I ask, “Baby, you need something?”

She stills for a second then replies, “You know, all of a sudden, I can’t remember.”

I chuckle and squeeze her hips. She pushes at me slightly til we’re just inside my office.

She whispers, “I need you.”

I lift my head and flash her the dimple. I say, “You got me, baby. You’re my heart.”

Tina gets a gooey look on her face and puts a hand on her chest. She shakes her head and straightens. She steps closer to me and says slowly, “No, babe. I *need* you. Like, now.”

Well, hot damn!

My baby needs me! I like that.

She walks backwards, closes the office door and locks it, smiling a sultry smile all the way.

I’m already harder than a rock. Tina and I have had sex a few times now and it’s always bangin’ but she’s never come to me for a nooner. I *really* like this.

She walks up to me and undoes my belt and zipper so I’m open and bare.

Steps back a few steps, lifts her skirt and slowly lowers her panties. Then walks over to my desk, puts her hands on it, turns her face to me and lightly shakes her perfect ass at me.

Fuck me! It's on!

She giggles when I run to her. I lift her skirt and kneel behind her. I take my time kissing her perfect behind. I squeeze and lightly spank her cheeks. They turn rosy.

Nice.

I stand and she turns to me. She lays wet, sexy kisses on my neck and softly sucks at my pulse point which feels amazing. My cock jumps. She lowers herself til her head is lined up with my crotch. She palms my hard length, stroking it up and down before taking me into her mouth. She works me so good. My eyes roll back and I groan.

This is Sexy Tina. I love all my Tina's but I really like Sexy Tina.

She takes me deep into her mouth and hollows her cheeks on the release. She does this repeatedly.

Fuck, I'm going to come.

Oh, no you don't!

I put my hands under her arms and lift her. She gasps when I turn her and push her a little forcefully onto the desk.

Luckily, Tina is wearing heels, otherwise this never would work.

I lift her skirt, bend my knees a little, hold my cock and prod gently til I find her entrance. I carefully work my cock up and down her slit, coating it with her arousal. When Tina pants, I know it's time. I slowly drive the head of my cock into her pussy.

So fuckin' tight!

You'd think I'd get used to it.

Nope, no getting used to perfection. My baby is perfect.

I push myself in inch by inch. I hold Tina's hips and pull her back so we're ass to crotch.

Can't get a better feeling than this. No ways.

I still for a moment before pulling back slightly and thrusting back into her. Hard. She moans and I can't stop myself from gripping her hips and fucking her hard. I pound into her. I look down and see her rosy ass which is jiggling with every thrust.

Oh, man. So good.

I ask ,“You like that, baby?”

She pants her reply ,“Ohhhhhh. Yes, Niki, I love it. Faster, baby, I'm close.”

I love when she calls me Niki.

I pound into her harder and faster. I feel her tighten around me.

She feels like heaven when she comes.

I feel my own release dawning. Tina grinds her ass back into me. She

moans quietly and I feel her contract and release around my swelling cock.
Heaven.

And that's that. I grip her hips tight and pull her back into me. I groan as I jerk my own release and fill her with my seed. Tina rests her head on my desk and I hold onto her. We both pant softly and I feel Tina's body shake. I look at her sideways turned face and she's laughing.

She says, "That was my first nooner. Ever."

I chuckle as I slowly pull out of her. I ask, "I like being your first at something. How was it, baby?"

Still bent over my desk, I hear her sigh and she whispers, "The best. Everything with you is the best."

I clean myself before I bring some tissue and wipe her clean. I ball up her panties and put them in my pocket.

I decide it's time to bring up a concern I've had for a little while.

I pull Tina to stand and hold her tight. She wraps her arms tightly around my waist, sighs and rests her head on my chest. I smile. This is what love is. Simple pleasures and all that.

I clear my throat and ask, "Tina, sweetheart, should I be preparing for a baby?"

Tina's limp form goes so rigid I think she might just take off like a rocket.

She replies quietly, "No, Nik. I have a birth control device in my uterus and

it's good for another two years. But while we're on the subject, when's the last time you were tested?"

A fair question.

I answer truthfully, "After the last time I slept with Sissy. I'm clean as a whistle, sweetheart." I smile down at her worried face. "I've never had sex without a condom, baby. You're the first."

Her eyes widen and she whispers, "Really?"

I reply, "Really really."

She smiles up at me. I'm just about to kiss her when she jerks back and says, "I'm clean too by the way! I got tested after...after him. And I'm squeaky clean. And no. No babies."

That last statement sounded a bit too sharp for my liking.

I grip her tight and rub her back. I ask, "But you want children someday, right?"

She backs away from me. Her face voids and I get the feeling I'm not going to like her answer.

She shakes her head, swallows hard and says slowly, "No, Nik. I decided not to have children. And no, there is no changing my mind about it. This wasn't a decision I made easily. Believe me." She finishes on a whisper.

Well, shit.

I want kids. I was thinking that Tina would be the one to give them to me.

This is a blow to the gut for me. I was excited at the prospect of children and I wanted to be a daddy to Tina's beautiful children. It's all part of the fantasy in my head. Tina is my wife and we live together in a nice house with three kids and a dog. The dog was actually Bear but that isn't an option now.

I'm stunned speechless. I don't know what to say. I'm so disappointed right now.

I obviously don't hide my disappointment well. I catch Tina's shining eyes and she says, "I understand if this changes things for you. I really do. Just think about it and let me know if this is still a relationship you want to be a part of. Because I won't have children. Or adopt. I... I just can't."

She sounds tortured.

She turns and walks out of the office. I don't follow her.

This really does change things.

I need time to think.

Chapter Twenty-two

Fort Knox

Tina was on my mind all damn night.

We haven't spoken since she let me in on her blatant refusal to have children.

I shuffle around papers on my desk while I think.

I'm thirty five years old. I'm definitely not getting any younger and spent most of my adult life believing I'd someday have children.

I wanted children.

Then hurricane Tina tore through my life and my heart. I built her up so much. I was sure she was perfect.

Now, she's not quite perfect anymore.

But does that mean she's any less perfect for you?

Let's think about it.

There is no way I'm selling The White Rabbit which means all my weekends would be demanding and hectic. I wouldn't be able to spend weekend nights with my family anyway.

I'd love for Tina to be with me at the club and she won't be able to do that if she's pregnant or at home with our kids. Also, she owns Safira. How would she be able to work with a child to look after?

It would be unfair to have her watch our babies all day then be exhausted all night when I have club business til late in the evenings. She'd basically be raising a child alone.

What kind of father would that make me?

I love Tina.

And that's worth everything, right?

Sometimes love isn't enough.

I've come to conclusion that maybe children aren't in the cards for me. And I'm surprised with how I feel about it.

I'm okay with it.

I don't *love* the idea but I never stopped to think about how raising a child would affect the lifestyle I lead. I love the club. It's a big part of me. I don't want to give that up.

So maybe...?

I smile to myself, pick up my wallet and head out the door.

Rawr Raaawr

“Damn baby, that’s an unpleasant noise.”

I freeze.

My eyes widen as I turn slowly towards the door.

There stands a smiling Nik, dimple and all.

Ah, okay...

A little freaked out here. I thought we were over.

I don’t know what’s happening right now but he’s smiling. I swallow hard and shrug.

I explain quietly, “I keep forgetting about it. It just needs new batteries and someone to replace them.”

He walks towards me and puts his hand on my hips. He lowers his face til his lips meet mine and says against them, “I’ll get my guy to fix it, baby.”

My heart skips a beat.

I’m briefly stunned.

After a moment of allowing my brain to stutter I ask quietly, “Does this mean...?”

He pecks my lips lightly and answers, “Yeah, sweetheart. No kids. Okay

with me.”

By the beard of Zeus!

Relief courses through my veins and a familiar warmth spreads outwards from my belly.

I wrap my arms around his neck and hold him tight. I do this awful laugh cry and don't even care how stupid I look.

I kiss his lips hard and say whisper, “Oh my god!” *Cry-Laugh*

“I thought I'd lost you.” *Kiss-Hiccough- Laugh*

“Last night was the worst night ever.” *Sniffle-Kiss*

“Are you sure?” *Snort-Kiss.*

He chuckles and lifts me up. I have no choice but to wrap my legs around his waist. He holds me with one forearm under my ass and the other across my back.

He replies quietly ,“Got no life without you, baby. You're it for me.”

I burst into tears and he rocks me. I wrap him up tight as if he might disappear.

I don't care who's watching.

Nat, Lola, and Mimi all cheer, whoop and laugh around the store. I hear Nat yell out, “Get her out of here, you sly son of a gun.”

I lift my face and he smilingly says, “You got boogers, baby.”

I laugh and wipe my nose with my sleeve. That's the least of my worries

right now.

I have Nik! Nik is my man! Again...

I'm going to do everything I can to keep him. I love him so much.

Leaning my forehead against his, I whisper, "Love you so much, Niki."

His face softens as he replies, "Love you more, teeny Tina."

Heavens to glory, thank you God.

After I went over to Safira and reunited with my girl, we went to lunch. Tina sat in my lap. Well, she sat pressed so close to me she practically was. We had sushi, stole kisses and held one another. Just appreciating each other after our almost break up.

When we left we stayed wrapped up in each other til we reached Safira. I kissed Tina long and slow.

Never again.

I don't know how I got on without her. More importantly, I don't ever want to be without her again.

I check my wrist watch for the time. 2:11pm.

Time to get to a meet.

Two thirty comes and I arrive at the warehouse the Sixes own better known as the factory.

The factory is well known amongst gangs in New York. It's heavily guarded during the day and at night; however, all that keeps it safe is an alarm system.

I know this because Marcus was killed trying to get papers with this information out of my father's office. My dad never did give this information to Chaos and I'm not sure why. It would've been easy to arrange a raid and steal the drugs they have stored there. However, if Chaos did end up doing that it would've started a war between Chaos and the Sixes.

I guess that's why my dad never gave this information away. Dad never was one for a fight.

I'm not stupid enough to come alone to see Uncle Jerm. I bring Ghost with me; people are generally scared of him with good reason. Ghost wouldn't hesitate to shoot you in the face if he thought his life was in danger. Long gone is the boy who took his licks without a word.

We walk into the warehouse office and are frisked. This is not unusual.

It would be disrespectful to conceal a weapon at a meet.

We remove our guns but I know Ghost would never go completely unarmed.

We are escorted by a street thug, better known as a soldier, to Uncle Jerm's office. I've only been here once before, when I was a teenager, but I remember it well. I was petrified the last time I was here. I thought I would take my last breath in this warehouse.

The door opens and Uncle Jerm is standing in front of his desk, smiling with open arms.

The thing about Uncle Jerm is you gotta love him. He is lovable.

Never without a smile or kind word.

I would tell you he wasn't cut out for this work but I know some of the things he's done.

The stuff of nightmares.

He will do anything to protect his boys.

I walk over to the short, sixty year old African American who always wears a suit and tie, hug him and pat his back. Ghost doesn't hug. He just stands in the corner on watch.

Uncle Jerm pulls back from me and says, "Well, well, well. Looks like the little boy grew into a big man."

I chuckle. I wasn't very tall the last time we met. I was just a freakin' kid. I'm surprised he remembers.

Smiling, I say, "Uncle Jerm. You look good."

He pats his belly and replies, "Old lady's on my back. Cholesterol this and

cholesterol that. Won't let me eat anythin' anymore. Thinks I'll have a heart attack or some such shit."

He motions for me to sit which I do. Then he takes his place behind his desk. It's very similar to mine.

He claps his hands together and says, "So, I believe we have a small problem."

I nod and respond, "Yes, sir. I think we do. Your boy Omarr broke into my girl's apartment and did a job on her cat. Ripped its head off and hung it like a Christmas ornament on the back porch. Luckily, the neighbor found it before Tina did."

Uncle Jerm's face droops into a frown. He mutters, "I don't like this. Omarr... Well, he hasn't been the same since Marcus died." He straightens and reveals, "Always hated on me for not retaliating. Doesn't tell me things like he used to. But I heard of your Tina. Chaos seem real pleased you found yourself a girl. Says she real pretty. I'm happy for you, son. You get something good, you hold onto it with both hands, ya hear?"

See what I mean?

Lovable.

I nod and he continues, "Omarr has been extremely disrespectful as of late. He don't turn up for his shifts. He don't answer to me anymore." He leans back and with a sigh says, "He gone rogue, boy."

Oh, Fuck.

This is what I was dreading. Omarr isn't taking orders from Uncle Jerm anymore, which means he's only answering to himself. This is basically Omarr making his own rules. If Uncle Jerm gets evidence Omarr's recruiting behind his back, Uncle Jerm will have no choice but to kill him which would be good for me.

I utter a hesitant, "I see."

Uncle Jerm nods and says, "Yeah. I know you get me, son. Not much I can do about him right now but I'll have my boys keep an eye out. Haven't seen him in days. If I could control this, I would. Terrorizing an innocent girl is *not* the way the Sixes roll. I hear he wants her. You better up security from your end. If he wants her, he'll take her. You take care now, ya hear?"

And just like that, we're dismissed.

We didn't get anything sorted but at least I got some information.

Looks like the next step is security.

It's around four when I hear the god-awful bell go off.

I'm a little stunned when in strolls Ghost with three other men. Ghost doesn't even look at us girls as he walks in and out of rooms giving instruction to the men. One man has a note pad and pen and is writing furiously all the while nodding. One man is taking measurements. And the

other man almost pushes me out the way to get under the counter.

Well, excuuuuse me, Rudie McRudeAss.

Ghost finally notices that I'm alive and approaches. He says firmly, "Upping your security, T, considering you have..." He looks around Safira then back at me, "none. Getting that goddamn bell fixed, too."

Yippee to the bell. I'm not sure about the rest.

I cautiously ask, "Is there a reason I need security in a store I've been at for two years without problem?"

He scowls at me and replies, "You got a problem, take it up with Nik. Just followin' orders, T."

Well damn!

I look around and see men are already drilling holes into my walls and getting dust on some of the clothes.

Eeek!

I run over to the clothes and rip them off the displays. I dust them off as best I can but I'm sure they'll need a steam clean.

My face turns into a scowl matching Ghost's and stalk over to the computer.

I log onto the Instant Messenger and type.

TheTomicBomb: Nik the Dik, u got some 'splainin 2 do!

I immediately get a reply.

Nik123: Okay, baby. Later.

Oh no, he didn't!

TheTomicBomb: Can u pls explain y I have 3 men and Ghost ruining my damn clothes!?

Nik123: Be there in two.

That's more like it!

Two minutes later, Nik strides into the studio and starts barking out orders. "Don't put that there", "These clothes are very expensive, watch it", "Fix the damn bell before you do anything else, it's an emergency."

My savior.

My face has since gone soft. I walk up behind Nik, hug him and press my lips to the middle of his back. I utter a muffled, "Thank you, honey."

His hands rub mine that are gripped tight around his waist. He replies, "Anytime, sweetheart."

Nik barks another order, "Don't put the camera there. It needs to focus on the outside, as well."

Camera?

I quietly ask, “Nik, why do I need cameras?”

He barks another order, “Get the panic button in before the camera.”

Panic Button? What in the Dickens?

I’m freaking out!

I whisper, “Nik, you’re freaking me out.”

He turns in my arms so I’m hugging his front now. He kisses my brow and responds quietly, “All just precautions, Tina. I don’t think you’re in danger but it’s worth doing all this as a safety measure. You want your girls safe, right?”

Low blow right there, what am I meant to say to that? No?!

I reply sulkily, “Yes.”

He smiles and says, “Good. CCTV goes straight to our security room which Ghost or Trick will monitor. Panic button makes our security room go bananas. As soon as it goes, we’ll be half a minute away. Tighter than Fort Knox, baby.”

I must admit that sounds good. It makes me feel safer. But what am I meant to be afraid of?

I ask cautiously, “How much is all this going to cost, Nik? It looks awfully expensive.”

Nik’s face turns serious as he replies, “You ain’t payin’ a dime, baby. Don’t

even try to argue with me about it. You wouldn't need any of this shit if it weren't for me. I take care of what's mine."

My heart squeezes.

That's a bit sweet. But it must cost in the thousands of dollars. I don't like that.

I try to argue, "But..."

Nik cuts me off with a deep kiss and immediately my traitorous body responds.

No fair you big meanie.

He pulls away slightly and says firmly, "No."

Well, I guess that's the end of that argument.

It takes an hour to install the cameras, panic button, and new door sensor.

Hurrah!

Our doorbell actually goes *Ding Dong* again. I need to bake a cake to mark this wondrous occasion!

I kiss Nik, pat Ghost's cheek, and thank the other men.

They all leave and I slump. I didn't even do anything and I'm exhausted.

Hmmm.

I wonder what would happen if I press the panic button right now?

I look around. When I'm certain no one can see me I peek under the counter. My fingers twitch.

You know the saying curiosity killed the cat? I'm sure it was written about me.

I slide my fingertips from the top of the counter down and just as I come into contact with the button...

I jump two feet into the air when the phone rings. My hand slaps my chest, I breathe heavily and my legs shake.

Seems I'm as skittish as a cat too.

I answer and before I say hello I hear, "Don't even think about it."

That's Ghost!

I stand tall, frown, and put a hand on my hip. I lie, "I wasn't going to press it!"

Ghost sounds amused as he says, "Uh huh," then hangs up.

I make an exasperated sound and stare at the phone. Damn fool of a man hung up on me!

Looking up, I scowl right into the camera.

The camera moves left then right. It looks like it's shaking its head no!

The nerve!

Admit it, you got busted.

Yeah. Totally busted.

I spend most of the next morning teaching Nat and Lola how to use the new security equipment.

I see Nat's finger twitch by the panic button. I smile and warn, "I wouldn't if I were you. Ghost will hand you your ass on a platter."

Her face falls and her lips pout. I giggle at her adorableness.

This is why we're friends.

I spend the rest of the morning vacuuming around the drill holes and re-steaming clothes that got dusted yesterday. Once I'm sure the items are like new I place them back on display.

Lola and I chat. I ask her about Trick and what's new.

She responds, "I'm not sure what's going on with Trick. Just when I think he's going to make a move, he stops. And I'm *there*, you know? I want it to happen. But something's holding him back. Not sure what more I can do."

I turn thoughtful. Nik told me Trick moved back in with his Mom. He didn't elaborate but I'm sure it has something to do with her. Maybe she's sick? I don't want to make assumptions to Lola and freak her out so I stroke her pretty brown hair and utter, "Be patient, honey. Trick isn't a player. There must be a reason."

She nods and replies sourly, "Hope he's worth waiting for." She looks at me and immediately softens. "Because I will, you know? I'll wait." She lowers her head and nods as if reassuring herself. "For Trick, I'll wait."

I squeeze her shoulder and make my way towards the counter. Just as I get there I see an older man on the other side of the road. He's clutching his chest and using his bowler hat to fan himself.

Holy Smokes!

He's going to faint!

I run to the staff room, get a bottle of water from the fridge and snatch my stash of candy from counter before bolting out the door. I run into traffic using my hands to show cars I'm trying to help someone; luckily the cars stop.

I reach the short, African American man just as he's about to fall. I put my arms around him and slowly lower him to sit on his bottom against The White Rabbit.

I quickly ask, "Are you okay?" I open the water and hand it to him.

He takes it from me with shaking hands, drinks a little and replies breathily, "Oh, thank you, child. It seems the sun has it out for me today."

My heart slows its pace and I plop down next to the old man.

I open up my stash of raspberry bullets and hold it out to him. He raises a brow but takes one and pops it into his mouth.

With the candy at the side of his mouth he says, "These are my favorite."

I nudge his shoulder slightly and reply a little over excitedly, "Me, too!"

Bonding with an old man over candy is nice. Don't judge me.

He chuckles but quickly firms his voice and reprimands, “You could’ve got hurt rushing over here, child. Best not be doing that again.”

I nod and reply, “Sorry, I’d promise I won’t but if I saw someone going down the way you were, I probably would.”

I hold out a hand to him and say, “I’m Tina.”

For some reason, his face looks stunned for a moment.

He covers it quickly, takes my hand and replies, “Jermaine.”

We shake and smile at each other. Bonding over candy and water on a dirty sidewalk.

This is how good friendships start.

I’m just about to ask Jermaine to come to the store for coffee when I hear, “Uncle Jerm?”

Max stands there staring wide eyed at the two of us.

Oh, Crudsickles.

This sweet old man is big, bad Uncle Jerm of the Sixes? How can that be?

My face must show my unconcealed shock because when Uncle Jerm looks at me again he chuckles.

He looks up at Max and replies, “Was just coming to see my boy Nik. Felt a little dizzy when superwoman over here flew in and saved me.” He shuffled sideways and takes my hand in both of his. “You know, when people told me Nik’s woman was different, I didn’t get it. I thought a woman is a

woman.” He kisses one of my hands and continues quietly, “Now I get it. You a special type of woman, Miss Tina. I’m glad to have met you. It was an honor and all *my* pleasure. Be sure of that.”

My throat thickens.

That’s one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me. I don’t know how to respond. I just open and close my mouth like a fish out of water.

Uncle Jerm smiles at me and hold his hands up to Max. He says, “Help an old man up, son.”

Max helps Uncle Jerm up and holds his arm with one hand. Then he holds out his other arm to me and I use it to pull myself up.

I dust myself off and stutter “W- well, I better get back to work.”

I kiss Max on the cheek then do the same to Uncle Jerm. I know who he is but I feel we have a connection after today’s incident. I’m so happy when he takes my hand smiling and kisses it.

Then I waltz back over to the store leaving Max smiling and shaking his head.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Attack of the She-Devil

Poker night has turned into board game night.

Turns out the guys were losing too much money to Ghost who has a supreme Poker face and no tell whatsoever.

Max, Ghost, and Lola sit at the dining table asking the others if anyone else wants to play. I see Nat raise her hand and walk over to the table.

Uh oh.

I don't even try to hide my worry.

I walk over to Max and speak softly, "Are you sure you want to play with her?"

Max looks confused and replies ,“Sure, T. We’re a player short.”

I raise my brows and respond a long, drawn out, “Ooookaaay.” Then I lean closer and whisper, “Don’t say I didn’t warn ya.”

I make my way over to the sofas with Uno. Meems hates playing this with me but is always a good sport and a tad competitive which is great because she doesn’t give in easily when I whoop her butt.

Nik, Trick, and Mimi gather around me as I deal. We all take our cards and play.

Nik tries to cuddle me but I know he’s trying to look at my cards. I give him a *don’t even think about it* look that must look serious enough because he raises his brows, puts up his hands in surrender and backs away.

Shit almost got serious.

We play three rounds. I win the first two and I’m actually happy when Meems wins the other. I jump off the sofa and tackle her to the ground saying, “You want a piece of me?”

I’m even happier when she bursts out laughing. Mimi seems a lot happier these days.

Just as I jump off of her I hear Nat say loudly, “This game sucks.”

Oh poop!

Ghost smirks at her and responds, “No. You suck.”

Why, oh why, Ghost?! Don’t taunt the bull!

Nat stands and leans toward him over the table. I see her eye twitch.

That can't be good.

She whispers in eerie calm, "Oh yeah?"

Ghost doesn't even look at her when he replies a firm, "Yeah."

Nat picks up the board and throws it across the room. It hits the wall and bits and bobs fly everywhere. Then she stands and walks coolly to the sofa where she plops down and says sullenly, "I'm bored."

I smile and look over to a shocked Max, a chuckling Ghost, and a pissed Lola.

I say sweetly, "I told you so."

Max nods his head and says, "Game over, Red Rover."

"Daddy?"

I look to the monitor but see Tina is already making her way to the kitchen for a glass of water for Ceecee.

Smiling to myself, I think about how perfect a mom she'd be.

Then suddenly I'm frowning. Because we won't ever experience that together.

Max watches Tina with a small smile.

She has been the perfect role model for Ceecee. She's a successful business owner with good manners who loves to cook and involve Ceecee in

everyday things. Her advice to Max about letting Ceecee be independent has really paid off, too. She gets herself ready for school, makes her own breakfast, and is generally happier. It was hard for Max to let go. He was so used to doing everything for Ceecee. Part of it being he liked being needed by her.

I think he worried he would be left out of Ceecee's life if he didn't have to do anything for her.

Tina disappears down the hall and we all resume playing.

Half hour passes and Tina hasn't returned.

Sherlock Holmes time.

I creep down the hall and find Max eavesdropping on Tina and Ceecee. He looks like he wants to laugh. I tap his shoulder. He turns and holds a finger to his mouth.

I hear Tina first. "The thing about makeup is that less is more. You put on a ton of makeup and you'll end up looking like a clown!"

Ceecee doesn't speak for a long moment then responds with, "But I like clowns."

Tina's voice sounds wistful as she says, "Yeah, me too." Then she excitedly offers, "Ooh! Next time the circus is in town we'll go!" I can practically hear her bouncing up and down.

That's my goofball.

Ceecee whisper replies, “You’re the coolest.”

Tina responds matter-of-factly, “Nuh uh. You’re the coolest. Ice cold, baby.”

Ceecee sounds full of awe when she asks, “Really?”

Tina replies, “Uh, yeah!” She makes it sound like Duh! “You think I come here to see your uncle or your daddy? Nope. I come here to see your pretty face, angel.”

Neither of them says anything for a while then Ceecee whispers, “Love you, Tina.”

Tina responds with a choked, “Love you more, baby.”

I turn sideways to look at Max. He looks to be in pain. His eyes are bright and he swallows hard.

He turns and creeps back down the hall without a word.

Well, damn.

Ceecee is finally asleep and I tiptoe down the hall back to the others.

I see the games have stopped and everyone has taken their usual places on the sofas watching yet another Will Ferrell movie.

Everyone except Max, that is.

I look over to Nik and shoot him a questioning look. He nods his head toward the patio.

I step out to the patio to find Max with both hands on the rail, head slumped down between his shoulders. I touch his arm and ask quietly, “Honey, you wanna tell me what’s bothering you?”

He replies a short and firm, “No.”

Using my hand to lightly tousle his hair I say, “Okay, honey. But I’m here with open ears if you need ‘em.”

I’m halfway back to the door when I hear a pained, “You got no idea, babe.”

I walk back over to him, touch his arm and tell him, “So help me understand.”

Max swallows hard and says quietly, “You got no idea what it’s like to love someone so much, with all ya freakin’ heart, but she looks exactly like someone you hate. It feels like a cruel reminder every time I look at her I see the face of the person who put her in that fuckin’ chair.”

Sadness eats away at what’s left of my heart.

Wow. This is the most Max has ever spoken to me about Ceecee and her accident. Nik has since told me the story just so I’d have all the facts and not be completely ignorant about Ceecee’s mom.

I feel honored that Max would let me in.

What Max doesn’t know is that I know a bit about how he feels. Mia looked just like Jace and every day was a reminder of the heartbreak I felt. But then

Mia would smile or giggle and I'd also be reminded that Jace was a big fat stupid head to leave that behind.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I squeeze and rest my forehead on his back.

We stay like this a long time before I break away and give him some time alone.

As I reach the door I look back to my damaged friend and pray that someday he'll find love again.

Saturday night comes and all us girls are itching to get to the club.

We need drinks and laughter, stat.

We are over people trying to bring us down and Mimi told me that if I had any more problems with anyone this week to flip em the bird and say some really nasty words which made me giggle and blush.

We're all dressed in our usual attire and head to The White Rabbit or, Wonderland as we like to call it.

Anticipation drives us crazy. As soon as we exit the cab we bound up to B-Rock whooping and jumping around like loons. He chuckles, holds his cheek out to accept our kisses and lets us in.

It's bangin' tonight!

We make our way up the stairs to the VIP area and Asian Alice is there to

greet us with a smile and escort us to our booth.

Trick and Max are already seated, talking and laughing together. As soon as they notice us approach they both stand to hug and greet us.

I ask where Nik is and Max shrugs and tells me he was called to his office to deal with an emergency.

Hmmm.

That sucks.

Maybe I should go over there and make his emergency a little more fun.

I smirk internally and decide I'll do just that.

But first, I need a drink.

I wonder how the fuck I'm standing in my office with Sissy when I should be out waiting on Tina to get to the club.

This was not the emergency I had in mind when I was called to my office.

Sissy is dressed in a white thigh high dress. It's a miracle it covers her pussy and I suddenly wonder what I ever saw in her.

She was easy.

Oh, yeah. That's it.

I sit in my office chair and Sissy sits very close to me on the edge of the desk.

I ask, "What can I do for you, Sissy? You know, it's funny, but I thought

you were banned from the club.”

She throws me a sour look and replies, “Don’t be mean, Nik.” She smiles what I used to think was a sexy smile and says, “I just wanted to see how you were.”

This is a fuckin’ emergency?

I stop myself from rubbing my hands down my face and reply, “I’m busy. And speaking of busy, I need to get back so please escort yourself out.”

I move to stand but she stops me with a foot on my thigh. She scoots closer to me and my eyes narrow.

She’s up to something.

Lightning quick, she slips off the desk and into my lap, lowers her face to mine and kisses me.

Not a nice kiss either.

It’s sloppy and her tongue prods at my lips. Revulsion washes over me. Her hands remove my shirt tails out of my slacks. I stand. She falls to the floor on her knees.

I’m fuming.

I spit, “I had one fuckin’ rule, Sissy. Don’t ever kiss me. My kisses go to special people. Not people I used to fuck.”

I undo my belt and zipper to work my shirt back into my pants when the office door opens. I turn to see who it is.

Oh Fuck!

I open the door to Nik's office and freeze.

Nik is standing with his zipper undone. Sissy is on her knees before Nik, wiping at the corners of her mouth trying to fix her lipstick which is all over Nik's mouth. When she sees me, she smirks.

There is a fist wrapped around my heart and it squeezes, hard.

I fight to keep breathing.

I lock my knees to stop them from shaking. I feel ill.

Dread seeps through my body.

My heart is breaking.

Disgust claws at my eyes and begs for me to look away. And I do.

Using my hand I shield my view because, let's face it, I don't want to see Sissy smirk over the blowjob she just gave Nik. I croak, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to barge in." It comes out thick, my mouth is suddenly dry.

How pathetic am I?

I walk in to my boyfriend's office and catch him cheating on me with a She-Devil and I apologize.

Then I turn my back and walk my shattered heart out.

I hear someone yell out my name but it sounds miles away.

How the fuck did this happen?

I tuck my shirt into my pants and zip myself up. I look down at Sissy and rage coils tight in my gut.

The stupid bitch is smirking.

I may have just lost the love of my life and she taunts me. My blood boils.

Kill her.

No control.

I put my hand to her throat, lift her up by it and squeeze hard. She sputters and slaps at my hands.

I ask in a quiet but deadly voice, “Get what you wanted, you sick twisted cunt?”

Her wide eyes are watering and she gasps for air. Her nails dig in to my hand.

I don’t care. I’ve lost control, maybe even my mind.

Using the hand at her throat, I walk Sissy backwards into the wall. Her lips are turning blue and her eyes are drifting closed.

I vaguely hear, “What the fuck?” Then arms are all over me pulling me away.

Max turns my head to face him. He’s saying something but I can’t hear him.

Ghost, Trick, and Max all have their arms on me, yelling things at me. I see their mouths moving but there is no sound.

Sissy slides down the wall clutching her neck and gasping violently for air. My eyes drift to the door and I see Mimi, Nat, and Lola staring wide eyed and open mouthed at Sissy.

I shrug out of the hold the guys have me in and walk over to Nat. She's my only hope at this point.

Lifting my hands, I hold her face. She looks worried. I say confidently, "I swear to you on Tina's life, nothing happened."

I hold her face firm but her eyes drift to Sissy. She looks at Sissy a long time before she whispers, "I believe you."

I pull her towards me and kiss her forehead. She moves her hands over mine which are holding her face. I rest my chin against her forehead and whisper, "Where is she?"

Nat shrugs against me.

This night can't get any worse.

I stumble onto of the club.

Luckily, I got my purse before I left. My cell phone blasts Nik's ringtone – Beyoncé's 'Halo'.

No way am I answering.

B-Rock looks concerned but lets me on my way without stopping me.

As I cross the street, I listen to Beyoncé sing the first verse.

*Remember those walls I built,
Well, baby, they're tumbling down,
And they didn't even put up a fight,
They didn't even make a sound.*

Fuck off, Beyoncé. There's no such thing as angels. No one wears a halo. And if they do it's only to disguise the pointed horns that sit atop their heads.

I told Nik I didn't trust my instincts when it came to men and it looks like I was right on the money.

Women say it all the time. I didn't even see it coming.

I thought we were happy.

A sob tears out of my throat just as I'm unlocking the door to Safira.

It starts a torrent of tears. I sob so hard I can't pull in a full breath.

It takes me a minute to get in the door. Once I'm in, I lock it behind me. I turn off the alarm, keep the lights off and stumble. On my knees in the middle of my store. A store I don't want to own anymore if it means I'll have to see Nik every day. Still sobbing, my eyes blur and I can't see but I crawl my way to the general direction of the store room.

Heartbreak and sorrow swirl through my limp body.

My knees hurt. I wheeze, huff and puff.

Screw you, Panic attack!

I can't breathe. I think I'm going to pass out.

And I do.

It's been an hour and I still can't find Tina.

I'm sick with worry. We've looked everywhere.

Where could she be?

Dread fills me.

What if something happened to her?

Nat told me she wouldn't answer my calls so I stopped trying. Nat kept calling her from her phone but not getting an answer. I can tell by the look on her face that isn't good.

I kicked Sissy out and told her if she even tried to press charges against me I'd out her for the coke addict she is. Her daddy would disown her if it came out. The stupid bitch told me all about it.

Everyone is crammed into my office and they all look like I'm about to go postal.

Which I just might if we don't find Tina soon.

Nat gasps and slaps a hand over her head. She knows something.

I run to her and take her hands in mine. She whispers, "Safira."

My fuckin' god.

How stupid *am* I?

I don't wait for anyone. I run out of the club into traffic and luckily make it to the other side unscathed. I try the door but it's locked. I look inside but its pitch black. It doesn't look like she's here.

My cell phone rings and I answer. I hear Ghost say calmly, "She's in there man. Collapsed. Get in there."

I drop my cell phone and use my elbow to try and break the thick glass of the door.

It doesn't budge.

I try again and again til my elbow pulses with pain and is raw and bleeding but it won't break. I roar in anguish and move to the display window, I walk back a few steps then run and throw my shoulder into it.

It breaks.

I'm covered in glass and I feel blood drip into my eye but I don't care.

I walk between the mannequins through to the studio. And there she is.

I rush over to her and lift her limp body.

Out cold.

Blood drips from my forehead and eye onto her cheek.

I open the store, hail a cab, and take her home.

My eyes flutter open then closed.

They're so heavy I can't lift my lids.

I try again and after a few attempts I manage to squint a little.

There is a low light coming from beside me and I try to lift my loose body into a sitting position. Just as I'm about to give up and lay back down, arms come under mine and help me.

My head is pounding, it feel as though blood is rushing to my brain.

I look left and see a concerned Nat sits next to me on the bed. I look around the room and blanch.

This is Nik's room.

What am I doing in Nik's room?

“What am I doing here?” I whisper.

Nat puts her arm around me and explains, “I know you're upset, T. But it was all a big misunderstanding.”

My eyes widen in disbelief. I groan and put a shaking hand to my pounding skull.

She goes on quietly, “You didn't see what we saw, babe. He had Sissy backed up against a wall and was choking the life out of her. Does that sound like a man who was happily having an affair?”

He did what?!

That does sound unusual.

I remain quiet.

Nat continues, “When you walked in on that scene, and it was a scene planned by Sissy by the way, Nik was devastated. He thinks he’s lost you, Tina. He’s a mess.”

I’m at war with myself.

I want to believe it. My heart says *yes* and my head counters with a big fat *nuh uh*.

Nat squeezes my shoulder and states confidently, “Tina, when he looked in my eyes and said nothing happened, I believed him. He loves you. And he doesn’t even like her. I saw the look in his eye, it was pure and honest.”

And there it is.

Nat would never lie to me. If she believes Nik, she has reason to.

After a moment of silence I ask quietly, “Can you get Nik for me please?”

She smiles at me and responds, “Of course, beba.” I smile softly.

My mom used to call me beba all the time. It means baby in Croatian.

She exits the room and suddenly I’m nervous and sweating.

What if it Nik doesn’t want me anymore because I believed he’d do something like that to me?

The door opens, I turn to look and see Nik stand hesitating in the doorway.

I try so hard to be strong but I crumple. I cover my face with my hands and burst into heart wrenching, uncontrollable sobs.

I feel the bed depress and in a moment I'm lifted onto Nik's lap. He cradles me like a parent would their child.

He coos, "It's okay, sweetheart. You're okay now." And he kisses my head and rocks me til I calm.

I sob and sputter, "I'm s- s- sorry. Sissy's a b- b- bitch." I finish on a wail.

I feel Nik's shake with laughter and he agrees, "Yeah, babe. She is. A big one."

We stay quiet for a while and hold each other. Nik breaks the silence.

He whispers, "I would never, ever hurt you like that, Tina. If I ever thought I was going to cheat on you, I'd break up with you. But I don't want to cheat on you." He strokes my hair and continues "You're my life. Nothing is more important to me than you. But I was there and I know what you think you saw. And it looked very bad. I'm sure if I'd walked in on you and another man in the same position I'd probably kill the guy."

Oh, thank god!

He understands!

He wipes under my eyes and I lift my face to look at him. When his eyes reach mine I gasp.

I shriek, "YOU'RE HURT!"

His already scarred eyebrow is swollen and stitched. He has little cuts on his forehead and his elbow is bandaged up.

He cringes and says, “Yeah. About that, I called a guy to replace your store window. I kinda ran through it.”

My belly warms and my heart squeezes.

I whisper, “You ran through a wall of glass to get to me?”

He looks miserable and nods. He whispers back, “I thought you were hurt, baby. I’d trek through the fires of hell to get to you if I had to.”

I lean forward, hold his jaw with my fingertips, and kiss his lips softly.

My lips quiver as I whisper against them, “I love you so much, Nik. I was so hurt. I thought you didn’t want me anymore.”

He pulls me close and kisses me deep. He pulls away and replies, “I know, baby. I’m so sorry you were hurt. I guess people have it out for us. But I love you.” He pecks my lips then continues. “The whole point of love is to trust someone with your heart and pray they don’t break it. It’s about faith in each other. I gave you my heart when I told you I loved you which means I’m giving you power over me.”

I bury my face into his neck and breathe him in.

I never thought of it like that before. I guess I hold the same amount of power over Nik as he has over me. Love is sacred. A gift from one person to another. Love binds people together, no matter how different they might be.

Is it scary?

Hell, yes!

But if we never did the scary things in life we'd lead awfully boring lives.

Take the chance.

But I might get hurt.

Yes, you might. But maybe you won't.

Yeah.

Maybe I won't.

Chapter Twenty-four

The secret life of Tina

It's been a little over a week since Sissy made her play for Nik.

Yesterday was Monday and I felt a little sick. But I dragged my butt to work as most people do.

I ended up getting through half the day of moping around and sniffing before Meems and Nat sent me to Nik's office with a note.

It honestly felt like I was being sent to the principal's office.

When I arrive at Nik's office I see his face fall with worry at the state of obvious me. I drag myself over to him and hand him the note. His eyes narrow but he takes it from me and reads it silently.

Nik puts the note on the desk and bursts out laughing.

I lean over the desk and read.

I will pay you one hundred dollars if you keep her for the rest of the day. I love her to death but she totally sucks when she's sick. Love Nat x

Well, I never!

I feign hurt.

But my friend is not wrong. I *do* suck when I'm sick. I become a petulant five year old.

Nik catches me in a bear hug. He's so warm. My sniffles are muffled and I'm sure I'm getting boogers on him. I say in a nasal voice, "Don't hug me, babe, you're going to get sick."

He rubs my back.

That feels nice.

He replies, "Don't worry about me, sweetheart." He pulls back and kisses my nose. "I never get sick."

This brings us to today.

I'm no longer sick, in fact, I feel great. I guess it was just a twenty four hour virus. Nik's warm hugs and the endless tea he brought me yesterday seem to have worked.

Early this morning I receive a multimedia message. It's from Max and the subject says: An eye for an eye.

It's a photo. Of Nik.

The photo has been taken about an inch from his sleeping face. His mouth is wide open because there are balled up tissues stuffed up his nostrils. The ends of the tissues flare out around his mouth. Beads of sweat roll down his forehead.

Yep.

Mr. I-Never-Get-Sick...got sick.

My body shakes with silent laughter and I save the image to my Nik's name on my phone so whenever he calls it'll come up.

I knock lightly on Nat's bedroom door and tell her I'll be looking after Nik today. She nods and I leave my keys on her bedside table. Then I call Max and tell him he's in charge today at The White Rabbit. He answers with an amused, "Yes ma'am."

I pack an overnight bag and call a cab.

Time to look after my man.

On the way to Nik's I ask the cab to stop at multiple places.

First, I stop at the pharmacy and get day and night cold syrup and aspirin.

Next stop is to the supermarket where I get sports drinks that contain

electrolytes, chamomile tea, honey, noodles, and vegetables. My last stop is to a butcher. I ask him for a chicken carcass, beef osso bucco, and turkey wings. A weird combination, I know.

Max told me he'd leave the side gate open for me so when I arrive to the house I walk straight on through. I dump everything into the kitchen, take a sports drink and make my way to Nik's room.

Opening the door slowly, I peek in. He lifts his head and groans, "You're the worst girlfriend ever. We aren't friends anymore."

I chuckle and move to sit next to him on the bed. He really does look ill, the poor dear.

Using my palm to test the temperature of his forehead, I say, "Sharing is caring, honey."

He closes his eyes in bliss as my cool palms rest on his cheek and forehead.

He says, "Haha. You're so funny you're givin' me a stitch. Goofball."

I thought I was bad when I was sick. Nik is even moodier than me when he's sick and that's pretty darn moody. But he's adorably moody.

Poor baby.

I pull the covers off him and pull a sheet over him then go back to the kitchen to fetch some aspirin, cough syrup, and another sports drink then take them back to my patient.

I make him take the aspirin which he really doesn't want and lets me know

by sighing long and deep.

Smiling, I wipe his face with an ice cold wash cloth and run my fingers through his messy hair.

He whispers, "That feels nice, baby." And then he's asleep, snores and all.

Wow. He's sicker than I was yesterday. But he said he never gets sick so maybe this is years of sickness being drawn out of him.

The house needs a little tidying up so I do that then spend the rest of the morning checking on Nik, making sure he takes aspirin and cough syrup every three hours and wiping his face and arms down with cold water.

Early afternoon I get to work on the soup. I luckily find a soup pot; I'm sure this is Nik's moms doing because I can't see Nik or Max making soup.

I throw the meat and vegetables in, cover it with cold water, and turn the heat on high. I wait til it boils, then skim the top every ten minutes. After an hour on a high simmer, it looks the way I want it to and I switch it off. I strain the soup into another pot, peel away the fat from the turkey, chop the meat into little pieces and throw it into the broth. I take two of the boiled carrot and smoosh them up with a fork and add that, too. I turn the broth on to boil again. I add water, a little tomato paste, and season to taste then I break up the noodles and throw them in. That boils together for ten minutes.

And Voila!

A cure for any illness...according to my mama.

Arms close around my waist and I yelp. I feel Nik chuckle into the side of my neck.

I shriek, “Every. Freakin’. Time!”

The man is as graceful as a panther, even when he’s sick as a dog!

I’m glad to see he has some of his color back. His forehead feels cooler, too.

Hooray!

I ask quietly, “Feeling a little better?”

He nods and looks into the soup pot. He pats his stomach and says, “That smells good. I’m a little hungry.”

Yay!

His appetite is back, too. It must’ve been a twenty four hour virus just like mine was.

I tell him to sit on the sofa and I’ll bring him some soup. He sits and I ladle two bowls of soup.

All this caretaking has made me hungry.

Carefully as I can, I bring both bowls over to him, I sit and we eat.

Nik’s reaction to my soup is funny. He makes noises when he likes something he eats. All I hear are groans of approval and *mmmm*. I smirk into my bowl.

He has no idea how adorable he is.

Suddenly, I straighten.

Tell him.

Hesitation works its way into me.

I fight it hard but its winning and just when I think it's won, I blurt out, "So...I had a daughter."

Nik's body stiffens next to mine.

Avoiding his gaze, I play with my soup and continue quietly saying, "She—she would've been five this year. Her name was Mia. And she was beautiful, Nik." My throat thickens with emotion. I whisper, "So damn beautiful, Nik. You would've loved her." My eyes mist and my nose tingles. I'm having a tough time controlling my emotions but I do the best I can.

Why did I think this was a good idea?

The soup bowl clinks when he puts it down on the table. He places my soup on the table before he scoops me up and cradles me.

His lips against my forehead, he asks quietly, "What happened to Mia, baby?"

Taking a second to control the anguish that settles in my solar plexus, I clear my throat and respond, "Mom took her out for a morning walk. They did that every day. Mom had Mia in her stroller and was crossing at a crosswalk when a car careened into them." Memories of the horrific event flash through me. Tears fill my eyes and I whisper hoarsely, "Mom must've

seen it coming at the last second because she threw her body in front of the stroller. But it didn't make a difference because the kid who crashed into them was in shock and didn't brake right away. They were dragged some while. He was texting and driving. Wasn't even watching the road, Nik." The sobs that threaten break free and I croak, "Even though Mom got hit first, she lived for three days before she gave up her fight. My baby died at the scene. Turns out she was also born with hemophilia. She got that from me. And she bled out. In her fucking stroller, Nik. My baby went out for her morning walk and died. The only thing that keeps me from going insane is knowing my mom is somewhere in the clouds playing peek-a-boo with Mia. The stroller was lodged under his front bumper. I had to have a closed casket for her." My tortured memories break through. I rock myself and rasp, "The right side of her pretty face was gone, Nik. Her casket was pink and so tiny. No one should have to make caskets that tiny. Jace didn't even show up for her funeral."

I spent months having nightmares about Mia's last moments. What was she thinking? Did she understand what was happening? How long did she experience horrifying pain before she died?

Anxiety held me immobile at times. Then came the panic attacks. There was a short time when I thought I'd have to be institutionalized to control my grief.

Every night for months I would go to sleep and wake hearing Mia's cries. Desperation would leave me clawing at my ears and pulling out chunks of my hair, begging and pleading for them to stop. It was all in my head but it felt so real. Nothing would drown them out.

He asks, "Jace was Mia's daddy?"

I nod. I breathe deeply and reply shakily, "Yeah, Jace was Mia's daddy. I was young when we met in college. We were together for two perfect years. He was my first and I thought we'd get married someday. I saw him as perfect for me. We goofed around, enjoyed each other's company and supported each other. When I found out I was pregnant and told Jace, he told me he needed time to think about it. He asked for some space. That should've been my first clue. So, I gave him three days. When I went to his apartment...it was gutted." Nik's body tenses hard but I continue, "Not a picture left on the wall. This was someone who told me daily he loved me. And I believed him. I called his mother trying to find him. She didn't know where he was. Jace's parents saw Mia a few times a year and loved her so much. Jace lost contact with his family but I still involved them in Mia's life. They were at every Christmas and birthday. Jace was just...gone."

Nik remains silent. I'm worried this is too much for him. But if we're seriously involved I don't want any secrets between us.

It was time.

Nik finally says, “This is why you don’t want any more children.” This is a statement.

Nodding, I whisper, “I can’t go through that, Nik. Never again. My heart broke in a way that the pieces just won’t fit back together.” I’m desperate for him to understand.

Nik kisses my forehead and says quietly, “I’m so sorry, baby. No one should ever have to experience what you did. Not only losing your baby, but your mom, too. That—I can’t—I can’t even begin to imagine what you were going through, sweetheart.”

The heaviness that has been resting on me has been replaced with a lighter swirling of emotions.

Relief. Fear. Love.

I don’t want to be pitied. Pity from Nik would tear me up.

Lifting my eyes to his, I plead, “Don’t pity me.”

Nik shakes his head slowly and replies, “I don’t pity you, baby. But, fuck me, I feel so much sadness for you right now. And love. And admiration.”

He tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear and goes on, “I don’t know how you got through it all. But I respect you so damn much right now. The kid thing makes sense to me, too. I don’t know how I would’ve coped if we’d lost Ceecee after her accident. I’m so sorry you lost your little girl, baby. I love you, Tina.”

His kiss fills me with hope. This is so much more than I thought I needed. I didn't even realize it.

I love Nik so much.

A small, damaged part of my heart fixes itself.

After my confessions to Nik, I ended up spending the night there.

Ceecee and Max come home to soup for dinner and I was surprised they both seemed happy with that. Normal people wouldn't think it was enough. But Max explained, "We only ever get soup when we're sick so we barely ever get it."

After they ate Nik and I excused ourselves and went to bed. We held each other close all night, kissed and cuddled. It was perfect. Just what I needed. This morning we're both back at work. Nat has opened the store and it's empty.

I tell her, "I told Nik about Mia."

Her body locks, her eyes widen and she gasps, "No! Really?"

I nod, "Yeah, it was time."

A soft smile forms on her lips and she hugs me. She tells me, "I'm so proud of you. Mia isn't a dirty secret, honey, she's a beautiful memory."

Yeah, she is.

Ding Dong.

I love the new bell!

“Sorry, I’ll come back.”

Nat and I part from our hug to see Ghost standing in the doorway looking uncomfortably at us.

Smiling at him, I say, “It was just a hug, Ghost. We weren’t doing it!”

He shifts from his left foot to his right foot looking indecisive then stalks over to me. He hands me a small box. I look up at him through narrowed eyes and ask, “Is this from Nik?”

Ghost shakes his head and blurts, “I don’t know—I just thought—It seemed important to you and I—Fuck, would you just open it?”

Ghost bought me something? Has the world gone mad?!

I moved back a few steps to the counter and place the box in the top. I carefully open it and gasp.

My hands cover my gaping mouth and tears stream down my face.

Ghost pales and quickly says, “Oh Fuck, Tina. I’m sorry. I thought you might like it. I’ll throw it out. Nik is gonna have my balls.”

He reaches for the box and I shriek, “No!” I wipe tears from my cheeks and whisper hoarsely, “I love it. Thank you.” I walk over to him, wrap my arms around his waist, and hug him tight. I feel his arm wrap around my shoulder and squeeze. Ghost hugged me. I can die in peace now.

Smiling, I release him from my clutches and walk back to the box. I take

out the small ceramic urn and place it on the counter. I run my fingers across the engraved plaque.

Bear.

My favorite little guy is back with his mama. I suddenly feel lighter. I hadn't noticed Ghost behind me til he says, "He was a good cat, huh?"

I nod and whisper, "He was my daughter's cat. He was all I had left of her."

A long silence follows then I feel his hand squeeze my shoulder.

Ding Dong.

I don't have to look back to know he's gone. Nat sidles up next to me and hugs me round the waist and we both pay our silent respects to Bear.

After a while I ask Nat, "Still think Ghost doesn't have a heart?"

She answers quietly, "I'm not sure of anything anymore."

I smile, kiss my fingertips and place them on the urn.

Love you, Bear.

Ghost storms into the conference room and slams the door behind him. Max, Trick, and I are already in there, we look at him like he's lost his mind. And what he says next confirms he has.

"Tina had a fucking kid?!" he shouts.

Oh, shit.

I stand and blurt the first thing that comes to mind, "How did you find out?"

Ghost paces and stammers his answer ,“She just told me! I—I just wanted to give her the cat. And then Bam! She mentions her daughter. I just—I just brought her the cat for Christ sakes!” He sounds hysterical. I’ve never seen Ghost lose his mind like this. He doesn’t do feelings. I think this is why.

Thinking about what he said, I’m confused.

I ask carefully, “You bought Tina a new cat?”

He immediately replies with, “No, I had the cat cremated for her. I took it to her this morning and she lost it. Crying and shit. Why do they always cry!?”

Max and Trick are staring open mouthed at me. I know I have some explaining to do. It worries me because Tina didn’t give me permission to discuss this with my boys. But then again, she told Ghost. Although that could’ve been due to the fact she was overwhelmed by what he did for her. *I’m* overwhelmed by what he did for her. I guess he does like her after all.

I point to him and say, “Sit down. Relax before you have a heart-attack, you putz.”

Ghost sits and I begin, “Tina told me yesterday that she had a child. She got pregnant in college by her boyfriend and the asshole upped and left her without a trace. Mia was two when she died. Tina’s mom took the baby for a walk and they were knocked down by a car and dragged at a crosswalk. Tina’s mom threw herself in front of the stroller but they both died. So, yes, Tina had a daughter named Mia. Tina lost her mom and daughter in the

same accident. That's the reason she came to New York. End of story."

A long, thick silence follows.

They all look lost in thought. After a moment Max asks quietly, "How does she do it?"

I turn to my brother. He looks pained. This conversation must have brought back memories of Ceecee's accident. I ask just as quietly, "Do what, bro?"

He turns his sad eyes to me and replies, "Live."

I shake my head and shrug.

I don't know.

Chapter Twenty-Five

For the greater good

The first thing I wake to this morning is my phone chiming. I can't believe my eyes when I find a text on my phone from Omarr. It's a message asking to meet with me.

Has the guy lost his freaking mind?

He killed my cat!

Nik and the guys have been talking about Omarr and the Sixes a lot lately which means I've been eavesdropping a lot lately.

I know Uncle Jerm is worried about Omarr and now classifies him a rogue, whatever that means, and that Nik is worried about me because Omarr is a psychopath. I found out Nik has spent over ten thousand dollars on Safira's

security alone. I don't even want to know how much he spent on the security at the apartment. Nik also mentioned to Max the other night that Uncle Jerm needs evidence to prove Omarr is going behind his back before he can punish him.

I think I can help with that. But I need an extra pair of hands.

I call for Nat. When she appears at the doorway, I sit cross legged in the center of my bed and use my best professional voice "Take a seat, Miss Kovac."

Her eyes narrow but I know Nat, she's intrigued. She sits on the edge of my bed and nods her head for me to continue.

I hand her my phone. As she reads the text I explain, "So, Nik and Uncle Jerm have a big problem in Omarr. What can we do to help, you ask? Well, I have a plan. But I can only do this if you're in, too. I can't do it alone, babe."

She nods and asks, "What's the plan?"

I cringe and explain it to her. With wide eyes she says, "You're crazy. But I love it. I'm in."

I squeal and bounce on my bed. Nat's laughs and hands me back my phone, I immediately text Omarr to meet tonight at my apartment.

God, I hope this works.

Nik and I met for lunch today like always.

He kept watching me with narrowed eyes. He knew something was up.

I was a little too skittish and anxious and no matter how hard I tried to soften my body, I was as rigid as a broom handle.

As we were walking back to Safira Nik asked, “Everything okay, babe?”

I didn’t trust myself to answer him so I just jerked a nod and smiled.

Everything will be okay, Nik.

Mark my words.

Nat and I have just walked through the door. Its six o’clock and I have half an hour to get ready for my meeting with Omarr. I jump in the shower but I don’t sing ‘Working 9 to 5’ today. That’s my happy day song; today may not be such a happy day. I have to get my head in the game. Once out of the shower I find clothes that Nat has laid out on my bed.

Oh, God. Yuk!

They’re the skimpiest clothes I own. There’s a black thigh-high mini dress which I’ve only ever worn with tights underneath and a pair of white pumps. Nat storms into my room with handfuls of makeup and hair products. She teases and primps my hair then applies a lot more makeup that I ever would.

She sprays me with perfume just as the doorbell rings.

She holds my shoulders steady and says, “Relax. I’m just in the next room.

You know what to do. We’ve gone over this a hundred times.”

I nod. This was my idea. My stupid freaking idea!

WHAT THE HECK WAS I THINKING?!

It’s too late now, answer the damn door.

I close my eyes and breathe deep. I count. One—two—three—four and open the door.

Omarr leans against the doorframe looking so damn gorgeous.

Too bad he’s bat-shit crazy.

I put on my best sultry smile to match my sultry voice and say slowly,

“Wow. You look good enough to eat, handsome.”

Omarr’s eyes bug out and his mouth parts slightly.

Oh, yeah. I got you. Hook, line and sinker.

He clears his throat and asks, “Can I come in?”

Still smiling, I step aside but not a lot, as he walks in my body grazes his and I press forward against him.

I put a hand on his chest and lean close to his ear, my lips rest on his earlobe and I whisper, “We need to talk. In private.”

He looks stunned but nod slowly as if he’s in a trance. I wink and nod my head toward the hall. As we reach my room I yell out, “Nat, I’m in my room with company.” A few seconds pass and Nat responds a muffled,

“Okay. Do not disturb. I get ya.”

Perfect. Nat is good at this.

We enter my room and I motion him to take a seat on my bed. Just as I’m about to sit, I straighten dramatically and say, “We need drinks. Be right back.”

I run back to the kitchen, grab my phone and dial Nat’s number. She answers and whispers, “It’s on. Go get him, baby.”

I head back to my room with two beers and my phone. As soon as I enter I look down at my phone, roll my eyes and mutter, “Sorry. I have to keep it near me in case Nik calls. I’ve put too much effort into that man to lose him now.” I place my phone on my bed side cabinet, screen side down and sit close to Omarr on my bed.

Omarr’s brows are furrowed and he asks, “What do you mean you put too much effort into him to lose him?”

I respond as seriously as I can put on, “Well, Nik has money. And lots of it. I’m not in a good way right now and I need cash. Like, pronto.” I shrug and roll my eyes. “Nik loves me, O. He’ll give me anything and everything I want. I just have to hook him a little more.”

Omarr eyes widen and he repeats, “Nik has money. Lots of it.”

I nod and smile as though I’m saying *now you’re getting it*.

Omarr smiles and takes a beer from my hand, clinks it on mine and toasts,

“To manipulating bitches!”

Oh my goodness, it’s working!

I fight off the urge to throw up and state, “You’re fucking things up for me, Omarr. I can’t have that, baby. If you want me you’re going to have to wait your turn. You get me?”

Omarr nods solemnly and utters, “That sucks. I’m sorry, baby. I know I’ve done some fucked up things to you but I do want you. Not just because of Nik. I just want you.” He turns to look into my face and says, “I don’t know if I can wait for you, mami. I want you now.” He leans forward and I just know he’s going to try to kiss me. At the very last second, I turn my head and he kisses my cheek.

Disappointment crosses his features so I quickly shake my head and lie, “Honey, this isn’t the first job I’ve done. I can’t have any distractions around. It’s happened to me before and I’ve lost out. Big. I won’t let it happen again.” I put a hand on his chest and fiddle with his collar. “Now are you going to lay off Nik or what?”

Omarr doesn’t look happy but he nods.

Hurrah!

I slide my hand up to his jaw, lean close and place a slow kiss on his cheek. I whisper, “Thank you, honey. You won’t regret it.” His eyes are closed when I move away from him.

He quickly opens his eyes and says, “Did you ask him about Marcus?”

I nod, pout my lips and respond, “Yes, I did. I’m so sorry, baby. I didn’t know Nik killed your brother. That’s a tough thing to go through. I can’t believe your uncle wouldn’t get back at Nik. It’s like he just got away with murder. What’s up with that?” I sound almost genuinely curious. I hope he’ll open up more.

Omarr’s eyes harden and he responds, “Uncle Jerm doesn’t like wars. Nik was part of Chaos and Marcus was killed in a member of Chaos’ house so they think Marcus got what he deserved.” He looks into my eyes and real pain shines through him. I feel sorry for this broken man. He goes on, “I get that Nik was a kid but on the streets it’s an eye for an eye. I want to make his life as miserable as mine has been. Besides, I wouldn’t worry too much about Uncle Jerm...he may not be around much longer to worry about.”

My insides drop.

Bingo!

I lean my head on his shoulder and rub his knee. I ask in a ditzzy voice, “Why? Is he sick?”

He chuckles and kisses my hair.

Mental note; shower after Omarr leaves.

He boasts, “Naw, baby. You’re not the only one who can work a job.” He strokes my arm and whispers loudly, “I’ll have my own army by the end of

the year. Uncle Jerm is in for a mutiny. If he doesn't kneel before me, he's a dead man."

I gasp and whisper shout, "You would kill your own uncle?!"

He catches me by surprise when he pulls my face to his and kisses me. I force myself to calm and warn myself to keep breathing. He breaks from my lips and chuckles, "You're too cute. I knew you were the one for me from the day we met, baby." He lets go of my flushed face and straightens. "And yeah, I'd kill my uncle. In a heartbeat. Nik is still alive. I should've been allowed to put a bullet in him."

Oh wow. The level of psycho this guy is on goes higher than any chart I've ever seen. He talks about death like it's nothing. Just a job.

I swallow hard and whisper, "Why did you kill my cat, O?"

He has the decency to look ashamed as he apologizes. "I'm sorry, Tina. I just wanted to hurt you because you hurt me."

I look up and lie, "But my hurting you was only an act! Nik is nothing to me. Just a pay check."

He nods and assures, "He went quickly. Decapitation is a very painless way to die."

My face pales, my breathing heavies, and I feel ill.

Oh dear lord. He decapitated my cat?! I think I'm going to throw up.

Instead I stand and say thickly, "Well, now that we've worked things out

and called a truce, I can forgive it.” Over my dead body.

He gets my cue and stands, too. He comes close to me and mutters, “Maybe we should seal this deal with a kiss.” His hand traces my collarbone and I shudder in disgust.

Omarr takes my shudder for something else and smiles. I state, “Sure, just so we both know what we are dealing with. I continue to work Nik and once I’m paid, I’m yours.” He nods and I continue, “But you have to back off. I can’t be distracted. You want Nik hurt and I’ll hurt him, baby. For you, I’ll do anything.” Then I walk a step forward and kiss him closed lipped but enthusiastically.

After I mentally count to fifteen, I step back and force a smile. Omarr is beaming and suddenly I don’t feel bad about doing this anymore. Omarr needs help and his uncle is the only one who can do that.

I’m doing the right thing.

For the greater good.

I take hold of Omarr’s hand and walk him to the door. He hesitates as I open it then leans down and kisses my cheek. With his lips still against me, he whispers, “I love you, mami.”

Then he’s gone.

As soon as I shut the door my stomach knots and I slide my shaking hands up my cheeks and into my hair.

This'll all be worth it in the end.

Standing, I kick off my heels and runs to Nat's room. When I enter she beams, "I'm so proud of you! You did it!" Her laptop is open and she's transferring the recording onto a USB.

Why do I feel so awful if this is such a good thing? I have a bad feeling.

Nat burns two discs. One for me to give Nik, one for me to give Uncle Jerm tomorrow morning and she keeps the USB as insurance.

I hug her hard and whisper, "I hope this works."

She responds with a squeeze, "It has to."

God help me if it doesn't.

My head pounds from lack of sleep.

Anxiety kept me awake all night so I decide to get up earlier than I normally do. I shower and dress.

Uncle Jerm isn't expecting me so I'm hoping he won't refuse to see me. I get into my car and drive.

Trying to be inconspicuous last night on the phone with Nik I asked him where Uncle Jerm worked and he tried to be vague when he said the docks. So that's where I'm heading. Surely, someone can point me in the right direction when I get there.

I arrive at the docks and the gates are shut and locked.

What the frick?

Checking the time on my phone, it's just past seven. I sigh and exit my car. I walk over to the huge wire gate, press my forehead against it and breathe in the salty fresh air.

This is nice.

“Can I help you?” says a deep and loud voice.

I open my eyes, jump back, and squeal for a good five seconds. The man on the other side of the fence is large, African American and scowling at me. The look in his eyes says some rude cuss words.

Taking a second to compose myself, I breathe deep and put a hand to my chest. When I'm good I step closer to the fence and ask, “How do I get to Uncle Jerm?”

The man's face hardens and he replies coldly, “If you don't know how to get to him you shouldn't be here, shawty.”

Anxiety clogs my throat and desperation sets in. I croak, “This is an emergency. I haven't slept all night because of that freak Omarr. I need to see Jermaine.” I close my eyes and beg in a whisper, “Please. This is important.”

My eyes are still closed but I hear the large man sigh. He asks, “What's your name?”

I open my misty eyes and reply, “Tina. Jermaine knows me.”

The man's eyes widen and he repeats, "Tina?" I nod and he continues, "As in Leokov's woman?" I nod. He lets out a long, low whistle and says, "He said you had balls but I had no idea you'd be stupid enough to come here. He won't be happy about this but if I leave you here he'll have my ass." He looks me up and down then nods to the side gate and sighs, "C'mon, shawty."

Large man walks me to the first warehouse then leads me to an office. He says, "Uncle Jerm will be here soon. Make yourself comfortable."

Then he opens the door to Uncle Jerm's office, I walk in and he closes it behind me. I take the CD out of my purse and sit on the sofa. I lean my head on the arm of the sofa and sigh.

I'll just rest my eyes for a moment.

My eyes flutter open and I see Uncle Jerm sitting behind his desk, leaning to the side with a hand over his eyes.

The CD I brought with me is gone. I jerk and Uncle Jerm looks up.

He doesn't look happy. Not that I thought he would be happy about my visit. His nephew wants him dead, for god sake!

I begin to speak but Uncle Jerm cuts me off with a firm, "Damn fool of a woman!"

Well, that's not quite what I was expecting.

He continues, “Do you realize the danger you’ve put yourself in? Nik is going to be livid. *I* am livid. Of all the things you could’ve done, *this* was the dumbest.”

And that’s when I burst into tears.

My body shakes with sobs and I croak, “He wants to kill you, Jermaine. He wants Nik to hurt. I—I—I didn’t know what else to do. I heard Nik say you needed evidence that Omarr was recruiting and now you have it. So, do something!” I shake and whisper, “Please do something. I can’t lose Nik.” I cover my face with my hands and weep.

Uncle Jerm pulls my hands from my face and kneels before me. He wipes tears from my cheeks and assures, “Omarr isn’t a concern anymore, child.” My body slumps back with relief. He continues, “As of ten minutes ago, Omarr has a price on his head.”

Oh, no!

I stammer, “B—B—But I thought you would get him some help!” My face pales and I whisper shout. “I didn’t want him dead, Jermaine!”

He shakes his head slowly and answers me softly, “Tina, Omarr isn’t right. Think of it this way, it’s you and Nik or it’s him. And be warned, he will come after you. He will find out about this, baby girl. I know you had good intentions but it was crazy. Straightjackets, padded rooms, out of your damn mind, crazy. You feel me?”

If I pale any more I'll be transparent.

What have I done?

Uncle Jerm smirks, "But, by god, you've got a set of balls on you." Then he sobers and says, "We got to tell Nik about this."

I nod.

That should be fun.

The CD Uncle Jerm had expressed to The White Rabbit plays on my computer. I sit at my desk and listen.

My insides dip.

I'm not quite sure what I'm hearing.

"Sure, just so we both know what we are dealing with. I continue to work Nik and once I'm paid, I'm yours. But you have to back off. I can't be distracted. You want Nik hurt and I'll hurt him, baby. For you, I'll do anything." No mistaking it. That's my girl.

It can't be.

No.

No.

Fuck no.

This can't be happening.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The great misunderstanding of 2013

Uncle Jerm wouldn't let me leave the warehouse he calls the factory until I had some coffee and breakfast with him. I'm glad he persuaded me. I probably would've passed out half way to The White Rabbit from exhaustion.

Upon departing, Uncle Jerm pulled me into a warm hug and told me, "You saved my life, Tina, which means I owe you. Big. If you need anything from this old man, just call." He gives me his business card and I slip it into my purse.

Which brings us to now. I stand out front of The White Rabbit.

My heart races and my stomach knots.

I'm going to have to tell Nik everything. And he is *not* going to like it. My previous experiences tell me I should be honest with Nik but I am petrified of what his reaction might be. I close my eyes and breathe deep.

Nik will understand. He has to.

I compose myself as much as I can and make my way to Nik's office. Just before I get there I'm greeted by a mad looking Max. He puts his hand up and says, "Don't go in there, Tina."

My feet stomp past him and I respond urgently, "Don't try to stop me this time, Max. I have to see Nik right now. I don't care if he's busy and hiding out. This is priority. It's important." And I barge into Nik's office.

Nik sits behind his desk staring into nothing. I approach and he stands up. Half way there I smile and say, "Hey, honey."

His eyes turn cold and he says, "Nik loves me, O. He'll give me anything and everything I want. I just have to hook him a little more."

My face pales and my heart clenches.

He's already heard the CD. Which means Uncle Jerm sent it over.

I begin, "I..."

But Nik cuts me off with a quiet, "Stop." He looks hurt. I never wanted to hurt him. I thought he'd understand why I thought I had to do this.

He continues just as quietly, "Never thought I'd be one of those schmuks. I

thought I did a good job of protecting myself from women like you.” There is a fist around my heart and it squeezes tight. He goes on, “But you...You really got in there. With my family and friends, too. You went the whole nine yards.” He laughs acidly. “Who the fuck sends candy to a guy?!”

I do.

My heart is breaking. Nik thinks I played him.

I try to explain, “Please, Nik. Let me exp...”

He cuts me off with a hard, “No.”

My face bunches and I start crying. I hyperventilate, cover my cheeks with my hands and yell, “Let me explain!”

He shakes his head and I croak a desperate, “It’s just a misunderstanding, baby.”

Nik’s face steels and he whispers viciously, “Don’t say another fucking word.” He looks down and says, “You were my world. My everything. You really had me fooled. It was all just a game to you. A job. Never thought I’d end up with a woman like you. I loved you. Never believed I deserved you. But now that I know the real you, I don’t want you. So this works out okay. Another lesson learned.”

Sobbing, I walk up to him and choke, “I love you, Nik.”

He doesn’t look at me when he replies coldly, “Yeah, well, I don’t love you.”

My heart shatters. I feel extremely light headed.

What have I done?

Nik moves passed me and nudges my body with his passing shoulder. In my weak state, the nudge feels more like a push. I stumble back and my heel catches. I fall. My back, shoulder and head hit the corner of his desk. Hard.

I sit on the floor a moment and mouth, "Ow."

Before I know what's happening Max walks in. He takes in my weak form on the floor then Nik's hard face. He storms up to Nik and gets right in his face and yells, "What the fuck is wrong with you? Get it under control, Nik."

I take this as my cue to get the hell out of there. Max continues to yell into Nik's face.

I crawl forward a few steps, stand unsteadily, and catch my breath.

Then I'm gone.

Max is in my face yelling at me but I can't make out any of the words he's saying.

Blood roars in my ears. Anger, pain, and heart-break have left me drained.

I didn't mean for Tina to fall. It was my fault, regardless, but I wished it hadn't happened.

My office phone rings and I cut Max's rant off by answering it, "Hello?"

Uncle Jerm asks, “You get the disc, son?”

I reply, “Yeah, Jerm. Thanks for the heads up.”

Uncle Jerm tuts. “That girl of yours either has a death wish or loves you too damn much. Didn’t even flinch at going up against Omarr.”

Wait, what?

Confusion settles over me and I ask, “Sorry, what?”

Uncle Jerm hesitates, “You see your girl this morning?”

I reply coldly, “Yeah.”

He doesn’t say anything for a moment then sighs, “Please tell me you listened to the child.”

I didn’t listen.

I retort, “What was there to listen to, Jerm? She played me. End of story.”

Uncle Jerm loses his cool composure and shoots back, “Well, your girl came to see me this morning with evidence that my nephew is planning a mutiny. She played Omarr and just put herself on the hit-list of a psychopath for the man she loves and to save the life of a drug dealing old man she barely knows. So I’d say there was a lot to listen to, son.”

Fear makes my stomach dip.

No. That can’t be right.

I bark, “Explain.”

Uncle Jerm replies quietly, “Just did.” Then hangs up.

Anxiety eats at me.

My experiences with money hungry women have been ridiculously high. Always a women looking for a sugar daddy. Not once had Tina asked for anything from me. I never gave her a choice when giving her gifts or doing things for her. Not her fault. I wanted to do that as her boyfriend and protector. I never got that gold digger vibe from Tina. I should have listened to my gut.

I've made a terrible mistake. I need to find Tina. I knew in my heart something wasn't right.

You told her you didn't love her.

I put my hand on the desk to hold myself up and feel something wet. I look down and there is small pool of blood on the corner of my desk mixed with a small amount of hair. Tina's hair. The blood blends in with the mahogany, you can barely notice it.

FUCK!

Oh, God. She has hemophilia. Her blood doesn't clot well. She could be losing too much blood. Maybe she doesn't even know she's bleeding. I feel sick to the stomach.

What have I done?

I snatch my phone up off my desk and call Tina. Her phone goes straight to voicemail. I don't leave a message. Instead, I run out of the office and

straight to Safira.

Nat is at the counter and greets me with a smile. She obviously doesn't know about the misunderstanding with Tina otherwise she'd already have ripped my balls clean off.

She says, "Hey Nik, you just missed her. She knocked her head on the car door and has a cut on her noggin so I sent her home." She looks left then right, comes closer and whispers, "How awesome was she with Omarr?! I didn't think she had it in her. And please! She's having hard times with money! Ha! Tina's a freaking millionaire!"

I blanch and whisper loudly, "What?"

Nat's face straightens and she asks, "She didn't tell you yet?" She sighs, "Her mom's life insurance policy was huge. Mia had a policy, too, but it all went to opening Safira. Tina put all her mom's life insurance money into an interest account. Over five years, she has well over three million now. It's a little hard to access but with my signature as well as her dad's, she can take it all out today if she wanted to."

Great. Just great.

I accuse my girlfriend of being a gold digger and she has more money than I do!

Remembering my reason for being here, I ask, "You said she was hurt. How bad is it?"

She waves her hands, rolls her eyes, and says, “Don’t get all protective on me! It was just a cut. But Tina’s a bleeder so it always looks worse than it is. I cleaned it. It’s fine and no longer bleeding.”

Thank god. Now to go over to the apartment and beg on my knees for forgiveness.

I ask Nat, “Is there any candy Tina likes?”

Nat looks at me like Well, Duh. And I understand it. This is Tina. She loves candy.

I roll my eyes and ask, “What’s Tina’s favorite candy?”

She writes down four different names and I head down the street to the candy store.

I hope this works.

I drag my sorry ass out of my car with a bag full of candy.

As I approach Tina’s apartment I think about my entrance. Should I knock?

Or use my key?

I think using my key is the better option. If I know she can pretend not to be home. But I see her car isn’t here.

Using my spare key, I enter the apartment and the first thing I notice is a handwritten note on the dining table. I walk closer. It’s addressed to Nat. I sit and read.

Hey hon, sorry I didn't talk to you about this before but I'm feeling a little raw. I don't think I could've spoken about it without crying a river.

Nik and I broke up.

The Omarr thing worked but everything is screwed up. There was a big misunderstanding and I need some space. I'm going away a few days for some R&R. I'll have my phone but it'll be off so leave a message if you need me. I wouldn't entrust the store to anyone but you. You know me, I'll be fine. Just needing some time alone. Talk about it when I get home.

I love you. You're the best sister ever.

My heart sinks.

I've driven the only woman I've wanted to protect from hurt and pain to this. I feel like the world's biggest asshole. Actually, I *am* the world's biggest asshole.

When the Sissy office ordeal happened, Tina listened to me (with the help of Nat) and believed me. I didn't even let her speak a word. I knew something wasn't right but I let my pride get in the way.

A sudden idea pops into my head. I flip open my cell and dial my guy. He picks up and I state, "I need someone found. Like, yesterday."

He responds with, "I need a cell number."

I give it to him and tell him her cell will be off most of the time so he'll need to check regularly. I quickly add he'll be well paid for the time he spends on this assignment. He accepts the terms and says he'll call as soon as he gets a hit. I end the call and pray to god that Tina is safe and well. If something happened to her I wouldn't be able to forgive myself.

Two days later...

My mind is only focused on one thing.

Tina.

Not being able to see for myself that she's okay is driving me insane. I'm anxious and moody at everyone who cares about me.

One of the worst things I've ever had to do was admit to the girls what I'd done. To say Nat was angry at me would be an understatement. She punched me in the nose. And broke it. I took it without a word because I know I deserved it. So I'm sporting a couple of black eyes and a busted purple nose.

Who knew Nat had a mean right hook?

As soon as I'd done that I decided I had to tell the guys. There is something about admitting you're wrong about something that makes you feel worthless. Admitting you're wrong about something important, even more

so.

I called a meeting in the conference room with my newly broken nose. Once the guys were seated, I explained what had happened. Max was the first to react. He got up out of his seat and left the conference room without a word. And it hurt more than any words could.

Ghost asked what happened to my nose with a twitch of his lips.

The jerk already knows.

They have CCTV at Safira. I responded with, “Your girlfriend should become a boxer.”

Last was Trick. The look on his face was pure disappointment. Disappointment in me. I didn’t like that. Trick has always been my buddy, even at the worst of times. This is the first thing that’s happened that’s ever gotten in the way of our friendship. He doesn’t have my back here.

No one has my back here. I fucked up. I’m backed up against a wall with three men and three women threatening to pounce on me at any second. That’s never a good feeling. What makes it a worse feeling is when those people are your friends and family.

Which brings us to today.

It’s been two days and not a word of new information from my guy. He called to say her phone is still off but he’s keeping a constant eye on it. It doesn’t make me feel any better. With every day Tina is missing, worry and

apprehension tear away at what's left of mind.

The days go slowly and the nights aren't any better. I can't sleep not knowing where Tina is sleeping. Nat said she hasn't been able to contact her but Tina has sent her a text twice to assure she's okay.

I don't buy it.

If she were okay, she'd have come back by now.

Frustration at my own stupidity is a good way to describe my feelings right now. This is all my fault.

Just as I'm about to start banging my head on the table, my cell rings.

I jump and almost drop it. I juggle it for a few seconds before I put it to my ear and say a little too loudly, "Yes?"

"We got her." That's my guy...and he knows where Tina is! I'm giving this man a bonus. I want to kiss his feet right now. I'm beyond relieved.

He gives me the details and I chuckle. Of course Tina would stay at a hotel three minutes from her apartment. I thank him with a promise of a swift money transfer and we're done.

I decide to shower and change my clothes before I see her, I need to shave too.

No, don't shave! She likes the scruff.

Yeah, my baby likes the scruff.

I shouldn't call her that right now. That's, of course, if she is willing to be

my baby again. I wouldn't blame her if she didn't. What I did was almost unforgivable.

Why are you still sitting at your desk?

God, I'm such a schmuk. I wait for days for this information and now I'm hesitant about using it.

Nope.

I move before my body tries to resist. I walk past the 'chill out' room, down the hall and I hear Max shout out, "Where you going?"

I yell back to him, "To pick up precious cargo."

It was surprisingly easy to get a spare key to Tina's room. And it only cost me a hundred dollars.

Okay, so I spouted some story about sneaking in to surprise my girlfriend who thought I was coming the next night. The girl at the main desk was an obvious romantic and fell for it.

Mental note; never use this hotel.

The girl at the desk had no way of knowing I wasn't dangerous. I could've been Omarr, for Christ sakes.

So, here I stand in front of Tina's room with my bag full of candy. I check my watch. It's 11:49pm. I'm sure she'll be asleep. Or at least I hope she will be.

That was my plan. Sneak in when Tina's asleep; there will be less of a chance of her punching me in the face when she's sleepy.

Wait...

Didn't she go all Bruce Lee on me and put me in a choke hold when she was sleepy?

Great. Just great. I forgot about that.

I shake my head and slide the key card in. The light turns green and I gently open the door being careful not to make a sound. I carefully walk in and see Tina asleep in the bed. She's sleeping on her stomach which she never does. She always curls up on her side. It looks as though she's naked under the sheet that's pulled just above her behind. I step closer and what I see makes me want to roar and punch something.

Tina's back and shoulder are purple with bruises.

This is why she's sleeping on her stomach. She hurts. I hurt her. I don't deserve Tina.

But I want her.

I sit on the edge of the bed, careful not to wake her and lean forward with my elbows on my knees. I run my hands through my hair.

Maybe Tina's better off without me.

As soon as I smell him, I wake.

I know it's Nik and regardless of what happened the other day, I'm not afraid of him.

Nik didn't mean for me to trip. And that's exactly what happened. I tripped. I'm still hurting, physically and mentally, though. This is why I take cowards way out and pretend to sleep. I remind myself to breathe in and out deeply and to not react at all.

I feel his hand lightly brush my bruised shoulder and I shiver.

Thanks traitorous body!

I feel the sheet lift from my bottom to cover my back and shoulder. I don't understand it but even the small amount of pressure from the sheet hurts. I'm careful not to flinch.

Nik whispers hoarsely, "I'm so sorry, baby."

I almost forget to breathe. A small part of me is chastising myself for pretending to sleep but another part so desperately wants to hear what he says to my supposed sleeping form.

He continues in a whisper, "Never meant to hurt you. Come back to me, baby. I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you."

My heart skips a beat.

Nik wants me back. He must know what really happened.

This is great!

Don't do it. Don't give away your heart again. It hurts too much.

I do hurt. I don't know if I could handle that again. After Jace was hard but after Nik I actually thought I'd die from heart-break.

I have to think about this.

I feel his breath close to my ear. He kisses the side of my neck so softly I could've imagined it and whispers, "Love you, Tina."

He shuffles around and makes some strange noises for a few minutes, the door opens then closes and he's gone.

I sit up in bed and see something on the desk in the corner that wasn't there before. Needing a little light, I switch on the bedside lamp and move my sore body over to the desk.

What I see makes me smile. The first real smile I've had in days. Nik has obviously spoken to Nat about my candy preferences.

Written in raspberry bullets is 'I'm sorry'.

Written in green apple jellybeans is 'I miss you'.

Written in cherry jellybeans is 'I love you'.

My heart skips a beat at the last line.

Written in gummy bears is 'Marry me'.

Did Nik just propose using candy?

Why, yes, brain. Yes, he did.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The father of her child

A week has passed since Tina disappeared and I hear nothing from her. I've been checking in with Ghost but he says she hasn't been at the store. I'd say she's probably still too sore.

I still can't believe I proposed to her using gummy bears.

You're such a dork.

Quiet, brain.

But here's the kicker; if she wanted to marry me she would've already accepted.

I lean back in my chair, put my feet up on my desk, and use my forearm to

cover my eyes.

I think I'm depressed. I remember feeling similar feelings like this when my dad died. Nothing makes me happy. Not even Ceecee, who is very confused with my sudden change in attitude. At least Max is talking to me again.

"Tina's back."

The voice makes me jolt in my chair and I feel it fall further and further back. Next thing I know I'm on the floor with Ghost leaning over me chuckling. He says, "Sorry, bro."

You don't sound sorry, asshole.

He goes on, "Tina just got in. So I suggest you get your sorry ass up and get talking to her." He offers his hand, I take it and he helps me up.

Then he slaps my shoulder in a brotherly gesture and leaves.

Before I can change my mind, I'm up and out the door.

Hiding out in the storeroom was not what I had planned when I decided today was the day I came back to work. But here I am; sitting on the floor, my desk at my back, my head resting back on it, and my hands covering my eyes.

Too soon.

I hear the door open then close. I murmur, "I shouldn't have come today, Nat. I think I'll try again tomorrow."

Hands come under my arms and lift me so I'm sitting on the desk. I open my eyes and see Nik's beautiful but slightly bruised face. His nose is crooked, too.

This looks like Nat's handy work.

My heart squeezes and my eyes mist.

God, I missed him.

His amber eyes search my face. His hand moves to the back of my neck and squeezes. He sounds pained as he says, "I can't take this anymore. It's been a week, Tina. A long, torturous week. Do something! Yell at me or hit me, for fuck sake. Just don't shut me out, baby. I know I screwed up really fuckin' bad. Tell me what I can do to fix this." He leans his forehead on mine and whispers hoarsely, "Please, let me fix this."

I want to kiss him so badly but restrain myself. Instead I hold his cheeks with my shaking hands and whisper, "I don't know if this can be fixed, Nik. You can't glue together a broken heart."

I lean back and watch devastation transform his handsome face. I touch his scarred eyebrow and continue, "My heart was broken before I even met you, Nik. This isn't all about what happened. And no, I won't marry you out of some twisted obligation you feel about what happened."

He looks as broken as I feel when he tells me, "You're my forever girl. If you leave me, you'll always be the one that got away. I will never find what

I have with you ever again. I love you. Please tell me you still feel something for me.” He looks in my eyes and pleads, “Please, baby, please. I’m begging you. Tell me it’s not over.”

That is the most beautiful and heart-wrenching thing anyone has ever told me. It’s heart-wrenching because I don’t know if this is something I can do anymore.

I respond quietly, “You don’t fall out of love with someone in a day, Nik. Of course I love you. You mean the world to me. But sometimes love isn’t enough. You’re compromising too much for me. You want kids and I won’t have them.” I breathe in a shaky breath and go on. “You have no idea how damaged I am. I’m a lot of work, Nik. Don’t settle for damaged goods. You deserve the best of things. And that’s not me. Not even close, honey.” I end on a whisper and all of a sudden feel like crying.

God, pull yourself together woman!

Nik shakes his head and replies firmly, “That’s not true. You’re worth a hundred of any woman out there. You would give the shirt off your back to someone who needed it. I’ve never met a woman as honest and selfless as you. I don’t care about children anymore, honestly. As long as I have you, I won’t need a thing.” He holds my face in his hands and says, “You’re it. The one. The start. The finish. *You* are how my story ends.”

Swoon. Damn it, Nik, you fight dirty.

Nik is giving me a toothache. But I won't give in.

I respond with a shaky, "I need time."

He nods and whispers, "Okay, baby." Then he pulls my face towards his and kisses me softly.

As soon as his lips touch mine, I sigh. He moves to stand between my knees and I grip the lapels of his silk shirt. I try to pull him closer to me, impossibly close.

Right now, it's just Nik and Tina. No problems. Just love.

I'm so in love with Nik.

He nips my bottom lip and I gasp. His tongue touches mine and I moan lightly into his mouth.

I'm losing composure. Nik's kisses are divine.

Suddenly he pulls back and whispers, "I'll give you time, baby. But do me a favor, will ya?"

I nod and he says, "Remember how you feel when you kiss me. Because if it's even a small piece of what I feel when I kiss you, there is no question about what you should do."

He turns his back, walks out of the store room and closes the door behind him. I touch my fingertips to my still wet lips.

Nik is imprinted on them.

I thought long and hard over the last few days. I tried hard to let Nik go but

it's proving difficult.

Tragedy has a way of making you appreciate every small happiness you experience. The happiest I've been in the past five years is with Nik.

I lose myself in thought before I slide off the desk. I want to go home.

So I pack my things, leave my keys with Nat, and catch a cab back to the apartment.

As soon as I arrive home, I go back to bed.

Emotions are so exhausting.

When I open my eyes again, it's dark.

Geez Louise! How long did I sleep?

I look over at the bedside clock and it reads 7:12pm.

Holy moly! I slept for eight hours! That's just great. Now I won't get a wink tonight.

Nat has a date tonight. She hasn't been on a date in an age and I'm so happy for her. She's been too busy making sure I'm okay. It's time Nat had something good in her life.

I'm just about to get out of bed and shower when someone starts banging on the front door like a maniac. I pull the covers up to my chin and my eyes widen.

What if it's a robber?

Yes, sweetie. Because robbers knock before they enter.

I pull back the covers and sneak into the hall. Then I hear it.

“TIIIIINNNNA! Otvoriti vrata! Sada!”

Oh my god!

That heavily accented voice demanding I open the door is my dad’s! A huge smile appears on my face, I chuckle while I open the door.

As soon as it opens, my dad yells, “Where is the fuck bastard?!”

Ah, okay.

Dad looks a little out of sorts. His hair is a mess, his eyes are bloodshot and he is spitting angry.

My brow furrows and answer, “Which fuck bastard, Tata?”

He pushes his way into the apartment and makes a show of looking around. Lifting sofa cushions, peering down the hall, checking under the dining table and going so far as to even check if I’m concealing someone in the kitchen cupboards.

He stands in the kitchen and turns to me, he responds, “*THE* fuck bastard. He no here?”

The fuck bastard. That could only be...

I answer softly, “Jace isn’t here, Ta. I haven’t seen him in years. Before Mia was born.”

Dads eyes flash and he tells me, “He call. He call me looking for you. He

ask where you live, Valentina. I no tell him but he try find you.”

What? No way.

I shake my head and say, “Tata, you must’ve been mistaken. He’s not here so...”

I haven’t even notice I’ve left the door open til I hear, “Everything okay, babe?”

I spin and see Nik standing there staring holes into my father’s head. He has a pizza box in his hands and is dressed in sweats and a t-shirt.

Le sigh.

He looks amazing.

I spin back to my back and see Dad staring holes right back into Nik. The funny thing is that Nik is acting protective of me. Okay, so my father has his hands on his hips while wearing a scowl but if my father were a dog he would be a Chihuahua. All bark and no bite.

I ask Nik quietly, “What are you doing here?”

Nik continues to glare at my dad and answers, “Nat thought you might need some company tonight with her being out so she asked me to come.”

That little sneak!

Dad loosens up at this. He storms over to Nik, holds out his hand and says, “Nat tell you to take care my Tina? Natalia is like my own child. If she like you, I like you.”

I roll my eyes and introduce them, “Nik. Dad. Dad. Nik.”

Dad shakes Nik’s hand and replies, “You have longer name?”

Nik nods and replies, “Nikolai Leokov.”

Dad smiles and says, “Ahh, Ruski!” Then he looks at me and says, “Nije hrvatskom, ali on je okay.” Then he leans forward as if Nik isn’t there and whispers loudly, “But Ruski are communists, Tina.”

Oh my God, Dad!

I did not miss my father embarrassing me at all. Luckily, I hear Nik chuckle and he asks me, “Is there a problem? You looked anxious when I got here.”

But it’s my dad that answers a heavily accented, “Big problem, Niki. So big problem. The man try see Tina, she no want to see him. He call me today.”

Nik brow furrows as he asks, “Which man?”

Oh, crap!

I start, “Tata, nemoj!”

But it’s too late, dad blurts out, “The fuck bastard, Jess!” Dad can’t say Jace properly.

Nik turns to me, his eye twitches and he repeats, “Jace? As in, *that* Jace?”

Oh, Shit!

I don’t normally swear but this is an Oh, Shit moment! Nik looks about ready to kill someone, namely Jace, and dad seems to like this because he’s smiling like a loon.

I'm just about to answer when someone walks into the doorway and I freeze.

Jace Weathers looks into the open apartment and freezes, too.

I choke out, "Jace, what are you doing here?" Nik steps forward to stand next to me.

Jace looks from Nik to me to Dad and greets, "Hi. It's been a long time, Tina."

You don't say?!

Jace still looks good, a little more mature looking but still tall and handsome. He looks at dad and says in greeting, "Marko." Then he looks at Nik and says, "I'm Jace." He holds out his hand for Nik to shake.

Oh, no. I don't want Nik to get arrested for assault so I quickly take Nik's hand and squeeze it.

Nik utters, "I know who you are. I just don't know who you *think* you are to come here today."

I jump back in fright when Jace is pushed in the back. He flies forward into the apartment and there stands a fuming Nat behind him yelling, "GET OUT YOU FUCKER, YOU AREN'T WELCOME HERE!"

Nat stalks in followed by Mimi, Lola, Trick, Ghost, and Max.

I ask a shrill, "What is everyone doing here?!"

Nat looks at me and says, "Your dad called me. I left dinner and called for

backup.”

Dad storms over to Nat, kisses her cheek and puts an arm around her shoulder. Dad loves Nat. Always has. They have the similar abrupt personality and bond over it.

My face falls and I ask, “You left your date for me? Honey, you shouldn’t have done that.”

She smiles and pats my hand, “Don’t worry, I’ll reschedule.”

Jace stands, straightening his jacket. He looks at Nik and says loudly, “I’m the father of Tina’s child. That’s who I *know* I am.”

A long silence follows.

Nat is the first to react. She steps forward and whispers, “You dare call yourself that?”

Rage fills me. I look at Jace and ask slowly, “Do you even know when Mia’s birthday was?” Jace looks down at his shoes. I continue quietly, “Or the first word she ever said?” The rage builds and I yell at him, “When did she cut her first tooth, Jace?” I close my eyes and breathe deep before saying calmly and quietly, “All you were was a sperm donor. Mia didn’t have a father.”

I burst into tears and croak, “I needed you so badly when she died. My dad had a breakdown mourning my mom. When he needed me the most I couldn’t be there for him because I was organizing Mia’s funeral as well as

my mom's. And you didn't even come to her funeral." I nod my head and state, "Twenty five fucking messages, Jace. That's how many I left. If it weren't for Dad and Nat, I don't know where I'd be. But I'm good now. No thanks to you."

Max looks disgusted as he asks, "You didn't go to your own daughter's funeral? What kind of man are you?"

Ghost looks livid, he steps forward and spits, "You need to leave right fuckin' now."

Trick growls, "You forget you ever knew Tina."

I'm suddenly surrounded by warmth and the love of my friends. And it's nice.

Nik doesn't say anything for a while then, "Money."

Jace avoids my gaze when Nik states, "He needs money, Tina. That's why he's here."

My mouth drops open. I don't believe it. But Jace doesn't deny it.

Nik gets right up in Jace's face and says with frightening calm, "I swear to God, you ever come near her again and I will gut you and use your intestines to decorate my Christmas tree. You're nothing to Tina. Just somebody she used to know."

Lola hold Trick's hand and boasts, "Tina has something good here. She doesn't even think about you anymore."

Mimi steps forward and states, “If I were you I’d get going. These guys are former gang members. I wouldn’t push ‘em.”

Jace’s eyes widen and his face pales. My dad actually smiles harder.

Jace clears his throat and tells me, “You look good.” Then he turns on his heel and leaves.

Pandemonium breaks out with everyone talking at once. I’m getting questions from all sides and anxiety fills me.

I step back and shout, “Can everyone shut the fuck up?”

My dad gasps and says, “Valentina, you no be rude you friends like that!”

I nod my head in agreement and try again, “Can everyone *please* shut the fuck up?” My dad nods his head in a *that’s better* motion. I continue, “I know you must all have questions but I’m in no mood to answer them. So please excuse yourselves because all I want to do right now is go to bed.”

I kiss my father’s cheek and ask, “You need a place to stay or are you heading home?”

He utters, “I go home. Look.” He points to my friends and whispers, “You no need me.”

I take dad’s hand, squeeze it, and I tell him, “I’ll always need you, Ta. Always.”

Then I head down the hall to my room, leaving everyone behind.

I lay on my bed ten minutes before my room bursts open. Nat, Meems, and

Lola bring in the pizza that Nik brought and sit on my bed.

Mimi says, “The guys left but you must be out of your mind if you think we’re leaving, doll.”

Nat asks, “Is tonight a ‘Night at the Roxbury’ kind of night? Or more of an ‘Uncle Buck’ kind of night?”

Lola replies, “I thought it was more of a ‘That Thing You Do’ kind of...”

I cut her off with, “You’re all wrong. It’s a ‘Zoolander’ kind of night.”

They all laugh and clap. I sit up on the bed and bow my head regally. I’m glad they didn’t leave.

We spend the night eating pizza and watching ‘Zoolander’, quoting the movie and laughing our heads off.

Friendships like these are hard to come by. I believe if you can count your true friends on your one hand you’re blessed. I’d rather have three true friends than three hundred acquaintances.

Mimi and Lola leave after the movie. I’m back in bed and think about tonight. I was so worried about seeing Jace but now all I can think is *Jace who?*

Just as I’m falling asleep, my phone buzzes on the bedside cabinet. I read the text and chuckle.

Nik: Would rather be in your bed tonight but don’t want another freaky

sleepover with Nat.

Me: Haha... I'm glad you were here tonight.

Nik: Me too, baby. I would tell you I love you but I'm trying to give you time...

Me: I love you, Nik. Goodnight.

Nik: Love you more, Tina. Sweet dreams.

I smile and put my phone back on the side cabinet.

No denying it. I love Nik.

Seeing Jace tonight brought back the same old memories yet somehow they felt different. There isn't as much pain associated with them anymore. Just a mild sting.

You're healing.

The likelihood of a person finding true love is few and far between.

Who am I to deny it when I find it?

Tomorrow is a new day.

I wake with a spring in my step.

I get ready for work and am so excited about seeing Nik today.

Put the past where it belongs and move on is what my mom always told me.

You see, when dad first met my mom they were just kids. My dad was a

mean little sucker and called mom fat.

Yep.

Ever the charmer. So, dad meets mom for a second time later on in life and was floored because my mom was gorgeous. Dad shadowed her like a lost puppy, begging for a date. Mom refused. Dad followed her everywhere til she said yes. He would camp out in front of her work and walk her to her car when she came out. He would randomly show up with an umbrella when it was raining and leave sweet notes on her car window.

I call this stalking. Dad calls this romance.

The point of this story is my mom may never have fallen with my dad if she didn't move on from the hurt he caused her as a young girl. So that's what I'm doing. Moving on.

I drive to work with the intention of going straight to see Nik. I park my car and step out.

I'm caught off guard when hands grab at me. Someone strong has a hold on me with one hand tight around my mouth and another arm lifting me by the waist.

I shriek into his hand but it sounds small and muffled. I'm pulled back into a van. I lose a shoe on the street. The man holds me still as I screech and scratch at his hands. I can't see him but he's tall. I push my head forward a little and slam it back into his chin. He yells, "FUCK!"

I know that voice.

He covers my mouth with cloth. A huff and puff from exertion and I'm suddenly weaker.

So tired.

I feel sleepy.

Lights out.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The beginning of the end

The morning has been great so far.

I'm waiting on Tina to get into work so I can go squeeze her a little.

She told me she loved me last night and I gotta say it was the first goodnight sleep I've had since the misunderstanding about Omarr.

I'm amazed that her douche ex-boyfriend had the nerve to show up at her place. I wasn't sure why he was there at first but as soon as I mentioned money, he blanched.

Stupid asshole.

Just as I get up and make my way down the hall to the security room, Nat bursts into the hall holding a shoe. She looks shaken. Her eyes are red and

puffy. She sees me and runs down the hall crying.

I pull her into a hug and say, “Whoa, there. What’s happened, babe?”

She sputters her response, “Tina was really l—late for work so I w—went to ch—check for her car. Her car was th—there and it was open, Nik. Her shoe was on the floor and her b—bag was still in the car. She’s gone, Nik.”

My stomach drops.

No. God, no.

I ask, “Her cell?”

She responds, “Still in her bag. It looks like she struggled, Nik. There was a little blood on the ground and her shoe was on the road. I don’t think it was Tina’s blood because it was only a few drops, if it were Tina there would’ve been more. I’ve seen her bleed from the smallest cut. She bleeds like a faucet.”

Two options here.

Jace the asshole snatched her up to get money out of her or Omarr has her.

I really hope it’s Jace. I don’t think he’d hurt her, he doesn’t look the type.

Omarr, however, would get sick satisfaction out of torturing Tina.

I tell Nat, “I need Jace’s cell number.” She goes through Tina’s phone and gets it. I hope he hasn’t changed his number. I call from her cell.

I’m stunned when Jace answers, “Tina?”

I bark into the phone, “If Tina is with you, you better tell me you piece of

shit.”

He immediately sputters, “She’s not with me, I swear. I’m back in Cali!” I hang up.

I know fear when I hear it. He doesn’t know where Tina is.

I look over at Nat and shake my head.

The only other option is Omarr. If that motherfucker hurts Tina in any way, I’ll kill him. And Uncle Jerm won’t do a thing about it now that there’s a price on his nephew’s head.

I take Nat into the conference room and call for the guys. Max, Trick, and Ghost appear in the doorway smiling and joking until they take in Nat’s appearance. All of their faces drop. They know something’s happened.

I announce, “Omarr snatched Tina this morning.”

None of them say a thing so I continue, “We need a plan. I’m pretty sure I know where he’ll take her but he won’t take her til later tonight. Thanks to my father, I have details on the place. Who’s in?”

All the guys nod their heads and we get to work.

Night falls and we’re ready to go ahead.

If I know Omarr’s style well enough, I’d say he likes Drama. He’ll most likely put on a show.

Ghost contacted Uncle Jerm, explained the situation and asked him to lower

security for the night. After Tina saved his life, he was willing to go one further and offer his assistance in any way he could help.

We make our way to the factory in separate cars. The girls have been forbidden to come.

They weren't happy about this but there is no way I'm putting them in danger. It's bad enough I have to put my boys in this situation. At least the guys know what they're in for.

I park right in front of the warehouse. The guys are going round back. I step out of the car and make my way to the office door. Once inside, I take a deep breath and open the connecting door to the factory.

As soon as the door opens, Omarr has his gun on me. He's standing behind Tina, who is taped to a chair. I look into her eyes and see fear, clear as day.

Don't worry, baby.

Omarr smiles, steps forward and announces theatrically, "The man of the hour! Take a seat, Nik. We've been waitin' on you. Haven't we, baby?"

Tina shrugs and makes a confused face. It's genuine.

See?

Omarr is bat shit crazy.

I walk forward and ask, "Where do you want me?"

Omarr points to the chair next to Tina and says, "Try any funny business, I'll shoot you and make her watch you die."

I sit in the chair and he straps me into it with duct tape tightly. Omarr glares at me for a moment before turning to Tina. He says, “Okay, baby. You got some explaining to do. How did Uncle Jerm get our conversation?”

She stammers and lies “N—Nik bugged my room, sweetie. I had no idea he didn’t trust me. I’m so sorry. He sent the tape to Uncle Jerm. I came here as soon as I found out and told him it was a fake. He believed me, baby.”

Good girl. Play along.

Omarr looks sympathetic and sighs, “I knew it. I knew you wouldn’t give me up.” He strokes her face lovingly and states, “You love me. You wouldn’t do that to me.”

And one flew over the cuckoo’s nest.

I clear my throat and shoot a hard look Tina’s way. I lie saying, “You gold digging whore. I knew I couldn’t trust you. You think that was the only bug? I had ‘em everywhere. The only reason I kept you around was because I like the way you suck cock.”

Tina scowls at me and hisses, “Omarr, let me out of this chair or so help me...I’ll leave you.”

Omarr’s eyes widen and he shouts, “No! You’re never leaving me!”

Tina puts on her best bitch and retorts, “Let me out of the fucking chair, Omarr!”

Omarr’s brow furrow and he sighs, “Okay, jeez, Tina. Don’t be such a

bitch.”

He cuts the tape off her wrists and helps her up. As soon as she stands, she slaps him. Hard. The noise echoes through the warehouse and he rubs his cheek. He blurts, “What the fuck was that for, Tina?!”

She blinks a second then gets in his face and roars, “You kept me tied to a chair all fucking day! That’s not how you treat someone you love, O. That’s how you treat someone you don’t like! Now, do you love me?” He looks properly chastened and nods. She says calmly, “Good. Then you’ll never do that again. Will you, sweetie?” He shakes his head and she goes on, “Good. I love you, baby. But you’re seriously fucked up. I’m going to make you better, you hear?” He nods and smiles at her with pure adoration.

I’ve never seen Omarr let a woman put her hands on him without disappearing and turning up in landfill weeks later. He truly thinks he loves Tina. Or loves the idea of her at least.

Tina stands behind Omarr and wraps her arms around his waist.

Wow, that hurts more than it should. I know she’s only playing.

She stands on her tiptoes and whispers loudly, “Look at his face, baby. Doesn’t matter how much he says otherwise, this is hurting him. He loved me, O. I promised we’d hurt him, didn’t I?” She mouths to me I’m sorry.

Omarr chuckles and rubs Tina’s arm. He boasts, “Yeah, I got your girl. How does it feel to lose something you love, Nik? She don’t want you.”

Tina whines, “Omarr, how long is this going to take? I want to go home. I smell and I need a shower real bad.” She pouts, “You haven’t even fed me today. I’m so hungry, baby.”

Omarr slaps his head and sucks in air through his teeth. He looks remorseful as he promises, “Shit, I’m sorry, baby. I’ve been so caught up in this I didn’t even ask if you were hungry. I’ll get one of the guys to get you something right now.”

If I weren’t in this situation I would burst into laughter. The Tina Omarr believes he’s in love with doesn’t exist. This is the complete opposite of what my Tina is. I don’t like this Tina but Omarr seems enraptured with her. He turns in her arms and lifts her. She yelps and forces a giggle. She demands, “Omarr, put me down!” Which he does, but not before he kisses her.

Omarr closes his eyes and plants a deep kiss on Tina. Her eyes widen and she looks at me, I can’t conceal the look of disgust on my face. Her eyes are apologetic and I nod. I know she doesn’t want to be here anymore than I do.

Do what you gotta do, baby.

He breaks off the kiss and she plasters on a big fake smile. Omarr looks so happy. I almost feel sorry for him.

Almost.

Tina walks up to me, gets in my face and fake brags, “Bet you want me

now, huh? But guess what, Niki? You'll never have me. Never again."

I lean a little closer and whisper, "When we get out of this, I'm going to ask you to marry me." Her stunned face stills, I go on, "And you're going to say yes."

Omarr walks into the next room and Tina rushes forward. She whispers, "I'm sorry, honey! I didn't know what else to do!"

I whisper back, "You're doing a great job, baby. Keep him busy. I love you so much. The guys are out back, this'll be over soon. I promise."

Tina rushes back to her place just as Omarr opens the door. He comes forward with bags of food for her. She opens them, scrunches her face and says, "I smell olives, sweetie. I don't eat olives. Like, ever."

That's about the only truthful thing she's told him all night.

Every lunch time we swap my tomatoes for her olives. I love that we do that. That's our thing.

Omarr opens the bag and sighs, "I'm sorry, baby. I'll have them get something else. No olives."

She smiles at him and says, "Thank you, sweetie. I'm really hungry."

As soon as he heads out the door she takes a pair of scissors from the desk, runs forward and cuts underneath my wrists so it still looks like I'm strapped to the chair. She puts the scissors into the back of my pants and runs back to the desk.

God, I love this woman.

Omarr comes back into the room and hands Tina another fast food bag. He vows, “Not an olive in sight, boo.”

She plasters on a smile, kisses his cheek, and says, “Thank you, baby.”

Omarr walks up to my chair, takes the gun out of his pants and aims it at my chest. Tina shrieks, “Omarr, no!”

Omarr frowns and looks towards her. She immediately straightens and tells him, “Baby, I won’t be able to eat if you do that now. C—Can you wait til I’m done, please?” She sounds a little too shaky and I know Omarr senses it. But he nods and moves to sit with her.

She picks at the food I know she doesn’t want to eat but does a pretty good job at making it look like she’s enjoying it. She even offers bits of food to Omarr who eats out of her hand like a pet. She strokes his head like a little child.

This dude is one serious case of fucked up.

After Tina finishes eating half of the meal, she pushes it aside. It’s just about go-time.

Omarr holds his hand out to her and she takes it. He leads her towards me but stops halfway and tells her, “Baby, stay back here. You don’t want to get his blood on you.”

Then he walks forward and aims the gun at my chest. He puts his finger to

the trigger and hisses, “This is for Marcus.” Just as he’s about to do it, two small arms come around Omarr’s neck and two legs wrap around his waist. Tina chokes Omarr with everything she has.

Goddamn it, Tina!

Omarr tries to fight her but she has her head behind his so he can’t even hit her with the butt of the gun. He turns ashy as he tries to shake her off. I see his eyes widen and he falls hard onto his back. crushing my girl.

Tina gasps. She’s winded and can’t pull in a full breath.

Enough is enough.

I can’t wait for the guys. I have to act now.

I’m up and out of the chair. I take the scissors and plunge them into Omarr’s retreating back. He turns, howls in pain, lifts the gun, and shoots Tina.

Everything turns to slow motion.

Tina’s body jerks backwards and I feel her blood spatter across my face. Her face shows a mixture of shock and pain. Within seconds she’s lying unconscious in a pool of blood.

Tina’s a bleeder.

She’s going to bleed out.

I kick Omarr in the lower back. He howls again, rolls to his back, aims and shoots the gun again. I feel the bullet hit me but I want him dead so badly the pain doesn’t even register. Pure adrenalin courses through my veins. My

vision starts to fade out and I fight hard to keep my eyes open. I stumble forward, take the gun from his shaking hands and shoot him in the forehead. I watch as the light fades from Omarr's eyes. I feel a moment of intense satisfaction followed by the hollowness of dread.

I stagger forward and fall into the huge pool of blood next to Tina's body.

I'm so sorry, T. I would give my life for yours.

I see darkness and shadows form over our bodies. Hands are all over us.

As I lay next to Tina, I take her limp hand and think if this were going to be the way I died, at least I was in the hands of someone I loved.

My vision fades to black.

I wake with a start.

I can't see! And I'm being smothered!

Reaching up with my weak arms, I feel around and pull at what's covering my eyes. I take them off and look at them.

Eye patches?

What am I? A freakin' pirate?!

I try to swallow but something blocks my throat.

I start to panic. I can't breathe.

A shrill beeping pierces my ears and I moan into the obstruction in my throat.

I'm frightened!

Tears fill my eyes, I begin to shake and silently sob.

"Hush, dearie, hush. It's alright now, girlie. You're just disorientated. Open your eyes for me, honey."

I calm slightly at the sound of a smooth voice. I open my eyes and it takes a while to focus.

I see an older, round nurse at my hospital bedside.

She smiles and tells me, "I've been waiting a long time for you to show me those pretty eyes of yours."

I'm so confused.

How did I get here? What happened?

I make the sign for choking and my nurse chuckles. She says, "Yes, you have a tube in your throat. I can get that out for you now but you'll be sore so try not to speak." She walks out of my room and comes back a few minutes later with another older woman. The woman smiles big and says, "Dear me, you gave us a real fright, Valentina. There were times we thought you wouldn't make it. You lost a lot of blood. We did four blood transfusions. How are you feeling?"

Ahh, I have a tube in my throat, doctor, and I don't know sign language.

I make the sign for choking again and the doctor touches her forehead and chuckles, "How about we get the tube out and then you answer me?" I nod

and she smiles.

The nurse and doctor work together and I gag on the tube as it comes up and out of my throat. I breathe deep and even that hurts. The doctor asks me, “How are you feeling?”

I whisper, “Tired. Sore. Confused.”

Wowza, that hurts.

I put a hand to my throat and my face pains. The doctor looks at me sympathetically and says, “You’ll be sore for a while, sweetie. Getting shot is never an easy thing for the body to recover from.”

Oh my god, I got shot.

The memories drift back.

Omarr kidnaps me. Nik comes for me. I get shot.

That’s all I can remember.

I whisper, “Nik.”

The doctor smiles softly and says, “Maybe you should wait for your friends to get here. I called Natalia Kovac as soon as I was told you were awake.”

I nod but I can’t help the anxiety that coils in the center of me.

She didn’t want to talk about Nik. I hope he’s okay.

I’m left alone to my thoughts for a while. Just when I feel at peace the door bursts open. Nat stands there and when she sees my smiling face she collapses to her knees in the doorframe and sobs hard.

Seeing my friend in pain hurts me, too. I can't stop the tears from falling down my cheeks and my throat hurts like a mother. Ghost appears behind her and picks her up. He places her next to me on the bed and I hug her weakly. She sobs into my shoulder. I look up at Ghost. He smiles and pushes my hair behind my ear.

Nat straightens and bellows, "Don't you ever, *ever* do that to me again! Or I'll beat your ass so hard you'll wake up into next week!"

I chuckle but no sounds come out. My lips are splitting and cracked but I don't care.

I whisper, "Nik."

Nat looks at me and tells me, "We can only visit two at a time and the others want to see you so I'll come back after everyone's seen you."

I nod. Ghost and Nat leave the room as Lola and Trick come in. Lola holds my hand on one side of the bed and Trick hold the other on the other side of the bed. Lola tries to be brave but tears run down her forced smile and into her mouth. Trick kisses my forehead. As they leave, Max and Mimi come in.

Max smiles but his eyes are bright. He sits on the bed, hugs me gently and whispers, "I'll never forget you took a bullet for Nik. I don't care if we don't have the same blood; you're a member of my family." I smile but tears are streaming down my face.

The only conclusion I've come to is that Nik has passed away. This is why no one will talk to me about him.

I'm completely devastated at this but won't mourn him until I'm alone. I want to mourn Nik privately and I'll have time to do that later. I don't want to disappoint my friends who are so happy to see I'm okay.

Mimi smiles big at me and accuses, "You never told me I'm friends with a total badass who jumps on the backs of bad guys with guns."

I whisper back, "I didn't know either. Total badass."

Mimi smiles and whispers, "Righteous."

Max holds me around the shoulder and I take in the warmth he offers. After a few minutes they both kiss me and leave.

After seeing everyone, I'm exhausted. I close my eyes and take comfort in the darkness.

I hear shuffling in the doorway and open my eyes. I take in Nik.

I smile and hope this dream is a good one. He's wearing sweats, a t-shirt, and sneakers. He has a cane in his left hand and he limps over to me.

I frown.

This is not a good dream. Nik's never injured in my dreams.

He smiles big and kisses my forehead. He asks, "Did you have sweet dreams, baby?"

I turn my tired, half-lidded eyes into his bright amber ones and beg in a

hoarse whisper, “Don’t wake me up.”

My eyes flutter and I press deeper into the warmth at my side.

Something tightens around my waist. I open my eyes and lean back.

Nik is in the hospital bed with me. Dressed in sweats and a tee.

Oh, god. I wasn’t dreaming. Nik is alive!

He smiles and his eyes search my face, he whispers, “Hey, baby.”

I smile but an endless stream of tears fall down my cheeks. I mouth *hey*.

He wipes my tears away and says, “Well, this proves it...”

I frown and shrug.

He continues “Nothing will keep us apart. And we need to get married.

Like, tomorrow.”

I silently chuckle and mouth *I do*. The after a moment I mouth *what happened?*

He straightens and explains, “When Omarr shot you, I thought you were dead, baby. Never, in all my life, have I felt the way I felt that night.” The light in his eyes fade and he focuses on nothing in particular across the room, he whispers, “So much blood. I was sure there was none left in your body.”

Stupid hemophilia!

He goes on, “Then he shot me in the thigh. It didn’t look bad but he got a

main artery so I was bleeding as bad as you were. And I thought to myself as long as I'm with you in life or death, I'll be okay. I killed Omarr, baby. My last thought before I passed out was that I wasn't able to save you. And that sucked."

He looks so pained.

I whisper, "I love you...and we're getting married."

He smiles and teases, "You pinky swear?"

I silently chuckle and hold up my pinky. We link them together. I lean forward and place a soft kiss on his lips. We chuckle and hold each other.

My eyes heavy and I slip into a deep and restful sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Making it official

One month later...

Just thinking about the past month makes me exhausted.

It turns out I was in hospital three weeks before I woke from my deep comatose sleep. I was shot just under the right side of my collarbone. The bullet went straight in and out, luckily missing all vital organs.

Nik was there every day with me, leaving Max in charge at The White Rabbit. My dad came down when I first got shot but Nik sent him back to Cali with a promise that if anything changed, he'd call. The day after I woke, my dad was there bullying me to get better which made me laugh.

My dad becomes even more abrupt when he's hurting.

I spent another week in the hospital after I woke and upon leaving I asked to see the doctor privately.

Spending a month in hospital after a near death experience will do things to a person. First, you question how you live your life. Secondly, you elect to make changes. And lastly, you decide to live a fuller life. This is the reason for my private doctor appointment.

The older female doctor I know as Gail comes into my room and shuts the door. I make my request and she smiles big, "Of course! We can do it today. It only takes a minute. I'll only ask this one more time though. Are you sure?"

I nod and within minutes, it's done.

I'm so surprised at myself and can't help the huge smile that stretches my face.

The weeks that follow consist of Nik and I doing physical therapy twice daily. We motivate each other as much as we can but some days are harder than others. We're both healed almost completely but we've been told wounds like this are always apparent in the mind and we'll most likely experience phantom pains every now and again.

Uncle Jerm worked with the police while I was in hospital to have Nik cleared of any charges he might've faced for killing Omarr. All charges

were dropped and it was ruled self-defense.

A week after I was released from hospital, Nik threw a welcome home party for me at his place. Everyone we care about was there; my dad, the girls, the guys, Nik's mom and sisters, Molly, Ceecee, even Uncle Jerm.

Half way through the wonderful evening, Max and Trick picked me up and placed me on the kitchen counter. Everyone turned to watch me with amusement in their eyes. So, of course, my eyes narrowed in an I-Don't-Like-Surprises kind of way.

Nik came forward and said for everyone to hear, "I think the traditional thing is to kneel but I can't due to my injury so I asked the guys to place you up on counter for me." He removed a small leather ring box from his jeans. I gasped loudly and covered my mouth with my hands. He smiled and said, "Tina, the best thing you ever did was Friend-zone me." At this, everyone burst into laughter, even me. He continued, "And I never thought I'd be so thankful for those disgusting candy wax lips. We've had so many things be thrown at us and we've always come out on top. Not even death could tear us apart. I want you by my side forever, baby. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Still holding my hands over my mouth I shout a muffled, "Ahhh, yeah!"

He chuckled and opened the box. The gold ring is beautiful and elegant. It's tasteful and exactly what I could have wanted if I chose it myself. It has

three nice diamonds sparkling atop it.

I love it.

I croaked, “I love it.”

Nik replied, “Not as much as I love you, Tina.” The he held my face and kissed me deep and sweetly.

Everyone cheered and Nik announced I was moving in with him as soon as I could. Nat feigned hurt but she was smiling like a loon.

Which bring us to today.

I’m moving in with Nik, Max, and Ceecee. Nik is helping me pack boxes and shift them over to my new place. I was a little worried about leaving Nat alone but she assured she is totally fine with this. She’ll stay in the apartment til the lease runs out in a month then get a one bedroom apartment for herself closer to work. I’m so lucky to have a friend like her.

I stop packing for a short break. I lean into the back of the kitchen cabinet to reach for a glass and arms close around my waist making me jolt. I turn and yell, “Every freakin’ time!”

Nik chuckles and shakes his head at me. We do this almost every day. You think I’d be used to it by now.

He gently pushes my hair out of the way, puts his face into the back of my neck and whispers, “Can’t wait til tonight.”

My stomach tightens and I flush. I can’t wait either. Our first night of living

together.

Excited!

I whisper back, “Me either. And I may have something special for tonight. Something I bought at a very chic lingerie store.”

His arm tightens around my waist and he pulls me back into his hard body. He nips my ear, growls lightly and warns, “Don’t tempt me, baby. We might not make it til tonight and we’ve still got a lot of packing to do.”

I sigh and ask quietly, “Want a quickie now and then we can take our time later? You know, just to take to edge off?”

Ever since our near death experience we’ve been insatiable for one another. Finding any excuse to be intimate and close.

Okay, so we’ve been going at it like rabbits.

And it’s been *so* good!

Nik stills at my back and I smile. He picks me up and I giggle, he rushes to my room, kicks to door closed and together we take the edge off.

I’m officially moved in with Nik!

We unpacked the last box and hour ago and it felt *good!*

This is the happiest I’ve felt in two months. If you asked me two months ago where I’d be and what I’d be doing in two months, my answer would’ve been the exact same thing I was doing the previous month;

managing Safira, living with Nat and hanging out with my great friends and awesome boyfriend.

Tonight is special for me. Even though we ordered Chinese food and lounged around in our sweats watching TV, it was awesome.

I ask Nik to give me half hour before he comes to bed. He smirks and kisses me gently.

I rush to shower, do my hair and makeup. I dress in my fabulous new lingerie and lightly apply perfume on my pressure points.

Before I know it, Nik shouts out from the bedroom, “I hope you’re ready soon or I’m coming in there.”

I touch the puffy scar that blemishes the pale skin under my collar and say, “Almost ready, honey.”

Just go out there and do it.

Yeah. Just like ripping off a band-aid. Fast and painless.

Using the slow breathing techniques I was taught in hospital, calm washes over me.

I smile to myself and open the door. I step out and walk back into the bedroom dressed in nothing but my sexy new lingerie. The bra is a demi cup with lace frill and the panties are the matching French-cut kind that leaves half your booty exposed both in a cream with black lace.

Nik is sitting back in bed with the sheet pulled up to his belly. His eyes are

closed and his hands are folded behind his head.

I clear my throat and he opens his eyes. He croaks, “Holy hell, Tina. You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

I giggle and move to his side of the bed. As soon as I’m close enough, he pulls me over him so I’m straddling his lap. He sits up straighter and wraps his muscular arms around me. One across my butt and the other crossed over between my shoulders. He pulls me close and kisses me softly.

He murmurs between kisses, “I can’t believe I get you in my bed every night. I’m the luckiest son of a bitch alive.”

His kisses become urgent and I lean back away from him. His brow furrows but I smile quickly and say, “There’s something I need to discuss with you.”

He looks at me in disbelief and asks, “Now?!”

I can’t help but laugh at his devastated expression. I smooth the lines on his forehead and smile, “Yes. Now, baby.”

He leans back and sighs, “Okay, sweetheart. What is it?”

I blurt out, “Do you still want kids, Nik?”

His brow furrows and he begins, “I told you it didn’t matter to me anym—”

I cut him off with, “I’m pregnant.”

He stills and blinks for a moment. Worry churns my gut.

Then he whispers, “No shit?”

I lower my face and whisper back, “No shit.”

Before I can react, Nik flips me onto my back so I'm lying on the bed with him towering over my body. His eyes are fixed on my belly. He looks stunned.

I don't blame him. I never told him I had my birth control device taken out. His silence fills me with fear. I blurt out, "If you don't want it—"

Nik cuts me off with, "Are you kidding me?" He smiles big, pokes my belly and says, "Our baby is growing in here. We made this little bean. And it was made from love, baby. That's a blessing. We're blessed."

Mist forms in my eyes and I smile, too. "Yeah, baby. We're blessed. It's still early so we can't tell anyone yet but our baby is growing every day."

He leans over my face and runs his nose up mine. He kisses me gently and says, "I hope she's just like her mama."

I chuckle and mutter, "I hope he's just like his daddy."

His eyes open and he sits on the bed. He runs a hand through his hair and repeats, "Daddy. I'm going to be a daddy." He jumps up on the bed in Tom Cruise style and whisper shouts, "I'm going to be a daddy!"

I burst into laughter and he jumps on top of me, tickling me. He accuses, "You little sneak! When did you stop taking birth control?"

In between fits of laughter, I sputter, "The day I left the hospital! Please, Nik, no more! I'm going to pee!"

He stops tickling me and kisses me fiercely. I wrap my arms around his

neck and he says against my lips, “I hope you’re in the mood for a good fucking, baby, because right now I feel all virile and manly!” We both chuckle at his excited silliness.

His kisses grow more and more urgent. He lowers my panties and asks, “Hard and fast or slow and sweet?”

I respond breathily, “Hard and fast.”

He pulls back a little and smirks, “God, I love you.”

Nik moves between my legs, positions himself at my entry and slowly pushes himself in til we’re crotch to crotch. I hold him tight around his neck and beg, “Move, baby.”

He pulls out half way and thrusts back in hard.

Fireworks explode in my eyes. My stomach flutters.

Nothing compares to this. Nik fills the missing pieces of my heart and makes it whole again.

His hands move under my ass, he grips me and lifts me a little. The small change has made a great thing fantastic. We’re perfectly positioned and Nik drives into me, rolling his hips with every thrust.

It’s perfection.

I feel my heart rate increase and my core tightens. Nik reaches down and pulls on my bra. Both my breasts come free. He takes one stiff peak into his mouth and sucks hard on it.

And that's that.

I'm flying. I moan long and contract around his swelling length.

Ecstasy.

He lets my nipple go with a pop. His eyes close in bliss. He kisses me deeply, holds me tight and thrusts once, twice, three times before he moans deep into my mouth, wraps me tight, stills and jerks his release into me.

We stay together like that catching our breath and basking in the glow of our love making for a long time.

I begin falling asleep. Nik rolls us to our sides, still connected and whispers, "You're going to be a mama, baby."

With my eyes closed, I smile and claim, "I'm going to be the best mama ever."

I hear his amusement when he replies, "Even if you wanted to be a bad mama, you couldn't. It's not in your nature, sweetheart."

I open my eyes and find his. I whisper, "Do you think Mia would mind?"

Nik shakes his head and smiles a sad smile, "No way. You don't think she'd be excited about being a sister? She'd be over the moon, babe. And we'll make sure our little bean knows all about her sister Mia who's watching her from heaven. Mia will be a guardian angel to her brothers and sisters."

I widen my eyes and whisper, "We're having more?"

Nik rolls his eyes and states, "Of course! At least another one."

I blink then ask, “Can I have this one first before we add anymore to the list?”

He smiles and replies a sarcastic, “I don’t know. I thought we could get two going at once. It’ll save time.”

I chuckle and rub the back of his neck. I tease, “You’re going to be one of those annoying daddies, aren’t you? Like the ones who tell everyone how much better their kid is than everyone else’s.”

Nik laughs and admits, “Yeah, I probably will be.”

We chat about our new family til late into the night.

Nik is over the moon and so am I.

We’re having a baby.

Every Sunday since I came home from hospital Nik has put on dinner for our friends and family.

Dad left a few weeks after I woke but we talk almost every day. He likes Nik and is so grateful I’ve found someone to love. I told my dad I was pregnant and he actually cried, which meant I cried. It ended up we were both sobbing and couldn’t talk so we just hung up on each other and spoke later that day. My dad is excited about becoming a grandfather again. Being a carpenter he told me not to bother buying baby furniture apart from a crib because we’ll design some together and he’ll make it himself by hand.

That's a great gift which will hopefully become a family heirloom.

So, it's Sunday. Everyone is here for dinner and we're all talking outside.

Ceecee is attached to my hip as always and I love it. I play with her hair, hug and kiss her. She's going to have a little cousin running around soon enough and I know she'll be a good role model.

Nik announces the food is ready and we all sit down at the new outside dining set I insisted we get.

Nik and I sit next to each other as always, it makes our food exchange easier.

Everyone is reaching over each other to get food. Nik packs my plates for me with three times as much food as I eat. He's a little crazy protective over my pregnancy.

I start taking things off my plate and put them onto his. I remove the olives, feta cheese, and bacon out of my salad. He adds tomatoes to mine. I haven't noticed Nat watching us. She narrows her eyes at me and offers me some wine which I kindly refuse.

Nat gasps and stands so fast her chair flies back. She smiles, points at me and crows, "You're pregnant!"

Everyone stops eating at looks up at me with shocked and stunned faces.

My face flushes, my neck itches and I try to deny it with, "What? You're crazy! You're all crazy if you think I'm pregnant, right Nik?"

Nik nods and looks around the table. He puts on a serious face and states, “She’s pregnant.”

The table erupts in cheers. They all get up and hug us. Nat laughs and cries at the same time, she asks, “Did you really think you could hide something like that from me?”

I say loudly so everyone can hear, “It’s so early, guys. I’m not in the second trimester yet. I wanted to wait til I was at least twelve weeks. But yes, we have a little bean growing in my belly.”

Nik’s mom, Cecilia, smiles big but is crying. I go over and hug her.

She says, “You saved him. My Niki. You saved him from a lonely life. I was always worried he would never live and he didn’t until he met you. I’ll be forever in your debt.”

Tears stream down my face and I tease, “You can pay me back by babysitting every now and again.”

She laughs, “Of course, even if you didn’t need me to I would.”

Nik’s sisters hug and kiss me, they’re all delighted.

That makes me happy.

Max, Ghost, and Trick all take turns hugging me. I ask each of them “So, you all ready to be Uncles again?”

Max smiles and nods vigorously, Ghost smirks but his eyes are wide and he looks a little frightened and Trick yells out, “Hell, yeah!”

The girls jump all over me. They catch me in a group hug and I blurt out, “I own Safira!”

Nat smiles and Mimi and Lola look at each other and burst out laughing.

They’re actually crying with laughter!

I put a hand on my hip and demand, “What’s so funny?”

Mimi says between fits of laughter “Oh, bless her. She thought we didn’t know.”

WHAT?!

Lola giggles and tells me, “Sweetie, we’ve known for almost two years.

Our pay checks come out of a Safira account with you listed as the owner!”

I did not know that!

I blink and whisper, “I did not know that.”

We all burst into laughter, I wipe tears of mirth away from my eyes and

mutter, “I’ve wanted to tell you for a while but I thought you might treat me differently if you knew I was the big boss lady.”

Mimi straightens, shakes her head and states, “You’ll always be my savior, doll. No matter what.”

Lola smiles big, “Yeah, T. You gave us a chance. You’ll always be our friend.”

Nat squeezes my waist and says, “You’ve always got us, honey. And, by the way, you can’t lie for shit.” We all giggle.

I excuse myself and head to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I sip at it and look out the window to the yard we're all my friends and Nik's family chat together, laugh and goof around.

This is all I ever wanted.

I didn't get it the first time round but I'm a firm believer of second chances.

I look down at my belly, put my hand to it and smile.

Being granted a second chance is a gift.

I'm going to use it well.

Epilogue

It's a baby!

Seven and a half month later...

“NIK, YOU STUPID SON OF A BITCH! I HATE YOU!” Tina yells.

I look over at the doctor in panic and shout, “Give her the drugs! Give her the drugs!”

Gail smiles and explains to Tina, “Tina, you’re doing so well but it’s too late for the drugs. Your baby is almost here and wants to meet its mommy. So when I say so, push.”

Tina squeezes my hand, throws her head back and moans long. She is flushed, sweating, her hair is a mess but, by god, she looks beautiful. She’s a soldier.

Gail looks up at Tina and says, “Now, Tina. Push hard, honey.”

Tina clenches my hand hard and lets out a long strained moan. Gail whoops

and tells us, “And the head is out. One more push and you’ll have a baby!”

Tina pants and Gail says, “Now, Tina. One last push!”

Tina pushes with all her might and then...crying.

Oh, god. That is a beautiful sound.

Gail smiles and hands me a pair of surgical scissors. She holds the umbilical cord and I cut through it. It’s tough like thick rubber!

She takes our baby over to the corner, wipes it down and weighs it before bringing it back to us.

She hands our baby over to Tina, who attaches its small mouth to her breast, and announces, “Congratulations, you two. You have a healthy little girl.”

I look down at my wife and baby girl and try hard to hold myself together.

Tina looks sheepishly up at me and advises, “I can’t be held responsible for what I say in the middle of childbirth, Nik. We shall not mention my potty mouth ever again. Amen.”

I chuckle and touch my daughter’s little face. She makes fussy little noises and wiggles a little but continues suckling.

She’s so small.

Tiny.

But I helped make her. She’s mine. I’ll do anything for her.

God, she was just born and I’m already wrapped around her finger.

I ask my beautiful wife, “What are we naming our little princess?”

Tina looks up at me and whispers, “I like Tatiana.”

I smile big and whisper back, “I love it.”

Tina looks down at our daughter and asks her quietly, “Tatiana, do you want to meet your family?”

Tatiana whines softly and wriggles. Tina says, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I go out into the hall and call our friends in. Nat, Mimi and Lola are openly crying. Max, Trick, and Ghost are swallowing hard and looking at our daughter in awe.

Nat croaks, “What’s her name?”

I reply, “Tatiana.”

Mimi whispers, “It’s beautiful.” Everyone smiles and nods in agreement.

The guys try to leave. Something about breastfeeding women we aren’t married to makes us uncomfortable. Tina calls out, “Guys? Can you stay for a minute? I want to ask you all something.”

The guys re-join the group and Tina looks up at me and smiles. That’s my cue.

I ask them all, “How would you all feel about being Tatiana’s godparents?”

All six of them stare back at me open mouthed.

Lola whispers, “All of us?”

Tina nods and smiles, “We couldn’t decide on just two of you. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair. We love all of you, not just two of you. We’d be honored if

you would.”

I straighten and ask the guys, “Any objections?”

They all smile widely and shake their heads. I look to the girls and ask, “Objections, ladies?”

Mimi clears her throat and whispers, “Are you sure you want me as a godparent?” She looks down and continues, “I’m not exactly godparent material.”

I begin to speak but Tina beats me to it. She assures Mimi with, “That’s just not true. When Tatiana needs help with a bully you’ll be there.” Tina looks around the room and goes on, “When she needs someone to make her laugh, Trick will tell her awful jokes. When she wants to hear love stories, she’ll have Lola who’ll read them to her by the dozen. When someone looks at her the wrong way, she’ll have Ghost watching her back. When she’s older and needs help with fashion and makeup, Nat will help her look chic. When she has a bad day and needs to vent, she’ll have her uncle Max to give her a pep talk. And when she feels like the world is coming to an end over some teenage tragedy, she’ll have Ceecee to remind her bad things get better. So, you see, Tatiana has the best family anyone could ask for. We might all be misfits but we fit together perfectly.”

Mimi smiles a wobbly smile, clears her throat and says quietly, “Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

We all laugh and everyone says goodbye to Tatiana who has stopped feeding and decided to sleep instead. I take her from Tina and place her in her little cubby. I sit next to Tina on the bed, put an arm around her and ask, “How are you feeling, baby?”

She plays with the fingers of my other hand and smiles softly, “I’m wiped, honey. But so, so happy. Best day ever.” She lifts her face to mine and I kiss her softly.

I whisper against her lips, “I love you, Tina. You’re my everything.”

I feel her smile against my lips and she says, “I love you more.” Then she asks, “Can you get me some water, honey? I’m parched.”

I get up to bring her some water. I walk back into the room and smile.

My two beautiful girls are sleeping soundly. I take a moment to think about how I’m feeling.

I’m nervous as hell about being a daddy. I’m excited about watching Tatiana grow up. And I’m happier than I’ve ever been in my life.

I look to the little slip of a woman asleep in the bed. The strong, golden-hearted, sweet woman who randomly sent me candy one day. My wife and the mother of my child. The love of my life.

Warmth swells inside of me.

I realize I’m finally at peace. I smile.

It was worth the wait.

The End

*****The Friend-zoned series will continue with the story of Nat and Asher (Ghost)*****

Author Note: If you enjoyed Nik and Tina's story you can help me by leaving a review on the website you purchased this ebook on, Goodreads and recommending it to your friends.

All my love,

Belle xx