



He wants to give her
a taste of the dark.

KING^{DOM} COME

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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PROLOGUE

FEELING FIERCE WAS THE GREATEST THING, especially when heading to a bar with questionable clientele. Being that my legs were my best asset, I wore tight jeans with knee-length boots over top to show them off. I felt like a force to be reckoned with. I even wore a peekaboo sweater, which made it clear my tits were small but mighty.

That was important. Especially when I stood next to my best friend and roommate, whose curves made men drool even when she was fully covered.

We strolled into the bar that was night and day apart from the Manhattan neighbor it barely had an address in. The patrons weren't stockbrokers or any of the stuffy types, which was why I loved it so.

With my bestie, Bailey, in tow, I found an open spot at the bar, which ran the length of the wall. On the opposite side were a scattering of tables and

even a makeshift dance area. Near the front, where we'd entered, were the pool tables currently in use by a rowdy group of guys.

It was a Friday night, but the place wasn't too crowded yet. Though it was never packed like the clubs in the area.

"The usual, Piper," I said.

The woman manning the bar had soft, pretty features that could put her on covers of magazines, but she was a complete hardass. Regulars knew not to mess with her. She dressed like a biker chick but denied she was a card-carrying patched member. I still liked, and even admired, her badassery.

Piper nodded, acknowledging my order as she kept a keen eye on everything going on. I wanted to know her story—her expression was too cold for her not to have one hell of a story. But she wasn't much of a talker and hadn't taken any of my past offers to hang out.

Two drinks appeared in front of Bailey and me. I left Bailey to sip hers and took mine and wandered over to the empty dance floor. Bails was still in sight and this wasn't her first time here, so I let the thumping beat draw me to move my body. I tried waving her over, but she shook her head.

It wasn't long before several guys joined me. None of them wanted to know what was on my mind. They all had sex on the brain. Too bad for them, they didn't match what I was in the mood

for.

Eventually, the music lost its allure, and I decided to rejoin my friend, who was still nursing her drink. The men who thought they had a shot protested my leaving, so I said, “Girls’ night,” because I wasn’t a total bitch.

Bailey did her best to look as though she was having a good time. She was having boy trouble and I’d thought a night on the town would cheer her up. I was about to cut her a break and suggest we leave when a man who checked off every box of mine walked in. Bailey’s eyes widened as I did my best to keep my reaction under wraps. He took off a beaten-all-to-hell leather jacket and hung it on the coat rack up front, seemingly not at all worried that it would be taken.

His black tee clung to hardened muscles, and with his back to us, his muscled arms revealed more art than the Met gallery. I might have mouthed, “Holy shit,” when he looked our way, but I’d totally deny it. He made his way over to the only open spot at the bar, which happened to be next to me. He smelled of leather and all man and hell if I wasn’t on board.

As he flagged down Piper, I took in the well-worn black jeans and scuffed boots. He was perfect.

Sending a silent request of approval with a mere look at bestie, I waited for Bailey’s response. We’d

known each other since freshman year of college, so she read my question easily and answered with a barely perceptible nod.

Piper came over and my every fantasy come to life spoke. “Beer.”

His voice was deep and stoked every nerve ending I had to life. Point of fact, it was a real possibility my panties combusted. I gave him a look most men didn’t need a dictionary to understand.

His eyes met mine for half a second before they bounced off me and onto my friend. His lips only curled up a half a centimeter, but I caught the appreciation in his gaze.

Some women might have given up. Especially when he said, “Ladies,” before taking his beer and heading over to the pool tables. But I wasn’t most women. First, Bailey was taken whether she admitted or not, so there was no chance for him there. Second, I hated to lose. So, challenge accepted.

Piper disappeared in the back, but another bartender had walked over in time to witness the exchange and was busy laughing. He too was totally my type, but his longtime girlfriend, who was as heavily tattooed as he was, was a waitress and here tonight. I spotted her by the tables. She stood nearly as tall as her man and taller than me, which was saying something. She could kick my ass and Baily’s at the same time. Therefore, I didn’t

bother flirting with the bartender.

“I see you girls like him,” he said, grin as wide as Texas.

Having no shame, I asked, “You know him?”

“Not really. He’s only been in a few times.”

“Do you know his name?” I pressed.

“I’ve heard some of the guys call him Striker, but I’m not sure if they were just referring to his pool skills.”

Before I could pepper him with any more questions, he was waved over to fill more orders.

After he walked away, Bailey asked, “What about Hans?”

Hans was a guy I’d met when she met the man currently giving her the blues. He and I weren’t serious, and I wasn’t sure yet if I wanted to be.

I grinned cheekily. “What about him? We aren’t married or exclusive. Besides, there’s no harm in flirting.”

The chess match between Striker and me had already started, even if he didn’t know it yet. I didn’t intend to lose. I tossed my hair over one shoulder, determined to use a winning strategy. It was perfect timing when a bearded guy who looked as if he chewed nails for breakfast came over and asked me to dance.

“Why not?” I said, letting him lead to the spot occupied by a few other couples.

I kept my eyes on Striker, who if I wasn’t

totally off base, had been checking me out a time or two, but he hadn't taken the bait. Instead, I caught money changing hands between him and another man before a serious game of pool started.

I stayed on the floor, enjoying the freedom of music. Several modern crossover country songs played, and my partner wasn't a half bad dancer. He twirled me around as though he knew what he was doing, and I laughed, enjoying it. Only it wasn't enough to draw Striker to me.

When it was clear Striker might be done with pool, I made my move.

"Thanks for the dance," I said to my partner with a wink and sashayed over to the pool tables.

"Looks like you need a drink after all that dancing," Striker said as I went to grab a pool cue. That confirmed he had noticed.

"Want to buy me one?" I asked, grinning.

"Not especially."

That could have thrown me off my game, but I was a word warrior when it came to trading barbs.

"It's okay. I can afford to get my own."

"I'm sure you can," he said.

This was about the time I should have hedged my bet and folded. But I wasn't playing Texas Hold'em.

"Fancy a game?" I asked, holding the cue stick as if it was a wizard's staff, and with a firm belief I could totally turn his brush-off into a winning game

move.

He gave me a brisk shake of his head before leaving me there alone. All I could do was watch with narrowed eyes as he slipped on his jacket and headed outside.

“I’ll play you,” one of the guys who’d witnessed my crushing defeat offered.

I didn’t even look in the man’s direction as I said, “Next time,” and made my way to my bestie.

It wasn’t the first time I’d been turned down. I didn’t have an ego, which would lead me to believe I was God’s gift to all mankind. No, what hurt was the glance Striker had sent my friend’s way before he’d exited the building. Clearly, she was more his type. Short, petite, and not lacking in the chest area like I was. Worse, I was still very much attracted to him. It wasn’t often I came across a man who so perfectly fit my “type.”

“You ready to blow?” I asked Bailey when I reached her.

I could have kissed her when she said yes without putting to words the humiliation she’d witnessed.

I paid the tab quickly. Bailey was on a budget and we both knew it. She’d gone out for me when she’d much rather have stayed home with a book, so I took care of the expenses.

As if fate wanted a repeat performance of my mortification, Striker was still out front when we

exited. To give my fantasies more to work with, he was on a tricked-out Harley, smoking a cigarette.

I pulled up my big girl pants and strode to the curb to hail a cab, which showed how off my game was. I normally used my Uber app, but it was too late to pull that move. Instead, I continued to ignore the guy who knew he was better-looking than any man in a ten-block radius.

Striker was speaking to another biker who, unlike Striker, had taken notice of us.

“I can give you a ride,” that guy said, eyes dropping to my tomboy cleavage.

“Don’t bother with the princess,” Striker said to him.

“Why not?” the guy asked. “I’d bend a knee to get some of that.”

I couldn’t stop the coy smile from growing on my face. At least someone appreciated all the hard work I’d put into looking like this tonight.

Striker flicked the cigarette to the payment, revved the engine, and said in words that could be heard over the noise, “A girl like her only wants to brag to her friends about slumming.”

As Striker’s Harley disappeared down the street, I lost my cool and yelled, “Bastard.”

“Hey, I don’t mind if you slum with me,” the guy said.

It didn’t matter what that guy looked like—I wasn’t a second-best kind of girl. So I ignored him

and raised my hand to hail the approaching cab, which came to a stop next to us. Bailey slid next to me in the back seat, the pair of us speechless.

Silently, I worked on coming to terms with double mortification. Never had I ever been so thoroughly put in my place. Bailey seemed to be at a loss as well, or she didn't want to add to my shame.

Still, that part of me that never wanted to lose wished for a second chance to turn the tables and bring Striker to heel.

ONE

WEEKS LATER

THE CHICAGO SKY WAS A MOTTLED GRAY, THE SAME color as my thought. It held my attention as Matt drove us from the airport where he'd picked me up.

Part of the reason I'd come to see my brother was to fill the hole Bailey left when she'd been swept overseas by her man.

Just call me a jealous bitch.

I didn't want to be. Not of Bailey, my best friend in all the world, the one who deserved to win the jackpot when it came to men. Kalen was rich, gorgeous, and a sex god, judging by the noises that had come from her room before she had left for Scotland.

Who wouldn't be envious of winning a man

prize such as him? Me. At least I shouldn't be. I didn't want a rich man. I hated the money game and had steered clear of any guy with a bank account that rivaled mine.

"What are you thinking about?" Matty asked.

I looked at my brother. "You mean you can't read my mind? I am your twin," I said, exaggerating every word.

He rolled his eyes and went back to paying attention to the road. When he didn't laugh as I'd expected, I turned the tables on him. He seemed nervous.

"What's going on with you?" Since I trusted him and knew he'd never lie to me, I ignored the few beats of dead air and waited for his answer.

"I've got to tell you something and you can't tell Mom and Dad." He ran a hand through his hair and added, "Or anyone."

"Just spit it out," I said, worrying about the seriousness in his tone.

"It's about my job."

I narrowed my eyes. "Your job? Don't worry. I'm not looking for your undivided attention while I'm in town. As I told you, I'm here to meet with Haven."

Haven was an amazing up-and-coming artist based out of Chicago. My trip here would serve the dual purpose of checking on my brother while also securing more of Haven's art for my next art show.

I'd told Matty about Haven, but he must have been distracted because he asked, "Haven? A new friend?"

"No. I don't know her other than her art. I'm here for a face-to-face to see if I can convince her to give me more for an upcoming show. Don't you remember that conversation?" I angled my head so I could see him better, given he wasn't looking at me but at the road.

"It's just a bad time."

I let the arch of my eyebrow say it all.

He sighed. "I'm on a tough assignment right now."

"You're a cop. Aren't all assignments difficult?" I asked.

"A federal one."

For a second, I tried to figure out what he meant. "Wait. What? You're a Fed? FBI?"

"Undercover," he replied. "I'm working undercover for some bad fucking people, Lizzy. Honestly, you shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be telling you this, but I don't want you caught in it."

I couldn't speak. It was one thing for my brother to lie about being a cop. It was another that he was in so much danger. I could be too.

"You're kidding, right?" I shouted because he couldn't be serious. He nodded. "And you're only telling me now?" I had a hard time accepting, but the look on his face cured me of that.

“You said you weren’t sure if you were coming, then I get a call that you’re boarding a plane.”

“I didn’t think I had to make appointments to see my brother. But maybe if I’d known he was a Fed,” I shouted.

He’d told us he was uncover but with the Chicago Police Department, not the Feds.

He shook his head. “Well, now you know, and you can’t tell a soul. I mean it. Not even our parents or Bailey.”

“How long?” I asked, still thunderstruck.

“How long what?”

“How long have you been doing this?”

“I’ve been working with them since college,” he admitted. “And I’m only telling you because I trust you with my life.” I opened my mouth to say something snarky like we shared a womb, so he better, but he shut me down. “We can’t talk about this now. We’re almost to my place.”

My eyes widened. “What, is it bugged?”

He shrugged. “I do a daily sweep, but you never know.”

“I can’t believe this,” I said, shaking my head.

“Look, when we get there, I need you not to act like my sister.”

That was a jaw-dropping statement. “I’m not going to pretend to be your girlfriend either, eww.”

“No. But for your safety, I don’t want anyone to think you mean anything to me at all.”

“Like a hookup?”

He shrugged again, but I could tell he was stressed. “Yes and no. Just pretend we’re less than family or friends in public, okay?”

“And if they’re watching your place?”

“It a weekend hookup. As long as they don’t see a pattern of us being together, it should be fine.”

“Okay,” I agreed, stewing on my concern for him. Like Bailey, Matty was my best friend. I couldn’t imagine life without him. “You’re worried about me, but I’m worried about you.”

He took my hand and gave it a squeeze. Then we were pulling into the garage of his building and I had to bottle all the questions I had.

As soon as we walked into his apartment, I turned on him. “Gosh, Matt, you live like a slob.”

“It’s not like I have a lot of time here,” he said.

Clothes were everywhere, like piles of them. I wasn’t sure when he’d done laundry last. Trash was overflowing with pizza boxes and other take-out food containers. I was about to suggest a maid, but he gave me the stink-eye while waving some sort of instrument over every inch of his apartment.

“Are you hungry?” I asked, sure that was a safe question.

He stared at me. “Are you ordering out?”

I gave him a flick of my middle finger. “I can make breakfast.”

He didn't bother to respond, and I laughed, going to the fridge. Ultimately, I made us omelets and toast, and he shoveled in food as if he were eating his last meal. That thought soured my mood some.

"Good, huh?" I teased.

"Don't be weird, Liz."

I glared at him. I didn't like anyone calling me Liz.

"It's my job." Since he'd checked for bugs, apparently, we were free to talk.

"Do you have a death wish?" The venom in my voice was a bit unexpected, even for me.

"No."

"So, what was that thing with Bailey? You came to New York and professed your feelings when you're working a dangerous job?"

He looked surprised I would mention Bailey. "You know I've liked her. It was my one chance."

He looked away as I focused on his eyes marred by dark circles. He looked as if he hadn't slept in days.

"When did you want a girlfriend anyway? That was the reason you stayed away from her because you hadn't wanted one. What's changed?"

I hadn't had a chance to really talk to him about it until now.

"I'm fucking lonely, Lizzy."

That statement surprised me. My brother had

always acted as if he didn't care about having a partner.

"Working this job has made me realize I want what Mom and Dad have. Don't you?"

Our parents had been married for over twenty-five years.

"Truth?" When he nodded, I said, "When I see how Kalen is with Bailey, I'm so freaking envious."

"What about Hans?" he asked.

Hans. Beautiful and kind, nearly perfect in every way. "His dick is the size of a mini lipstick."

Though Bailey knew all about it, I hadn't told my brother. But the stunned look on his face did lighten the mood.

I laughed. "It's wrong of me, right? Like I should be able to get past that."

He held up a hand, chuckling and looking faintly ill at the same time. "Please, no more."

"I tried. Honestly, I did. But I like dick."

He held up a finger. "Enough with the dick talk. As far as I'm concerned, you're as pure as the Virgin Mary."

I tossed back my head and let all my pent-up emotions escape in a fit of laughter. "I think I deserve this moment considering all the times I had to put up with you screwing a girl in your room, your bed post hitting the wall we shared while whomever it was screamed your name."

His smirk was back, and I was happy for it.

“Good times,” he said.

“Yeah, and I was always the one left to pretend those girls were friends of mine when Mom and Dad caught them staying over for the night.”

“Great wingman, you,” he said.

“There is a guy that intrigues me,” I said, changing the subject. With Bailey gone overseas and not easily reached, I decided to overshare with my brother about the guy from the bar. “He’s an ass.”

“Your type.” All his humor was gone. I knew he was remembering the past and the one he couldn’t save me from.

“Exactly. So why the fuck do I always have to like a guy who’s bad for me?”

“You don’t have to.”

“I do. I tried. I tried really hard with Hans. But it just didn’t work.” I rolled my head around my shoulders, trying to work out the kinks.

“Just because that dickhead Roach was a weasel doesn’t mean you have to date every guy with only one foot out of a prison. I bet this new one has tats and wears all black.”

I bit my lower lip, trying hard to contain a smile, and he groaned out of frustration.

“Take it from me, he’s probably bad news,” Matty said. “He’ll use you like he’s conquering some princess, then toss you aside.”

“He did call me a princess,” I said.

“Do us both a favor and find a guy with a job.”

That didn't at all sound appealing. “Could you imagine me as a corporate wife, attending brunches with stuck-up former prom queens thinking they're better than me?”

“You'd put them in their place.”

“I'd be bored.” I sighed.

“You'd be safe.”

I could have easily tossed it back in his face. But then I wondered why my brother and I were attracted to danger. Our parents had raised us to be safe and happy. But life wasn't always predictable. My mind returned to the red-hot guy dressed in black, dangerous and sexy. I wanted him.

Maybe I wanted him because he'd acted as though he didn't want me. I was confident if I got one night, he'd be on his knees, begging for me. Then maybe I could walk away with my head held high.

Everything changed before I left Chicago when I got a call from Kalen. My apartment had been vandalized and between him and Mike, they had a plan for my safety.

TWO

CONNOR

A few weeks later

THE CLUB USED TO SOOTHE MY SOUL, AND LATELY IT hadn't. I felt restless as ever and needed to do something with the energy thrumming through my veins, especially because I'd given up the occasional smoke that brought calm.

There was one place I could channel that energy. It wasn't my place in Manhattan. Instead I headed for my apartment in Soho. Though I'd talked to my brother, Kalen, about selling it, it was the place where I kept all my painting supplies. On nights like these, I put all my unsettling thoughts on canvas for my eyes only. I'd thought I'd gotten past the need to work out my demons, but I was wrong.

I would have to tell Kalen I'd changed my mind and get the extra keys I'd given him.

Upon arrival, I had to make a stop on the second floor before I could cleanse my soul.

I knocked and waited, unconcerned about the late hour. Carrie would answer. She'd know it was me. The door opened and a stunning brunette with shy, rounded eyes answered.

"Sir," she said automatically and stepped back.

I entered, though I should have reminded her our agreement had ended some time ago. A quick look over her gave me cause for concern. "Have you eaten today?"

She looked as though she'd lost weight, not that she'd ever weighed more than her full breasts and exceptional ass.

"I—" she began.

I tsked and gave her a hard-eyed stare. "We talked about this. You have to take care of yourself."

"Why?" she asked with a bluster I hadn't seen before.

Good girl, I thought, and managed only a lip twitch when a full-blown smile wanted to play across my lips. Instead, I arched a brow, which had the immediate effect I was looking for.

She backed down, her eyes finding the floor.

"Eat something," I ordered.

She marched into the kitchen and pulled out a

granola bar. She unwrapped it with contempt, yet I watched her eat it in three bites. Then she came over to stand before me, head down.

“There’s someone new living in the building,” she said.

“Yeah?”

She bobbed her head.

“Which apartment?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to speak with her. I’ve just seen her a few times. She lives somewhere upstairs.”

Her nervous chatter meant she knew what I had come to talk about, and she was hoping to avoid it. I tipped up her chin. “Have you thought about what we talked about?”

“I don’t want to go home,” she said, that defiance back in her tone.

The beautiful girl had left her small town and come to New York to find herself, including her sexuality. Her parents had thought they were sending their daughter to attend Columbia University. Somehow, she’d found herself at my club on a guest night. A beauty like hers, coupled with innocence, left her prey for wolves.

My penchant for beautiful things, including women, and a protective side I couldn’t contain made her a perfect fit as my next sub. I’d taken her under my wing to help her explore all the naughty thoughts she’d been harboring for years. What I’d

learned was that she was a sweet girl who liked sex a little rough, including hair pulling and slaps on the ass. She also had a fondness for following rules and took orders well. But in my opinion, she wasn't a true sub, especially with her stubborn nature.

Not wanting to stifle her voice, I replied, "It's your choice. But the lease here is ending and you'll have to find a place of your own."

She didn't know I owned this apartment or the one upstairs. Or that I wouldn't let her be homeless. She may no longer be mine—at my choice—but that didn't mean I didn't feel responsible for her. If she couldn't find a place, I'd have the management company that handled all my real estate offer her a sweet deal so she could afford to stay here.

"I found a job," she said.

I nodded. "Is it what you want?"

She shrugged. "It's grunt work, but I'll be in the newsroom. Maybe I can write a story about you."

I gave her another stare she'd understand. "Just because you and I aren't together doesn't mean our non-disclosure agreement isn't still in effect."

She pouted. "I know. I would never say anything about that, but you are news as King's son."

"I trust you," I said, because I did. "I still think you should go home to that boy. What was his name, Linus?"

She giggled. "Liam."

“Yeah, him.”

“I told you he went to the Air Force a few months before I left for college. Who knows what he’s doing, or who, now? Besides, he’ll never understand,” she said, sounding a little sad.

Bingo. The feelings for this guy were still there.

“He will if you explain it to him.”

Most would find it odd, given how many times I’d seen her naked, that I would push her into the arms of another man. Yet I cared enough about her to do that very thing. She was still sweet, not yet jaded. I feared if she sought another man to take control of her, he might take advantage and not make her needs his highest priority.

“What will I do back home? I have an opportunity to become a real reporter here,” she said.

I couldn’t argue that. “You can start something of your own there. You told me before they didn’t have a paper in your town.”

“Yeah, but half the people there probably wouldn’t read it.”

She might have a point. Only I feared she would be eaten alive in New York if left on her own.

“Think about it. I can help,” I offered.

“I know you would,” she said. “But it’s time I stand on my own feet.”

I couldn’t fault her. “Think about it and let me know. I should go.”

When I stood, so did she—only to remove her sleep shirt and kneel at my feet in a submissive pose. There was a time I would have taken what was being offered. Though her heavy breasts hung full with tight nipples, my cock didn't stir.

“Good night, Carrie. Eat and sleep.”

I left the apartment with a sigh and took the elevator to the penthouse floor. Though it was the only apartment up there, the elevator didn't open into the space as two units had been converted into one.

I walked to the door, opened it with my key, and headed directly for my bedroom—where I immediately stopped short. There in my bed, barely covered by silk sheets, was a blonde who looked vaguely familiar. I swept my eyes over a long torso to a small but shapely ass. From a side view, I spied equally small, but seemingly firm, tits. She was lying on her stomach.

A sort of miracle occurred, if you considered how long my sexual drive had been on hiatus. My cock hardened, which it hadn't done in weeks, maybe months. I'd thought with my line of work, it had become apathetic to the sights and sounds of sex. I'd wrongly believed that maybe I'd seen and done so much, nothing would excite me again.

I looked at her then down at my dick hidden behind a zipper. The traitorous beast was going against everything we appreciated on a woman. She

appeared tall, lean, and athletically built. My cock and I were into women with shapely asses and tits the size of melons—as long as they were natural. I had a personal dislike for fake tits unless they were really well made.

This woman was everything but. I stepped out of the room and went to the other side of the place to make a hushed call.

“Bro,” I said to Kalen, my only sibling and a half-brother at that. We shared a father but not mothers. His was our dad’s first wife, and Kalen had grown up in Scotland after they divorced when he was very young. My mother was Dad’s current wife.

“What’s up, Connor? It’s late.”

“What’s up? Tell me about the blonde in my bed,” I said.

Kalen was quiet for a moment. “Don’t touch her,” he said, sounding like a papa bear. But I wasn’t his son.

“Why not?” I quickly drew a conclusion. Currently, he was chasing a woman around the world, but that didn’t mean she was the only one. “Do you have more than one woman you care about?”

“She’s Bailey’s best friend. I’m keeping her safe.”

Bailey was the woman who had slayed my brother’s heart. He was doing his best to keep her

safe from whoever had targeted her. From the guilt I'd heard in his voice when he told me he was taking her to Scotland to keep her safe, I figured it was his mess had put her in danger. Now she'd done the unthinkable and left him where he'd stashed her in Scotland. Apparently, the danger had spilled over to her best friend who slept in my bed.

"Safe from what? And why in my apartment without telling me?" I asked.

"If I knew who I was keeping her safe from, I wouldn't be in this mess."

I shook my head. "You've never really explained what's going on or why you're chasing your redhead all over the world."

"If I had something to explain, I would. There are plenty of people working on this."

"Who, Griffin and his security team?" I asked, annoyed my brother had a better relationship with his best friend than me.

"Griffin is good at what he does."

"So again, I ask why you've stashed your girlfriend's best friend in my apartment."

"As I recall, you were getting rid of the place and gave me the keys. I needed a place not tied to me in case all this shit Bailey is going through has something to do with me. I figured since you were selling, it would be empty."

"You assumed wrong, brother. No contract was signed. No money changed hands. Which means

legally, this place is still mine. You should have told me. But since you didn't, I'll consider her a gift," I teased to rile him up. "Good night."

Before I ended the call, my brother's curses rang loud and clear through the phone. I silenced the device because Kalen was sure to call back. Then on quiet feet, I made my way back to my bedroom. I had never had a woman in my bed—not here at least. I'd kept this apartment as a sacred space free of anything but my creativity when I needed to unleash it. Yet as I watched the sleeping woman, trying to conjure why she seemed so familiar, I didn't get annoyed over her presence.

A knock shattered the silence and my butterfly turned in her sleep. When her face came into view, I got my answer as to why she seemed familiar. I disappeared down the hall as the knock continued. I had a feeling Kalen, if he was in town, had hightailed it over her to save the princess.

I stepped into the pantry and partially closed the door, where I watched as the blonde bombshell, sexily sleep ruffled, made her way to the door. So confident in herself, the robe she'd chosen to don—which was mine—hung open, giving me a view of everything I'd missed when she'd lain prone on the bed.

My dick, harder than granite, could have punched through stone to get to her and that was a problem. The slim blonde minx wasn't my type

physically, but the problem was I knew exactly who she was. We'd met before.

THREE

LIZZY

“HOLD YOUR HORSES,” I SAID GROGGILY. I PEERED through the peephole and muttered, “Son of a bitch,” when I recognized the man on the other side. After belting my robe closed and opening the door, I glanced at my arm where my watch should be but wasn’t. “Why are you here at *what the fuck* hour?”

Griffin, my bestie’s man’s best friend and head of security, barreled through the door and chose not to acknowledge my question. “Where is he?” he demanded, his Scottish accent in full force.

Annoyed, I narrowed my eyes at him. “He?”

The bastard ignored me and glanced around as if he was looking for someone. The fact that I knew

I was alone left me confused as to why he was suggesting I wasn't. I stood my ground as he darted into the bedroom and, after a few seconds, exited only to charge into the spare bedroom as if to defend my honor.

When he finally came back, I crossed my arms and glared at him.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I thought—"

"Thought what?" I snapped.

"Never mind. I got an alert that someone was here."

"Alert?" I asked, my question filled with deadly menace.

He may own a security company that handled such things for rich people around the world, but I hadn't hired him. Though I'd agreed to stay in this apartment at Kalen's request, I was here under protest. The only reason I'd given in was because my apartment had been vandalized by people yet unknown. But I drew the line at my privacy. An alert for a break in was one thing. An alert if I had a visitor was another.

"The kind that comes with the security we have installed to protect you," Griffin responded as he returned to his normal playful self, which included a crude once-over of my body.

"There better not be cameras in here or I'm killing someone, starting with you."

He stepped forward, a smirk growing on his

face. "If you let me have you, I'd die a lucky man."

I slapped his hands, which he'd extended as if to wrap me in his arms. "I didn't fall for your games at lunch the other day. Don't think anything has changed."

When I'd gone to give Kalen shit about being in New York and leaving Bailey overseas, he sent Griffin in to appease me and calm me down. Admittedly, Griffin was damn good to look at and fun to hang around, but he was also in the no-fly zone for me.

Pretending to be wounded, a hand on his chest, he said, "You can't deny the chemistry between us."

"Yes, it was like we were separated at birth, which would make having sex with you gross."

Griffin's lips twitched. "You have it wrong, darling." He injected a little Texas twang in that last word now that his accent wasn't on Highlander mode. Though a hint of it was still there. "It was cruel fate that separated us, not a blood tie. We were meant to be together."

"As friends," I finished for him. "We are too much alike to ever be together. We'd kill each other. Kalen and Bailey do enough of that. We don't need to add to the drama pool."

The two of them were madly in love, in my opinion, but neither would admit it. They were dancing around each other, pretending neither

cared.

“How can you say that?” Griffin asked, playing the victim again.

“You’d flirt. I’d flirt back. You’d get angry. I’d get pissed. You’d yell. I’d scream and hopefully the cops would be called before I decapitated you,” I said, all nonchalant like.

“That’s dark. But sounds like the beginning of the best sex of my life,” he teased.

“No, because it would start with you flirting with anything that moved. Not with me,” I said, tilting my head in game, set, match posture.

“Ah, you know me well.”

“Exactly. Now it’s time for you to leave. You can see I’m safe and, more importantly, sleepy.”

“Sure I can’t join you?” he asked, making another attempt at closing the distance between us. “What if being with you was my dying wish?”

I shoved him toward the door. “Then you’d be a dead and lonely man.” For good measure, I added a firm, “Go.”

With his hand on the doorknob, but not yet opening it, he said, “I can be your battery-operated boyfriend. All you have to do is turn me on.” He wagged his eyebrows.

That did it. I couldn’t hold back any longer and laughed. “Not even in your dreams.”

Finally, he opened the door as if he’d waited for me to cave and acknowledge his silliness.

“Seriously, just give me a chance.”

He sounded so sincere, I almost believed him.

“How about I take you to my favorite spot and I can play wingman, Robin to your Batman, and get you laid?” When his brows shot up, I added, “And not by me. We’re better friends.” Then with the seriousness he’d given me, I said, “I don’t want to lose that.”

He tipped his head in my direction. “I can’t tonight.”

Since it was after midnight, he was talking much later today.

“Tomorrow night then.”

“Tomorrow,” he acquiesced.

When the door closed, I slid the bolt and sighed.

Griffin would make some girl very happy. It just wasn’t me. A part of me mourned that. But the mature part of me accepted it would never work. I’d dated enough guys to know he wasn’t my person, which sucked. Though I’d had less experience with sex than some might think, my numbers were enough for me to know the man would be great in bed. That was something I sorely missed.

I turned around, leaning my back on the door, and admired the shadowy room. Though it was dark, I’d seen enough in the light to picture the rich color of the bamboo floors, which contrasted nicely

with the few pieces of furniture. An expensive modular leather couch and two armchairs flanked a glass table, which appeared floating on woven reflective legs only there to hold the glass up.

Not much more was in the room. The kitchen, which filled most of the wall to the far left, was hidden behind simplistic cabinetry which tricked the eye into not knowing there was a refrigerator or dishwasher.

The place was minimalistic like an art gallery. Abstract and landscape paintings by an artist I would kill to feature in my gallery were spaced on the walls. Yet no signature was anywhere to be found.

I was certain Kalen had never lived here. Not with the way Bailey had described his place. According to her, it boasted the minimalist style as well, but with enough items that it felt homey.

No, I was certain an artist lived here. One I very much wanted to know. My gallery could use a boost from discovering a talent such as this.

Despite my exhaustion, the wall of windows called to me. I walked over to them, glancing over the New York skyline. Though it was beautiful here, I missed my apartment.

Looking out into the night, I was reminded how I ended up here. After my meeting with Haven in Chicago, I'd gotten the call from Kalen that my apartment had been broken into and vandalized.

According to him, someone was targeting my best friend for reasons still unknown to me. I had my suspicions the destruction in my home was somehow related to Kalen, considering the way he insisted on taking care of not only Bailey, who I was sure he was madly in love with, but me too.

Despite knowing this, Matt had forced me back on a plane home because he thought I'd be safer in New York. I didn't want to admit I was freaked, which was why I was staying put and not going to a hotel or my parents' house or someplace I could be easily traced. Kalen seemed to think Bailey was the target, but what if she wasn't? Matt had been worried about my safety. What if someone had destroyed our apartment because I'd gone to see my twin?

I was up in the air about what to do with the apartment. Since the damage was extensive, I'd decided to also do some long overdue renovations. Updating the kitchen, bathroom, and floors had been on my to-do list for a while. But the idea of going home gave me hives. I had no idea what hidden things the vandals had done. Between Kalen, my insurance, and the contractors, the cost to me was next to nothing. I had a feeling Kalen might be pitching in more than he'd said. As it stood, it would be weeks until the apartment was finished.

So I was in Soho, enjoying this beautiful place

at no cost to me. Better than a rental or a hotel for sure. It was like taking a mini vacation.

I held my hand up to the glass and stopped myself from touching it. The place was too pristine for me to mar the view with my fingerprints.

Stifling a yawn, I turned and noticed the door next to the kitchen was cracked open. I was sure it had been closed. But I was too tired to make the trek across the expansive room just to close it, so I headed back to the bedroom. I removed the robe I'd borrowed from the enormous closet and slipped under the silk sheets.

I quickly checked my phone and noticed five missed calls from Hans and sighed. He was one of the most attractive men in the world and a highly sought-after model, but he too wasn't my person. I was such a bad person for being hung up on his penis.

The correct medical term was micro-penis. The man could eat his way to heaven, regarding my pussy and me as the path to get there. But I'd liked dick and not the silicone kind. There was nothing wrong with a good dildo, but it wasn't a permanent replacement for a hard cock, something Hans lacked through no fault of his own.

As much as I wanted it to work, it wasn't fair for either of us for me to continue pretending his problem wasn't mine. He deserved a woman who could love him and adore him completely. I hated

that couldn't be me.

I pushed aside my guilt and decided I'd wait until the morning to return his call. I wasn't sure what more I could say to him that would make him accept my decision.

Tomorrow would be a new day with many challenges, including the financial viability of keeping my gallery open. But I couldn't allow myself to ponder that if I had any hope of falling back asleep. Instead, I thought about the arrogant biker. The one who'd called me a princess a few weeks ago.

He'd been everything bad girls dreamed about. At least, this one. Why was it I was always attracted to his type? The one who didn't want anything to do with me. That's why any sort of relationship never lasted for me. Once a guy got all mushy, I headed for the hills. Would I ever learn my lesson?

At least thinking about him had the desired effect as I drifted into dream world, fantasizing what it would be like to fuck his brains out.

FOUR

CONNOR

HIDING IN MY OWN APARTMENT WAS A SHIT THING. Yet I didn't think I could explain my presence to the blonde before she dialed 9-1-1. I waited a few minutes until the house got quiet before I exited the pantry and closed the door as quietly as I could.

Before I left the apartment, I peeked into the bedroom to make sure Sleeping Beauty had drifted off again. The slow rise and fall of her sheet-covered chest said so. I didn't linger and exited the room. I'd only barely stepped out of the apartment when a fist caught me squarely in the jaw.

"So where were you hiding?" Griffin asked in a harsh whisper. His Scottish lilt was in full force tonight.

I rubbed at the ache on the side of my face and held up a finger. “One time. That’s all you get. Next time you’ll find out what Black Irish means.”

My mother was a dark-haired beauty, according to those I’d overheard. She had blue eyes the color of Caribbean waters, which she’d passed down to me. She’d told me all my life to be proud of our heritage, which included those often-labeled Black Irish, those with dark hair and blue eyes, and reminded me we were survivors by any means necessary.

Griffin huffed and spoke a series of words in Gaelic that meant nothing to me. I understood some Irish Gaelic, but none of the Scottish kinds. Even if I could, he was half muttering and speaking too fast for me to make any sense of it.

“Did you touch her?” he finally asked in English.

I narrowed my eyes at him. We might not see eye to eye, especially now, but he knew me better. I didn’t dignify his question with an answer. Instead I said, “You missed the show. She was naked and in my bed *willingly*.”

His jaw worked a second. “She didn’t know you were there.”

“Exactly. I didn’t know she was there either. A little warning and I might not have let myself in *my apartment*.”

“Stay away from her.”

“And what say do you have over her? I think she was clear when she shut you down,” I said, patting his shoulder.

He jerked away as I stifled a chuckle, but I couldn’t contain a grin.

“She’ll change her mind,” Griffin said, though his statement lacked confidence.

“When? At your little meetup tomorrow night?” When he said nothing, I tapped my chin with my index finger. “How about a wager?”

“I’m not playing any of your games.”

“Games? This is simple. I show up. You’re there. Let’s see who she chooses.” I knew something he didn’t.

“She’ll never go for this.”

“She won’t know, which will make her choice pure and unadulterated.”

He shook his head.

“Scared?” I mocked. “No one will force her hand.”

“I won’t agree to this.”

“You don’t have to. I’ll be there.” I started to walk away and stopped. “And to make things even, I suggest you don’t tell her who I am.” I winked. “That would give me an unfair advantage.”

I wasn’t exactly sure I had an advantage, but I saw the hesitation in Griffin’s eyes before I made my way to the elevator.

“Don’t worry, laddie,” I joked. “It’s not that

bad to only be friends with a woman you're half in love with."

Griffin opened his mouth to speak, but I stepped into the elevator as the doors opened on cue.

When I got in my car, I thought over the wisdom of my bet. Griffin had goaded me into it even though he hadn't been the one to come up with the scheme. I knew he didn't like me and saw me as some kind of threat to his friendship with my brother.

Kalen and I had only met when he moved to New York at our father's request. He was Dad's first son with his first wife. My mother was currently married to the man, but recent developments suggested that wouldn't last long. Apparently, she'd been sleeping with Dad's best friend, who was also his lawyer. There was a hint that maybe I wasn't even a King. I could visualize the triumph in Griffin's glare to see me toppled from the throne.

That had to be the reason I'd set the game afoot, because despite the blonde's beauty, she wasn't my type. Yet I couldn't ignore my cock's reaction to her. The last time I'd gotten the thing to participate was when I'd seen her weeks before. That had pissed me off, because I never lost control. After, when my dick had ghosted me on more than one occasion, I'd worried that my past

had finally caught up to me.

I shook off the memories before they could make an appearance and focused on the road as images of the naked beauty played in my head. I longed for my canvases and would have to resort to pencil and paper when I got home. A sketch would have to do to clear my head.

I pulled my Dodge Viper into my Manhattan apartment's garage. Though I wasn't into cars like my brother was, I'd had to have the concept car I'd seen when Kalen and I went to an auto show. I slid my fingers along the hood, one of its kind for now, as I walked toward the private elevator.

Tomorrow would be a new day. Tonight, I would sketch, and I did so until dawn.

It was then and only then I was able to find sleep, something that eluded me on a daily basis. But even in dreams, I couldn't escape the princess. Sleeping Beauty, I'd dubbed her. Golden hair and peaceful in sleep, yet she haunted my dreams.

I woke hard and had to rub one out in the shower while thinking of her to find release. That was the fucked-up situation I was in. The last time I'd jerked off—when it wasn't part of a scene—I'd been a teenager.

“Christ,” I muttered, disgusted with myself.

Before I could towel off, my phone rang. Eliza. My manager at the club, and former sub, didn't call me in the morning. Though it was after two in the

afternoon, so it wasn't truly morning.

"What," I said.

"What's got your panties in a bunch?" she joked. When I said nothing, she continued. "Yeah, sorry. You should know we had a request."

"And that is?"

She rattled off a name, and I scrubbed a hand down my face, knowing what she would say next. "He ordered a private room and wants us to arrange a partner for a scene he has in mind."

"Did you tell him we don't do that?" Not that she should have to. That was explained in the membership contract.

"I did, and he said—" She rattled off another name that had been in the news recently. "He did that kind of thing at his private island, what makes us better."

"We aren't a prostitution ring." I growled out the words. "Fucking pedophiles and sadists ruin everything." When Eliza remained quiet, I said, "Shit. I didn't mean that... I mean, I did about pedophiles. But not about sadists."

Eliza was a bit of a masochist. It was part of the reason we hadn't lasted, because I was far from a sadist. The reason people like him shouldn't pay for sex was because they then believed they owned the experience and safe words meant nothing.

"I know what you meant," she said quietly.

Eliza wasn't one to back down, and I knew I'd

hurt her. “Fuck, you know I didn’t mean it. It’s him that pisses me off. I could rescind his membership. On the other hand, if he doesn’t have a safe outlet for his needs, he may harm an unwilling participant.”

“I know,” she said more firmly.

“I trust you can handle it.” I had plans for the evening that didn’t include going to the club.

When she spoke, I visualized her lifting her chin. “I can and I will. I just wanted you to know.”

“Good girl,” I said, knowing she liked to hear it.

We all had our kinks, including me. Suddenly, I was back to thinking of the blonde, wondering just what she liked in bed and out.

FIVE

LIZZY

THE BRIGHT SUNSHINE CREPT IN LIKE A THIEF, jolting me awake. The clock told another story. I was late. My shower might have been called a dance in the rain as I rushed to scrub all the vitals. Picking out an outfit cost a little more time. Image was important and couldn't be overlooked.

Hence though I noticed the door to the pantry was closed when I swore it had been open last night, it didn't make the impact it might have if I hadn't been rushing to get my coffee before diving into the sea of New Yorkers headed to work. When I got to my gallery, my assistant, Anderson, was already waiting for me—with an espresso cup from our in-store machine.

“Good Morning, princess,” Anderson said.

“Don’t call me that,” I said, taking the shot of espresso from him. The label reminded me of the one man who’d called me that. I lifted the cup. “How’d you know?”

“Honey, you’re late and it shows on your face.”

I swallowed the drink before reaching in my purse to find my compact mirror. My reflection revealed a smoky eye look not on my lids but under my eye. I’d only have used makeup to get that effect if I’d been going for the “four hours or less of sleep” look.

“Ugh,” I whined.

“A little concealer and you’ll be fine. Your meeting is in fifteen minutes, so let’s get started.” Before diving into our agenda, he left my office. A second later, he was back with a bouquet.

“From Hans?” I said, feeling bad once again I couldn’t make it work with the man.

“No.” He set the bouquet of assorted flowers in a variety of eye-popping colors on my desk.

I plucked the card from the forked stick that held it.

*Roses are red
Violets are blue
All are pretty
No more than you.
See you tonight
Griff*

Though I didn't want to smile, I did. Anderson took the card from my hand and read it.

"The hot Scot," he said. "You totally need to screw him and tell me how it was."

"Slut," I teased.

Anderson was an equal opportunist when it came to bedmates. He didn't discriminate based on anything. Male or female or anything on the rainbow spectrum.

"You wish," I added.

"Damn straight, but apparently he's sticking to that line."

"He's just a friend," I said, slipping the card back into the matching tiny envelope.

"You're missing an opportunity there. You two could be a power couple."

"Who kill each other. We're too much alike."

"Not a good enough reason," Anderson sing-songed.

"We're better friends."

"Coward," he said and left the room.

I thought maybe Anderson had given up until he came back in with another bouquet. This one was filled with a dozen perfect long-stem red roses.

"Hans," I said, sure of myself this time. This was more his style.

"Ding, ding, ding. Give the girl a prize."

"I need to call him."

"You do, but not until after your meeting."

He moved both arrangements to a side table made of glass, which made it look as if they were floating.

“Concealer,” Anderson added before leaving my office again—probably to greet the artist I was meeting.

I did my best to dab some under my eyes before Anderson came in with my appointment.

Running an art gallery wasn’t easy. My day was jammed with making future deals with artists and haggling vendors for my upcoming event. Which meant by the time I left for the day; I was exhausted. When I finally got home and took a long gaze in the mirror that was temporarily mine, I saw the weariness that weighed on me.

I missed my best friend, who had absconded overseas for her protection, and I missed my brother in Chicago. I couldn’t call Bailey because of the time difference, so I called my brother.

Because of his job, he rarely answered his personal phone because according to him, while he was undercover, he didn’t carry his personal phone. So when he said, “Hello,” I was surprised.

“Matty,” I teased.

“Hey,” he said, sounding cautious.

“Is everything okay?” I asked in a panic.

“It’s fine. You? B?”

“I’m good. Bails is fine, last I spoke with her.”

We both had our nicknames for Bailey.

“Look, now’s not really a good time. Things are heating up.” That meant that the case was nearing its conclusion, which calmed me some. Though he’d told me that was also the point when an investigation became extremely dangerous. “I probably won’t be answering this phone for a while.”

“What if I need you? Or something happens?”

He sighed. “I’ll give you the other number, but you have to promise not to use it unless it’s an actual emergency.”

He meant life or death, not fashion or missing him.

“I promise,” I said.

He rattled off a number that I wrote on a random menu I found in a kitchen drawer. “If you call or text, keep it short and simple. Don’t give details. I’ll figure out your message and get back to you.”

My brother could take care of himself. He had been doing so since we were young. That didn’t take away my fear.

“Be safe,” I said.

But the call ended, and I couldn’t be sure if he’d heard me.

While I heated up soup I’d bought from a vendor on the street, I whipped up a grilled cheese sandwich, the one thing in the world I could cook outside of a basic breakfast. While I ate, I emailed

Bailey the details of tonight's shenanigans. She'd get a kick out of hearing that I was going on a quasi-date with Griffin—and that I was looking forward to it. I needed the laughs he would bring.

I dressed for the club, though I didn't have a lot of options since my apartment was off-limits. Kalen had been willing to buy me a replacement wardrobe, but I couldn't let him do that. I did let him buy some things, but mainly because I was pissed he'd put my bestie in danger from the man stalking her. It still didn't leave a lot to choose from. Plus, I didn't want Griffin to think I'd put a lot of effort into my choice of outfits, giving him false hope. For only a second, I wondered if I was making a mistake by not giving the big lug a chance.

I ended up wearing jeans and a basic silk button-up top with a cami underneath. None of the clothing screamed luxury, which was important considering our destination. With my cash, card, and an ID in a mini wallet in my pocket and my phone in my hand, I caught an Uber back to Manhattan.

Tucked on a side street, an unassuming door led into my favorite spot. My brother had been the one to find it back when we were in high school. He'd learned, then taught me the art of pool. Though he was far better than me, I could hold my own.

I sidled up to the bar the owner stood behind.

“Where’s Piper?” I asked.

“Doesn’t work here anymore,” Kingsley said. The older man was black and beautiful, and I might have flirted with him if not for the shiny wedding ring on his finger.

“That’s too bad.”

“What are you having tonight? The usual?”

I decided to switch things up and said, “Not tonight. Rum and coke, please.”

He nodded and quickly poured it for me. I was just putting the cup to my lips when a man approached.

“Hey, gorgeous.”

SIX

LIZZY

THERE WAS NO DENYING THAT GRIFFIN WAS A TALL drink of cold water on a hot summer day. That was also apparent to every woman in the bar. They had taken notice—maybe because he didn't look like a biker or blue-collar worker in his slick clothes that spoke money.

“Hey, you,” I said.

As he bent his head in an obvious move to kiss me, I turned my cheek so his mouth landed squarely there. When he pulled back, he said, “You're killing me, darling.”

I couldn't help but love the Southern accent he injected into that last word.

I gave him my best cheeky smile. “You'll live.”

The door opened, and the breeze it carried seemed to curl around my hand as if to grab my attention. The door was at my back, forcing me to glance over my shoulder to find the creator of every fantasy I'd had since the first time I'd seen him.

He walked in defying all fashion rules in ripped white jeans and a matching wife beater covered by a black leather jacket, looking like an avenging angel.

In my moment of distraction, Griffin leaned in to whisper in my ear, "Let's get out of here."

When I turned back, our lips were only a whisper apart.

I'd be hard pressed to choose which of the two men was better-looking. But the difference was the flutter in my belly I got around Striker that I hadn't experienced with Griffin.

I swallowed and pulled back some. "Don't be silly. You just got here. And that cute brunette over there can't stop grinning at you."

He glanced at the woman at the other end of the bar, farthest from the door.

Kingsley approached and said, "The usual?"

"Yes." That one gruffly spoken word was confirmation it was the same man who had called me a princess the only other time I'd seen him.

When had he become a regular? I'd come here a lot... before making things official with Hans.

That had to be when he'd started coming.

Coming... that sparked something in me. Though I loved sex, I didn't have many partners. Outside of my last relationship that had lasted some months, I hadn't had an actual cock in me for far too long. I felt my dry spell cracking from Striker's mere presence.

"Let me take you to dinner."

It took me a second to blink away my thoughts and focus on Griffin, who'd just spoken to me. All the playfulness was gone from his face. In its place was a seriousness I'd never seen before on him.

"I can make you happy," he added.

Before I could be pulled in the vortex that was Griffin, I took his arm. "Let's go play."

My words apparently took him by surprise, and I tugged him toward a pool table a group of guys were vacating.

When I met Griffin's questioning gaze, I said, "You can play, can't you?"

Some of his teasing nature came back as he smiled. "What? Of course, we have pubs like this back home."

"Really?" I joked with an eyebrow raised.

"Yes, with less American accents," he said with a wink, his smirk back in full force.

"Rack them up," I said, purposely not looking at the bar area or the man who had my full attention even though he wasn't in my line of sight.

Why did Griff and I have to be so much alike? I'd accused him of only pursuing me because I was the one woman he had to chase. Was I any better? The man who'd plagued my every fantasy had made it clear he wasn't interested in me and labeled me a princess. I'd been fascinated with him ever since.

"Lizzy?" I glanced up and Griffin appeared as though he'd been speaking to me. He waved toward the pool table before slipping behind me and placing his hands on my hips. "You need some help?"

I waited for the butterflies that didn't come. Before I could make a snarky comment about him touching me, an "Excuse me" sent a shiver down my spine.

The lack of enough space between tables forced Griffin to let me go as a body brushed against mine at the same time, and I took the break shot. The balls went wild, but none went into a pocket as expected. When I looked at Griffin, expecting a gleeful and teasing smile, I got a view of his pinched brows and a frown. Finally, he looked at me then at the table.

He regained some bluster and said, "How about this? If I win, we leave."

I tilted my head and said, "And if I win, we stay." I gave him a huge grin, trying to ignore what felt like heat at my back. I refused to look to see if

Striker had eyes on me.

Griff nodded, making the same mistake that had won my brother a lot of money when he used to come here. People would consider Matty a mark when really, they were. We were often underestimated. Yes, I'd lost my share of games and had blown this break shot. But unless Griffin was some kind of pool shark, I'd win in the end.

Surprising me, Griffin sank several balls until his cue ball was in an impossible position to sink any of his balls without sinking one of mine. We traded smirks as I moved around the table to end the game. As I leaned down to make my first shot, I locked eyes with the most vivid pair of blues I'd ever seen. Shaken to the core, I was frozen in place by Striker's penetrating gaze and unreadable expression.

"Stop giving every guy in here a peek of your tits."

I glanced down and spotted my camisole gapping. I may have next to nothing for tits, but that didn't mean I wanted to flash the bar. A flush crept up my neck. Ignoring both men and the embarrassment trying to take hold, I found enough concentration to take the shot. In went the ball, centering me again. I ran the board and smirked at Griffin when I sank the eight ball.

"I win," I said as Griffin came over. When he leaned in, I leaned back, leaving us in an awkward

position with my butt resting on the table but holding myself at an angle as if I planned to lie back.

“Looks like you need competition.”

Griffin and I turned almost as one and faced the man capable of melting this ice queen.

“She doesn’t need anything. We were just leaving,” Griffin said from behind me.

I smiled sweetly at Striker. “Give me a minute.”

Pivoting on my heels, I snagged Griff’s wrist and dragged him several feet away.

“Remember why we’re here,” I scolded and waved over the brunette who hadn’t given up the possibility of snagging Griff’s attention. “Don’t ruin this for me.”

Before he could speak, the brunette was there.

“My friend, Griff, wants to buy you a drink.” I gave Griff a warning glare when he finally stopped looking in the other man’s direction.

Griff turned to the beauty. “Yeah, sure, darling. What are you having?”

And there it was. The magnetic charm that won over most women. If I’d been slightly attracted to Griff romantically, I’d be annoyed at his casual use of the word darling with any woman he spoke to. Luckily, I wasn’t, or I’d be broken-hearted already.

When they headed to the bar, I spun and walked back to the man with the waiting smirk. His beat out Griff’s any day, sending a tingle straight to

my core.

When he turned, I was given a view of the tribal patterned tattoos on the backs of his arm he wore like badges of honor. When he faced me again, I focused on his dark, thick hair. Something a girl could hold on to when he fucked your brains out. But it was his face, too pretty but with a manly edgy, that caught me in his tangled web of self-assuredness.

“Slumming again, princess?” So he remembered me. “I hope I didn’t interrupt something,” he said with a sly grin, belying his words.

I gave as good as I got. “Only the smack-down I’m about to lay on you.”

His lips twitched as he tried to hold back a grin. Talk about satisfying.

“Why don’t you put a little wager on your words?” he asked.

Never backing down from a challenge, I said, “What is it you want to play for?”

A round of cheers, hand slaps, and leers came from the peanut gallery surrounding us. I hadn’t noticed anyone paying attention to our little transaction until then.

I wasn’t worried. I could hold my own, as I’d proven with Griff.

“Well?” I said.

He glanced over me. Actually, a better description was that his eyes did a slow perusal of

my body. I felt as much as saw his eyes taking me in. “You aren’t my type. I like women with curves.”

There he was spoiling things by opening his gorgeous mouth and saying crap like that.

“Who said I was offering?” I snapped, feeling the burn of rejection again. Apparently when I didn’t storm off as maybe I should have, I’d told him I liked being spurned.

“Who said I wasn’t taking?” He leered at me with a smug smile. “Just because you’re not my type doesn’t mean I won’t sample.” He let his gaze drop down my body again. “How about your total submission for a day? Whatever I want.”

“Again, who said I was offering?”

He shrugged. “We don’t have to play.”

His arrogance was the fire that made me want to bring him down a peg.

“What do I get when I win?”

“Sweetheart, that isn’t likely.”

I huffed, shifting a hand to my hip. “There isn’t anything sweet or heartfelt about me.”

He chuckled, and I ignored all the jeers around us.

After licking his lips, he said, “What do you want if you win?”

What did I want? “Same deal. Total submission for one day.”

A chorus of hoots and more wisecracks followed.

“Doesn’t sound like a hardship, princess.”

“It might be if I walk you around New York with a dog collar around your neck.”

Though I’d meant it as a joke to bring his ego to heel, I swore his eyes dilated a little. For moments, it was the two of us in a battle of wills. Screwing this guy until he was begging for my number was my new mission. And I didn’t care what people thought. I had to conquer him after he suggested I wasn’t good enough for him.

He leaned in and whispered, “Do you know what to do with a collar, princess? Because I do.”

I swallowed, prepared to take it all back. I’d met my match, and it was time to concede.

Only he straightened. “I’ll take the bet.”

And it was too late. In for a penny and in for a pound.

Pool was not only a game of skill, but a game of luck with the first break. How the balls landed could spell a win or a loss. My ace was his underestimation of me. But had I underestimated him?

“Shall we?” he said and racked the balls.

I pulled the stick I’d used during my game with Griff, then Striker took position.

“This was your challenge,” he said before effortlessly hitting the cue ball and calling “Solids,” at the same time.

We hadn’t set any rules, but when I saw the

balls position perfectly for him to run the table, I said, “Fuck.”

His only response was, “Precisely.”

SEVEN

CONNOR

WITH PRACTICED EASE, I SANK BALL AFTER BALL until all the solids were gone, leaving just the perfectly positioned eight ball. The blonde's sexy lips formed a rounded O—perfect for blow job penetration—as I hadn't given her one chance. I'd run the table. I took the final shot, sinking the black ball and ending the game.

I would have said something catchy to glorify my win, but Griffin came barreling over and snagged my prize by the arm.

"We're leaving," he announced, and the crowd that had formed booed him.

"Griff," she admonished. "One second," she said to me.

They moved as far as they could from the bystanders and me, but Griffin was practically foaming at the mouth and he wasn't careful not to be overheard. I was the closest to them, and those behind me continued to talk about my skill at dominating the game.

Griff threw up his hands after the blonde jerked out of his hold. "So what? You won't fuck me, but you'll fuck a perfect stranger?"

Her back was to me, but I saw her hand go up. Only he caught it before she could deal an open-handed slap. He said something that apparently hurt her, considering the slow way her hand moved back to her side. Whatever she said in response, I wasn't privy to.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I'm going back to Scotland tomorrow. The only reason I didn't go with Kalen is because of you. Because of tonight."

Her shoulders slumped and her head bent forward as if she was staring at the floor. For a moment, I wanted to rush in and punch Griffin and not to pay him back for the other night. But for her.

But instead of saying anything to Griffin, she turned and came directly to me. I had no idea what she was about to say.

"You won."

"I did," I said.

"I'm a woman of my word, but I can't make good on it tonight."

So the weasel had won. What I didn't know was if he had convinced her to sleep with him. The notion somehow bothered me. But I schooled my features and reached in my pocket, pulling out a card. I handed it to her. It was all black, and the raised numbers were black as well, though they were shiny against the matte background.

"Call me and we'll set up a time."

Her beautiful eyes narrowed. "You trust me?"

"I trust you're a woman of your word."

She nodded and put the card in her pocket before heading over to Griffin, who was at the bar—settling the tab, I supposed.

The other damnable thing was how I felt about Griffin leaving with my prize. I was still hard from getting a peek of the small mounds under her shirt every time she'd taken a shot while playing with Griff. I needed to work off the tension, so though I hadn't planned it, I paid my tab and got on my bike, heading to the club.

As I walked in, music poured through the speaker. I headed straight for my office to change. All black was the costume of the ring master, so I put on black leather pants, no shirt, and prowled the floors of my club. Everything about the place had made me happy until recently. I couldn't pinpoint when things had changed. I felt restless and out of sorts for reasons unknown to me.

"Boss."

I turned to see Lana, a short brunette with curves for days. She was my type in every way. But nothing. I felt nothing, only numb.

“Yeah, love?”

Her eyes were too bright and glassy, which meant a conversation before the end of the day. I didn’t allow my employees to be under any influences while on the job. It was too dangerous. Something could get out of control. My members had iron-clad contracts of confidentiality and I couldn’t allow anyone with a loose tongue to be in my employ.

Plus, even though I ran a sex club, no one was an actual sex worker. Sex was freely given here by a consensual partner. Someone on drugs couldn’t consent or be trusted to approve the consent of the members.

“Our newest member wants a scene with you,” she said.

It wasn’t hard to spot the beauty across the way. I didn’t let in newbies often. Her father was some big shot in the Middle East, according to the background checks and long conversations I’d had with Griffin. Despite our mutual hate for each other, he headed my security. Although we didn’t get on, I trusted him. He had warned me it might be a bad fucking idea to approve this woman’s application, since it could backfire if her father found out and didn’t like that his daughter had

kinks.

I didn't often do a scene with someone. A seductive song came on with a beat and a melody that fit my dark mood yet sparked something in me, so I asked, "What does she want?"

"To be spanked," Lana said with the shy baby voice she used when she was turned on.

"Fine," I said a little sharply, annoyed that I also had a personnel problem to deal with at closing and made my way to the center platform.

Normally a scene played out organically, without calling attention to it. But I knew this member wanted a show.

"How's everybody's night?" I said in the mic that had been discreetly handed to me by one of my staff. And with those words, I felt that familiar cockiness that always turned heads come out of me. "Who feels bad tonight?"

All the women, and some men, in the audience raised their arms, hooting and hollering like I was some rock star, fueling that showman in me.

I made eye contact with our newest member. "Come here, love. Tell me just how bad you've been."

My team worked as efficiently as a theatrical group, because in a way, that was exactly what the various stages around the vast room were meant to be. They were platforms for live performances for all the voyeurs. Dressed all in black to blend in, one

of my staff helped her up the few steps to reach me. At the same time, I handed one of them the mic. I would need my hands for what came next.

Her shy smile should have given me a semi. When my traitorous dick didn't respond, I continued with the script I'd written in my head when Lana told me about her request.

I bent my head and said in her ear, "Just how bad have you been?"

From there, everything went on autopilot as I played my role, the one I'd been born into. A chair appeared without me asking. After I sat, I laid her across my lap and lifted the little skirt she wore. I directed her to count out the punishment she'd requested. There was a fine line between pain and pleasure.

Though she may like pain, as some did, by the time I was done, I'd also made her come. I soothed the reddened skin with rubs before flipping her over and cradling her in my arms. She was spent.

I stood with her in my arms because I couldn't just leave her. Even though she'd wanted this, it was still my responsibility to take care of her all the way until the end.

Griffin appeared at the bottom of the platform and raised a brow. I hadn't expected to see him after what had happened earlier. Likely he wanted to see if I'd be here or with the blonde. But Griff also enjoyed a little play. I'd never asked him if my

brother knew Griffin frequented the club.

“I can take her,” he said.

I couldn't tell if he was doing me a favor or stabbing me in the back for losing earlier. But damn him, I trusted him.

“What do you think, love?” I asked the woman in my arms. My number one rule was to respect everyone's wishes. I wouldn't just pass her off because it was convenient.

She nodded, so I put her in Griff's arms, knowing she'd be safe with him.

That turned out to be a good thing. Not long after, I was being called to a situation in the back rooms. Through the picture window, the viewer was given a front-seat view of the show in what appeared to be a bedroom. It was for those who wanted semi privacy but still enjoyed being watched.

A woman pinned to the bed was shaking in fear as she yelled no.

“Has she said it?” I asked Dwight, the security team leader standing nearest me. Once a safe word was spoken, it should be respected. My team had video surveillance of everything except my private office.

He nodded, so I went to open the door. That's when I noticed security was emptying the main hallway.

“He's blocked it,” Dwight said. “I can send

them in if you want.”

“For fuck’s sake.” I hurried around back where a secret hallway had been built behind the rooms. “Let me handle it.”

I unlocked the door that, from the inside, looked seamlessly like the wall. Security had cleared the main hallway because we kept these doors secret on purpose. If members like the asshole in front of me knew about them, he would have blocked this one too.

“Move away,” I said. I heard security file in behind me.

The senator’s son who thought he could do anything he wanted had the woman by the throat. “What the hell?”

“Step away,” I said more forcefully.

His eyes narrowed. “She agreed.”

“Did she say please?”

He hadn’t moved off her, but I waved my security team back.

“I don’t know,” he claimed. “It’s a fucking rape scene. She’s supposed to say no and shit.”

I didn’t judge anyone or their kinks. I’d learned a long time ago that I needed complete and total control in a relationship. Though that was an illusion. My job was always to keep my partner happy, which meant she had me by the balls.

I directed my attention to the woman. “Do you want this to be over, love?”

She nodded as tears continued down her face.

“I fucking paid you, bitch,” the dickhead yelled.

“That’s it.”

I signaled to the team to take him down. It happened fast, soon he was restrained but still raging. The stupid SOB was on something.

It was the second time that night I’d had a woman in my arms. This time at least I hadn’t been the one to make her cry. Not that I made a point to make anyone cry. But it happened—usually when someone wanted emotions I didn’t have to give, no matter what type of relationship I was in.

Waving my second-in-command over, I directed Eliza to get the woman home. My security team would look to see if in fact money had changed hands. We had protocols, and members weren’t allowed to bring anything but themselves into the club. But clothing had pockets. It was possible money traded hands outside of the club. I could revoke her membership as well. But right now, I had to deal with a man who didn’t want to play by the rules.

I walked in the office as he was telling security I had no right to keep him here. He shut up when I stepped in front of him and leaned against my desk as I crossed my arms. “You know there are no second chances, yet here you are, fucking up your second chance.”

I'd made an exception I now regretted.

"She fucking agreed."

I held up a hand. "You not only broke the number one rule to respect safe words, you traded cash for sex in my club."

"Her daddy cut her off."

"This is why there is no paying for sex in my club. You assumed that meant you could do whatever the fuck you wanted. It's done. You're out."

He jumped to his feet. I didn't move, only arched a brow. Feeling as restless as I did, I itched for him to take a swing at me. Though I didn't allow the security team access to the video surveillance in my office, I'd already triggered the cameras when I walked in.

"I pay a lot of money for membership."

"So does she, and you broke the rules. Your dues are forfeit."

He moved in. "You think you're the shit."

Still, I didn't move and kept the bored expression on my face.

"Take Ronnie here for a ride," I said to no one in particular.

"I'm Ronald Winchester the III."

I nodded at security. The next thing, he was bound, a black hood over his head. It was all in the contract. Nothing shady would happen to him, but I couldn't have him knowing about the back

entrance the staff used. Especially because Ronald Winchester III would be looking for retribution. That was the type of guy he was. He'd be dropped off at his residence.

Ronnie's access card had been removed from his pocket. Within a matter of minutes, that card and its electronic signature would be wiped from my servers in case he'd cloned the card. His picture would be listed in security as *persona non grata*.

By the time I finished for the night—having fired Lana for drug use on the job—I was so wound up, I had no desire to go home. Griff had left, though I thought there had been something with him and my newest member. They hadn't had sex, but I had a feeling it wasn't the first time they'd met. Something else I needed to find out.

I would have headed to Soho, but my prize didn't know I knew where she was staying. As unlikely as it seemed, I found myself eager for her call.

EIGHT

LIZZY

THE CAR RIDE HOME WITH GRIFFIN WAS AWKWARD AS hell. He sulked the entire way, barely speaking a word to me.

When he pulled up to the complex, I said, “So you’re not going to say anything to me?”

“What’s the point? You’ve made your choice.”

“You say that like you know the guy,” I chided.

“Would it matter if I did?”

I blew out a long breath, exasperated by the situation.

He took the opportunity to say more. “Didn’t think so. I’m leaving for Scotland, so I won’t be here to catch you when you fall.”

What I loved about Griffin was his sunny

disposition, something he wasn't displaying now. I'd never seen him with a scowl before, and it bothered me.

"So, you're just going to be a dick to me?"

"You're breaking my heart. What do you expect?"

I would have laughed if I couldn't have cut the tension with a knife. "You aren't in love with me."

"Maybe not. But I could have been."

"Griff," I said and put my hand on his arm.

"Just go, Lizzy. It's late."

"Early, depending on your prospective," I teased because it was barely after midnight.

"If you're not inviting me to your bed, I suggest you take that skinny ass of yours upstairs."

I faked shock, hoping to provoke a smile out of him. "Are you calling me skinny?"

"Chan eil. Tha thu bòidheach."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Look it up." His brogue had grown thick in a space of seconds.

"Look it up?" I repeated. "I can't even spell it."

He shrugged. "Time to go, darling," he said, back to his normal accent. Still Scottish, but not as thick.

Reluctantly, I pressed a chaste kiss to his cheek before exiting the car. Once again, I was left wondering if I was doing the right thing. Being the man he was, he didn't peel off after I closed the

door and stood there, taking him in for another minute as if it would be the last time I ever saw him. He waited until I'd entered the building before leaving. I lifted a hand to wave, but I was too late. He was gone.

I'd made so many mistakes with men, and I wondered if Striker would be my strike three and I'd be out. As I rode the elevator up, I fingered the card he'd given me. But I pushed aside any thoughts of calling him. Who I wanted to call was Bailey. But it was around five in the morning where she was.

Instead, I grabbed a bottle of expensive wine from the stash. Served Kalen right as it was his fault I was in this position. It was his best friend he'd put in my path and look what a mess of things I'd made.

"This calls for a movie," I said to no one.

With the bottle, a glass, and the remote, I flipped through the options. I wasn't in the mood for comedy, though that probably would have been a better option. I also wasn't in the mood for some quirky girl finding the perfect guy movie. I ended up with *Brokeback Mountain*.

"Perfect," I said, until I was a sobbing mess on the sofa a couple of hours later.

Since it was sometime after seven in the morning in Scotland, I opened my laptop and rang Bailey through a video chat app we used. When her

face appeared, I was overcome with emotion. Her smile was welcome. I hadn't seen her do a lot of that lately.

"I hope I didn't wake you," I said.

"No. Just enjoying the view." She shifted her screen so I could see what she saw. Across a short street, a wave crashed in and the sounds of the water filled in the spaces between our words.

"I wish I could be there," I said.

"I have to say, never in a million years did I think I'd be in Galway in a flat." She laughed after she used the European word for apartment.

She'd left Kalen in Scotland and fled to Ireland on a private flight.

"So he hasn't found you yet?" The he was Kalen, the love of her life if she'd just admit it.

Her expression dimmed. "I don't think he's looking for me. He's otherwise occupied."

She and I didn't agree about that. I was sure Kalen, with his billion-dollar resources, knew exactly where she was—unless he was a total jackass. He hadn't seemed worried about her whereabouts when I'd stormed his office a while back, so I was sure he had eyes on her. That was why he'd taken her overseas in the first place.

"Is that a good or bad thing?" I asked, hoping to prompt her to express her actual feelings.

"Jury's still out." I knew my best friend better than she knew herself and she had moon eyes for

only one man. “But what about you? How did things go? How are you handling staying at Kalen’s place?”

“Bad and unsure and great.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Bad because Griffin’s not happy with just being friends.”

“And you?”

“Second-guessing myself again, much like with Hans.”

“Is that the unsure or great part?”

“The apartment is great and mine will be better when it’s done,” I said.

“Have you decided if you’ll sell? I really loved that place.”

“Me too, and undecided there. I’m still on the fence about how safe it is. They got past Griffin’s security.”

“I know. I’m sorry,” she said, glancing away.

“Not your fault.” When she looked back in the camera, I held her gaze. I hadn’t meant to make her feel like shit.

“It is, and we both know it. And yet we still don’t have answers for sure who’s behind it all. It’s a mess. I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m staying in a penthouse in Soho. What’s bad about that?”

“Nothing, I guess,” she said, sounding a little said. “So what’s the unsure part?”

That was the best part about having a friend I could trust. I could tell her anything free of judgment.

“Do you remember that guy from the bar?” I asked.

Her jaw dropped. “The one who called you a princess?”

“That’s the one. He was there at the bar tonight.”

“Why were you at the bar?”

“That’s where I took Griff. I thought I’d play his wingman, which I did by the way. He just wasn’t on board with playing mine.”

I laughed when she gave me dagger eyes. “You are not just going to stop there. What happened?”

“There might have been a game of pool and a wager,” I said, then filled her in on the rest.

“You didn’t?”

“I did and lost to Striker. He played me like Matty used to play all his unsuspecting marks.”

“What are you going to do?”

I loved her lots, especially for the lack of judgment in her tone. “I’m not sure.”

She waved a finger at me. “Uh, uh, uh. I remember a certain someone who told me to own my sexuality and screw a certain Scottish prick until my eyes crossed.”

“Did they?” I joked.

“Don’t change the subject. I’m not going to say

I like this Striker guy, but if you want to jump him, why the hell not?"

She was right about that. So after our call, I pulled out the card. It was well past two, closing in on three when I sent the text.

Me: Are you in bed?

Several minutes later, I had almost put my phone on the charger, prepared to go to bed alone, when I got a response.

Him: I can be. Is the clock starting?

I took that second bit as a reference to the bet.

Me: Not yet. But my bed needs warming.

The dots circled for some time and I wondered if he was writing a speech for how long it was taking.

Him: Where?

Before I could consider the ramifications, I texted him the address.

NINE

CONNOR

WHAT HAD I DONE? I STARED AT THE PHONE SCREEN as if I didn't recognize the object in my hand. There were reasons I'd gone about things the way I had. Winning the bet meant I could control our play.

When was the last time I'd had conventional sex? Did I even know what that was anymore? Why had I agreed to go over there when she would be wholly unprepared for my dark desires?

"Boss."

I looked up and found Eliza standing near my desk.

"Are you going home?" she asked.

I saw hope in her naughty expression and found myself comparing my former sub with the blonde I

intended on corrupting that night. Eliza hadn't made a good sub, though she'd tried. She was far too headstrong and willful for that. But she knew how to meet my needs. The blonde had no idea what she was getting herself into.

"No," I said, finally answering her question.

"Oh," she said, disappointment invading her pretty face.

"Is everything shut down?" I asked, getting to my feet. I already knew the answer.

"Yes. Everyone is gone. It's just you and me."

"Good. Let's go."

That wasn't an invitation, and she knew it. "You don't have to walk me to my car. I'm a big girl."

"I know."

Still, I put my hand at the small of her back and urged her forward. I snagged my leather jacket and helmet before exiting the office, which locked automatically.

"Can I ask if you're going to see her?" she asked.

The her was Carrie, the sub I'd recently released.

"No. Someone else." I didn't owe Eliza an explanation, but I wanted it clear that we would not return to the past. "You should hit up Griffin. He's in much need of a spanking, if you ask me." I chuckled.

Her eyes sliced my way before narrowing. “He was with our newest member after your scene with her. I was actually surprised to see you then. You’d told me you wouldn’t be in.”

“I had something to do,” I said, not giving her the information she was seeking.

She blew out a breath. “Even if Griffin is alone, I doubt I’m exactly his type. He likes them soft and sweet.”

That almost described the blonde. Sweet, she was not. Sassy fit her better. But breakable was more like it. Though she played strong, bending her to my will would break her.

“We’re here,” she announced, taking out her keys and disarming her car alarm. “I guess I’m going home alone.”

“Be safe,” I said, not wanting to stoke flames where there were no embers.

“That’s the thing. I don’t want to be safe. You know where I’ll be if things don’t work out for you tonight.”

I exhaled. “Eliza—”

She held up a hand. “Don’t. I know what you’re going to say.”

“Yet I feel you need to hear it. You are my second, nothing more. That can’t change no matter what, but especially as long as you work for me. I don’t fuck where I work. Got it.”

“Yes, boss.”

I tipped my head and gave her a two-finger salute before making my way to my bike. I hoped the rush of the ride would cool my vibe. If I was going to have boyfriend-type sex with the blonde, I needed to take the edge off. I shuddered just thinking the word. *Boyfriend*. I didn't think I'd ever been anyone's boyfriend.

After putting on my helmet, I straddled the bike and revved the engine, enjoying the sound. When I peeled off, it was like no other rush. Though traffic was light, I took pleasure weaving in and out of it at breakneck speeds.

When I arrived, I parked in my space in the underground garage, confronted with a moral dilemma. Should I share with the blonde who I was? I wasn't one for games, but I had a feeling if she knew, she might change her mind about what she had called me here for. Still, it was better to get it out in the open.

I stepped off the elevator and almost took out my key. Though I planned to level with her, revealing it by invading her privacy wasn't an option. I disabled security not wanting a repeat of the last time before I lifted my hand and knocked, which honestly was weird.

The gorgeous blonde opened the door in my robe, which I'd seen her wear before—though I couldn't mention it. She was tall enough it didn't drag on the floor and I found myself once again not

bothered that she'd helped herself to my things. Even here, my once sanctuary.

"You came," she said, taking a step back to allow me entrance.

"Not yet, but we'll see how the night goes." I held her gaze a second longer before stepping over the threshold. When she closed the door, I faced her. "There's something we need to discuss first." I said, prepared to explain who I was.

She moved, light as a gazelle, and pressed a finger to my lips. "No talking. You might ruin it."

I lifted a brow in question, and she shook her head.

"Just fuck me," she added.

Who was I to question what she wanted? Still, there was something I had to say.

"Strip," I commanded.

She stubbornly lifted her chin before tugging the tie free and shrugging the robe from her shoulders. It fell in a pool of silk and she stood completely naked without a shy bone in her body. My gaze ate up every inch of her skin, from her hairline to her toes, and I found myself painfully hard.

"Do you like what you see?" she asked, a teasing note in her voice as she slowly twirled, and I got a view of her lovely tight ass.

"Fuck me," I muttered.

"What was that?" she asked as I followed her

into the bedroom.

I shook my head. What the hell was this woman doing to me?

In response, she stuck her middle finger in her mouth and pulled it out only to draw a happy trail down between her breasts and directly to her clit. She circled it as her eyes went all glassy and she licked her pouty lips. I moved so fast, pinning her to the wall, she was shocked she found herself there.

“Don’t play games with me,” I all but growled.

“Then stop playing with me and put your cock to good use.”

My lips twitched, but I managed to hold back a grin before spinning her around and leaving her off balance. She had no choice but to bend and grab the mattress. Before she could crawl on, I held her back, giving her a silent message to stay where she was.

With her ass high in the air, I pulled a condom from my pocket. Tearing the wrapper with my teeth, I released my dick, then I rolled it on.

Before I plunged deep, I said, “I don’t do soft or sweet.”

TEN

LIZZY

AFTER MONTHS OF DICKLESS SEX, BEING FILLED almost felt like a new experience. I sucked in air, processing all the sensations flooding my body as he held still deep inside me. My white-knuckle grip on the edge of the mattress only tightened when he relentlessly moved. Each punishing stroke was filled with pleasure and a hint of pain. But the man knew exactly what to do, as if he knew my body better than I did.

His right hand smoothly slid from my hip until his fingers made contact with my swollen clit. I let out a gasp. With his expert pressure, any hint of pain was forgotten as my pleasure rose to new heights. I was no screamer, but even I couldn't

remain silent under the onslaught of his ministrations.

“Yes,” I cried, unable to hold back when his other hand found my nipple and squeezed the tightened bud. I dropped my head as I crested the first wave.

“Fuck,” he said as my inner walls spasmed around him.

If I’d thought he was done, I was wrong. A second later, I was flipped over onto my back, pulled to the edge of the mattress, hips hoisted in the air, before he was balls deep inside me again. From that angle, I got a view of his gorgeous face. The man was beautiful and didn’t shy from holding my gaze with his unreadable one.

The sounds of sex filled the room, drawing my attention to where we were joined as lovers. I got a glimpse of his thick cock when he pulled back before plunging forward again. As he hit bottom, there was still more of his dick that wasn’t inside me.

When I tried to sit up, his hand skimmed up my body, over my taut nipples, and caught my neck. He shoved me down, but not hard, and didn’t let go. The squeeze was gentle, but it did something completely unexpected—I felt myself rising to another feverish peak.

“You like that,” he said.

I was dizzy, almost floating on the pleasure, and

unable to find my breath. “Hmm, hm.”

As if he knew, he released me, and I came harder than I ever had before. Boneless, I lay there, limp as a noodle, before he flipped me back over. My hips were lifted as he thrust again. With my head buried in the mattress, I moaned as he continued his beautiful assault.

He caught a handful of my hair and pulled back so he could lean over and whisper in my ear, “Have you had enough?”

The simple answer would be yes. I’d come enough times to be spent. But as far as I knew, he had yet to.

“How many times can you make me come?” I asked, managing a smirk and squeezing my inner walls as I did.

Suddenly, he lost his rhythm, slamming home as he exploded inside me with a roar. There was power in that. I’d made him come.

But he didn’t give up like I thought. He pulled out, dragged my ass to the edge of the bed, and ate me out as though there was no tomorrow.

When I woke late the next afternoon—more like early evening—there was a throbbing ache between my legs. He had to have crushed the world’s record of the number of times and ways he’d made me come. I wasn’t sure it would be possible for me to come again.

After stretching out my arm, I sat up in bed so

fast, my head spun—I'd noticed for the first time, I was alone. "What a dick!"

My words echoed through the room, but there was no one but me to hear them. As I got out of bed, I heard the door open.

A Greek god walked through the door. "I see you're finally up."

Mentally, I apologized for cursing him before I focused on the welcome smell of coffee. For my ego's sake, I tried my best not to limp over. His eyes dropped and a small smile curled the smug bastard's lips as he extended the drink in my direction. I took it and eyed the bag he held.

After the first blessed swallow of life-reforming java, I asked, "What do you have there?"

He lifted the bag. "I wasn't sure what you'd like, so I got several things."

I took it and exited the bedroom in favor of the sofa. There, I set my coffee on the table, opened the bag, and snagged the first delicious thing I could find—which, as it turned out, I judged as heaven on earth after only one bite.

"Are you going to share?"

I glanced over to find Striker still there. Somehow, I thought I might have conjured him as a fantasy because last night wasn't real. But there he was, like a living Adonis. I tossed the bag, and he caught it one-handed. The boy had skills.

"Good catch," I said.

“I’m good with my hands.”

“Of course you are.” I stood and glanced at my watch. “I’m going for a shower. I expect you’ll be gone by the time I get out.”

“I can join you,” he said. I didn’t have to see his face to imagine the smirk.

“I think you’ve done enough damage for one night. See yourself out.” With my spine straight, I walked into the bedroom.

ELEVEN

CONNOR

I HAD TWO OPTIONS. LEAVE. THAT WAS THE SIMPLE choice. The other was to go and get my fill because damn it all to hell, I wanted more.

As I walked toward the bathroom, I pulled my shirt over my head. *One more time.* Then I would tell her who I was. By the time I made it to the shower, I had no more clothes to shed.

“I’m not done with you,” I said as I stepped in. When her eyes went wide, I put a hand next to her head and leaned in. “You can always tell me to leave again.”

She surprised me by curling a hand in my hair and drawing me down. Her lips were soft and probed mine until I gave in to the pull. I kissed her

back hard, and she bit my lip.

“I owe you one,” she said and slowly bent until she was on her knees.

She had no idea what she was doing. Seeing her looking like a God-sent submissive, I could have come the moment she wrapped those lovely lips around the head of my cock. Instead, I braced my arm on the tiled wall as she showed me she wasn’t just a princess but the queen of giving head. When I came, it was hard and long. I would have reciprocated if not for the sound of my phone ringing.

“Go ahead,” she said, getting to her feet.

I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my hips before heading out to see who was calling. The name on the display was Eliza. The phone had stopped ringing before I could answer. I dialed her again because she never called me to chat.

Before I finished saying hello, she said, “You need to come now.”

For some stupid reason, I heard the blonde’s voice in my head saying, *I already came but I’m up for coming again*. And I found myself smiling.

“What’s up?” I asked because I wasn’t ready to leave. I prayed the panic I’d heard in Eliza’s voice was overblown.

“I can’t explain over the phone. You need to get to club now.”

I didn’t like that I was worried. Eliza wasn’t

overly dramatic, and her insistence only heightened my concern.

“I’ll be there in twenty,” I said, planning out my next move.

When I turned back, the blonde was beautifully naked and unabashed. Still wet from the shower, she wore only a coy smile. “Somewhere to be?”

As lovely as she could be, I remembered one important fact. “I don’t yet know your name.”

Though I had somewhere to be, I planned to honor the truth I owed her.

“I think it’s best we keep things casual. So... you’re Striker, and I’m whatever you want to call me.”

“Princess,” I said, grinning.

“Exactly. It’s not like this is going anywhere. Let’s keep it simple.”

“Yeah, about that...”

She moved like a lithe cat, suddenly in front of me with her finger to my lips. “Somehow I thought you would be okay with this arrangement. Don’t be a pussy now.”

I lifted my brows because the woman had balls. She was calling me a pussy when all I wanted to do was lick hers. In fact, she had me by the balls. Her response intrigued me more by the minute. If she didn’t want the truth, who was I to force it on her?

There was only one thing left to talk about. “I’m sure you’re a woman of your word?”

She folded her arms as though I'd insulted her. "I don't renege, if that's what you're suggesting. I'll call and give you your twenty-four hours."

With that, I gave her a two-finger salute and took my leave. As I rode the elevator down, I put everything into perspective. I liked control and so did she. By definition, I shouldn't want her or have enjoyed sex with her. Whatever need had driven me to this point should have died away. Yet, there I was, anticipating her call.

Before I could enjoy her pleasure again, I'd have to get through what came next. I put plans into action and got on my bike. Even flowing through the streets like a dream on my Harley didn't put my thoughts at ease. I knew something with Eliza was wrong.

After I got off my bike, I checked the toys I'd brought to play with, then I went into my club and entered my office. I found I wasn't alone. A man was seated behind my desk as if he owned the place.

He tapped steepled fingers. "The man of the hour."

I stood there with a bored expression. He was waiting for me to ask something, like why he was there or why he was sitting behind my desk. But I already had those answers.

In the garage, in a secure hidden room, I'd checked the security cameras and spotted the trio.

The kingpin of Dubai had arrived. He wasn't unexpected. His daughter had come to the club.

With him, he'd brought two guys who looked like linemen on a professional football team. One was just a brute, all size but no muscle, with a head of shaggy hair and a beard. The other was built more like a bodybuilder. He had size, more muscle than fat, and was cleanly bald, though he looked younger than the other.

"You're here about Sara," I said, pronouncing her name the American way.

A flash of surprise widened his eyes a second before he schooled his features. "Very good, Mr. Black. I see you've done your homework."

Mr. Black was my name in the underground world I operated in. Having anyone know me as the son of Royce King wouldn't do me any favors. Lucky for me, I'd gone to boarding school and my father had done a good job of keeping my pictures out of the media, so everyone in this world believed that to be my name.

"I have, as I'm sure you have as well," I said, remaining just a step inside the door.

The kingpin's goons were in my line of sight—as was Eliza. She stood near the desk, at an angle where she could see him, his men, and me.

Mr. Haddad leaned back in my chair. "As you can imagine, my little girl, *my only daughter*, is a princess to me."

Hearing that word only reminded me of the blonde and what I couldn't have if I didn't survive this.

"And what do I find out? That's she's not at the college dorm I pay for, but she's here."

He glanced at his guards and I wasn't sure they knew what kind of club I operated. It wasn't like I advertised.

"We're a private club," I began.

He waved at the two beefy men he brought with him. "Leave us."

I held back a smirk as the two guys muttered, "Yes, boss."

They had to wait a second before I decided to move, letting them exit. I wanted them to know I wasn't afraid. They were big, but I wasn't unarmed.

"You too," he demanded of Eliza.

She didn't move except to face me. I nodded. When the door closed behind her, I eyed Haddad.

"I know what you do," he said.

"I cater to a clientele with specific wants and desires. There's no shame in that, especially in a safe environment."

"Safe," Haddad barked, jumping to his feet.

The only reaction he got from me was a lift of a single brow. Long moments later, I said, "Yes. Safe."

"I sent her to New York to get her away from men who would use her to get to me."

I was well aware of the strict rules pertaining to women in places like Dubai. Progressive on the surface, but highly traditional when it came to customs that dated as far back as biblical times.

“Which is why I protected your daughter.” I nodded toward my computer. “I can show you.”

The man hadn’t let his guards leave without having some sort of backup. Mine was tucked in my jeans, behind my back. So when he gave a sharp bob of his head, I took the laptop from my desk without giving him a view of my back.

When the video was cued up, I set the laptop to face him. Without seeing my screen, I knew what he saw. I’d already saved in a specific folder for this very situation—as I did with any high-risk member. Haddad watched. Faintly, I heard myself speaking as I stood on stage before giving Sara that publicized spanking.

The video was a risk. From his perspective, he could see me violating his daughter, or he could see how she’d been protected at every stage. All the way to Griffin bringing her to my office and laying her unmolested on the sofa the goons had stood in front of. I’d made sure Griffin’s face couldn’t be seen, and with a little bit of editing magic, the film skipped past the conversation she had with Griffin and went to where she’d been put into a cab an hour later, her father none the wiser that there was missing footage.

“As you can see, your *princess* was treated with respect.” At least that was what I hoped.

“You had her half naked... in front of a crowd...”

“I didn’t dress your daughter. I’m sure you’re aware of that.” I waved to the door his muscle waited outside. “Someone’s tailing her and would report to you everything, including how she was dressed. I could have taken advantage of her. She was primed and ready and begging for what she got. I could have had her on her knees, swallowing my cock.”

Haddad got to his feet so fast, the chair spun. Maybe I’d gone too far.

“How dare you?” he sputtered.

“No, how dare you come into my office when I did nothing. The members of this club sign non-disclosure agreements. For a woman with your daughter’s needs, this is the safest place for her.”

I held my ground as he rounded the corner. When I didn’t back down, he glared at me.

“I don’t understand her,” he said before muttering in Arabic or some language I didn’t know. “She gets this from her whore of a mother.”

Somehow, I doubted that. Based on this conversation, I thought Sara might have daddy issues. But I kept that to myself. “As I said, she’s safe here. Nothing will happen to her she doesn’t consent to. My floor workers are trained to know

when a timeout is needed even when our guests don't."

"Guests," he spat. "You're getting paid."

"That's the nature of commerce. If I didn't get paid, your daughter could have gone somewhere else where her needs weren't considered at all."

In silence, he seemed to think about what I said and come to the right conclusion. "You're right."

I nodded, not needing the validation.

He pointed in my direction. "I also see potential."

And there it was. I could have written a script for how tonight would go. He was taking a predictable path.

"Commerce. Your words, right," he said.

I said nothing.

"Your wealthy clientele may have other needs that I can provide."

"Before you say something on the record"—I pointed at a visible camera, not one of the hidden ones—"this is where this conversation ends for the both of us. Let me just say that to keep things safe for my clients, there is nothing you can purchase in the club—not drinks, sex, or anything illegal."

"Drinks?" he asked.

"Yes. To keep things safe for all, it's important that no one is drunk. Each member is entitled to two drinks a night as a part of their membership fee. There are no on-site purchases."

“But...” He glanced at the camera.

I finished for him. “Consent is questioned when someone isn’t in their right mind. They may make choices they come to regret or say they wouldn’t have made.”

“Ah. But they can come to the club already fucked up, so to speak.”

“They can. And a well-trained staff can spot that and deny entry, as per the contract signed by every member.”

“You can’t spot it all,” he said.

“No, I can’t. But I can do my best and reduce risk for all by doing so.”

“And what if I want a membership?” he said.

Yet another thing I guessed he would say. “You can put in an application. There’s currently a waitlist.”

“My daughter—”

“Your daughter was extremely lucky. We had a spot open. With her youth, her family background, I thought it was safer for her to bump her up the list and give her the open spot. You see, I know young women like her can find themselves in trouble in the wrong company.”

“So you’re doing me a favor?”

“No. I did her a favor. I didn’t want her to become a statistic.”

He stepped forward, trying to intimidate me. Though he was taller, he was also round in the

middle. If it came to a fight, I could take him. But I was sure we were both armed and it would end up a standoff.

“What if I insisted?”

I held my ground. “I would hate that for you and her. I could make that video public.” His jaw dropped and before he could say something, I finished. “And don’t think you can destroy it. The file is in the cloud. If anything happens to me or my assistant, that video, along with everything that happened in this office, goes viral and the police will be called immediately.”

He laughed. “And if I called your bluff?”

I shrugged. “Try me.”

“You may think you have me by the balls, my friend, but I’m not American.”

We were not friends. “No, but you also come from a conservative country. That video would bring shame to your family.”

His lips thinned.

“You aren’t the first man with power and money to throw your weight around. What you should realize is I’m doing you a service in a clean and efficient manner.”

“Clean? You threatened to expose her and myself.”

“Only because you threatened me first. You came here to intimidate me, thinking you could possibly own me. I have no desire to ruin your

daughter's life, but I value my own and that of my employees. Remember this—she will get what she needs, either here or somewhere else. You've seen the place. You've seen how she was treated. You should feel better."

He stepped back and clapped. *Here comes the finale*. Because men like him always had to have the last word. "You've got me."

I did but didn't say it.

"But remember this, Mr. Black, if anything happens to my daughter, the next conversation we have won't be as friendly."

He opened the door and left. Seconds later, I watched the security footage on my laptop as Eliza escorted them out the front exit and locked up after them. She armed the system before ambling back to my office. I was sitting in my chair when she arrived.

"Tell me," I said, because they couldn't have gotten in without help. Haddad was rich, but he wasn't subtle. He was a showy guy who was more apt to breaking and entering with a battering ram than with a tech guy who could beat my security.

Her head dropped as I steepled my fingers much as Haddad had earlier.

"I told you how I was feeling," she said, and I nodded. "I went to a bar last night where I met him."

It took me a second to realize she meant one of

the three men who had come to the office. My guess was the bald, well-built guy.

“I was needy and somehow we got on the subject of kinky sex. He offered to take me to his place and play with his toys, but I just met him.”

Clearly it had been a setup she hadn't seen coming. I'd thought better of her.

“So you thought, why not bring him to the club?”

Her voice broke as she rambled. “I didn't think. I'd turned down his offer last night but rang him up this afternoon out of desperate need.”

We all had needs and if not taken care of, they can lead to mistakes. “That's the problem.”

“I know. I'm sorry. I was trying to be safe. The club was closed. I told him to meet me here. I didn't expect him not to be alone.”

“How about the fact this isn't your personal playground?” I interjected.

“It won't happen again.”

“You're right it won't,” I said.

“Are you firing me?” she asked, enormous eyes shimmering with tears. Eliza wasn't a crier.

“I'm thinking about it. Go home.”

“I'm really sorry.”

“Go home and think about how you put us both at risk.”

She turned and walked out. Part of me wanted not to care about her safety. I had no idea if they

were waiting. I couldn't be sure how much she'd revealed to him. I watched her on the camera until she drove off into the night.

After arming the system and checking every camera to be sure I was alone, I closed the laptop. Then I pulled a false drawer from the bottom of my desk and took out another laptop. The one on my desk was more for show. There was nothing on the hard drive. Access to the cameras was through a secure closed internal internet access with a firewall most hackers couldn't penetrate.

Still, Haddad had been left near the laptop for I wasn't yet sure how long. It was compromised as far as I was concerned.

I wove my fingers together and flexed them before placing them on the keyboard of my real computer. I had work to do. My bluff had been a bluff to a point. If something happened to me, I had someone on the outside who would send out certain files to police and media. But I didn't have someone watching twenty-four seven. I couldn't trust that. I scrubbed through the files every night and categorized them. Certain files were uploaded to the cloud my designated person would gain access to in the event of my death.

On top of that, I had to consider my security system also compromised. I had to view all the footage from the night before and reset the protocols. Then I would need to contact Griffin and

let him know. It would be a long night.

No way I'd make it back to Lizzy's bed.

TWELVE

LIZZY

MONDAY CAME WAY TOO FAST. I'D SLEPT MOST OF Sunday, making up for the night before. I ached in places I didn't know were possible. Unfortunately, because I'd woken up late again on Monday, I couldn't linger in the shower and replay those events in my mind while using my fingers.

By the time I got to my office, I was grumpy for several reasons. One was I wanted to call Striker and beg him to fuck me. Right on my office desk if he didn't mind. The other had to do with a shadow outside my window that made me mutter a few curses.

"That frown is not a good look. What's crawled up your ass?" Anderson complained. He handed me

a steaming cup of coffee, which was much appreciated.

“Can you grab me another?” I asked with fake sweetness.

“Do you think you really need this much caffeine when you’re already on bitchiness overload?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not for me. Just get me a to-go mug, will you please?”

“All right,” he said, waving me off. “I don’t want to guess what you’re up to.”

When he returned, I put my finished cup on my desk and marched outside to confront my shadow. There on the side of the building, looking like Secret Service in a dark suit and overcoat with sunglasses, was the man who had followed me from Soho to the office.

“Here.” I held out the travel mug. When he didn’t take it, I added, “You can tell Griffin I don’t need a personal security guard.”

Finally, his posture shifted from *immovable man* to *oh fuck I’ve been caught*.

“You might as well take it and follow me inside. It’s too cold for you to be out here all day.”

“Ma’am, that’s my job.”

“And a job I didn’t ask for, but that’s not your fault. Come in or I’ll freeze to death and how will you explain that to your boss?”

After taking his hand and securing the mug in it,

I went back inside, confident he'd follow me.

"Get him a chair," I announced to Anderson, waving in the general direction behind me.

My assistant nearly lost his tongue down his throat as the big man came in behind me.

"I don't need a chair," the security man said.

I spun. "What's your name?" I almost giggled, thinking about how Striker had asked me that question and I'd dodged it for no good reason other than to protect my heart.

"John."

"Okay, John. Stand if you want, but you'll have a chair if you'd like."

Anderson bustled in with a chair.

"Put it anywhere except in front of the windows. I don't want to scare away potential customers."

There was plenty of foot traffic because of the name of the street, but most of my real clients came by appointment. Those who wandered in typically hightailed it out once they heard the price of one piece.

Anderson did as I asked, and I snapped my fingers while gesturing toward my door. "My office." When he came in, I leaned on the rim of the desk. "Sorry for being a bitch. I don't mean to take it out on you. Let's just do the morning wrap-up and I can get my shit together."

"First order of business is you're going

bankrupt.”

My jaw dropped, and I waved at the wide-open office door.

Anderson covered his mouth before dramatically removing it as if he could be seen through the wall, but he spoke loudly enough to be heard. “Of course, that’s relative. I mean, bankrupt for you is like buying one Chanel bag instead of five.”

I groaned as he closed the door and closed the blinds on the sidelight window.

Anderson whispered loudly, “Sorry about that. But to be honest, you didn’t break even this past month. As much as I like my job, I hate that you’re spending your trust fund to keep this place afloat.”

Location was everything, even when I worked by appointment. Being on Fifth Avenue gave my gallery a prestige my surname couldn’t buy.

“I know things aren’t great, but I have a plan.” It was unconventional on short notice, but I was banking on curiosity to drive sales.

“I hope you do, because I really don’t want to go job hunting, but I will.”

“I have more art from Haven, which sells.”

“At a considerable cost to you. That deal you made—”

“Gave me exclusivity. It brings buyers in. And I might have a lead on a promising unknown.” That was where I could make money. An unknown

would be willing to take less to get their art on a gallery wall. “Just work on the showing this weekend. I have some calls to make.”

Normally we would promote the hell out of a show for weeks in advance. Still, marketing it last minute as an exclusive first look could work on buyers who wanted to be *in the know* first. I could pitch it as an opportunity that had come up last minute. There were possibilities—if I could pull it off.

When Anderson left, I made a call to Kalen’s office before remembering he was out of the country. I sent him an email asking if he knew the artist whose work hung on the walls in my temporary apartment in Soho. In an hour, I had an email. Apparently, the place belonged to his brother. Kalen gave me his email and said Connor liked his privacy, so Kalen wouldn’t give me his phone number.

To: Connor King

From: Elizabeth Monroe

Subject: Help

Mr. King, my name is Elizabeth Monroe and I’m currently staying in your condo in Soho. It’s great by the way. I’m contacting you today in regard to the beautiful art on the walls. I own a gallery and I’m having a showing this weekend and would love to contact the artist to see if I could get a few pieces for the show.

I READ IT A FEW TIMES BEFORE SIGNING WITH MY phone number beneath. What I didn't expect was to get a reply before shutting my computer down.

To: Elizabeth Monroe

From: Connor King

Subject: Regarding Help

Elizabeth. I like that. I think the first order of business is your unlawful occupation of my condo without paying rent. We should discuss that before anything else.

I HAD TO CHECK MY JAW AS IT HUNG OPEN, IGNORING his strange comment about my name. I didn't have to think before I hit Reply.

To: Connor King

From: Elizabeth Monroe

Subject: No Help Needed

My lawyer would tell you, Mr. King, that I have written communication from your brother allowing me to stay in the condo in Soho. Any rent and any other legal communication should be sent to him. If you could just put me in touch with the artist, we can cease communication.

GLUED TO MY SCREEN, I DUMBLY WAITED ON A reply.

To: Elizabeth Monroe

From: Connor King

Subject: Repayment

My brother will be handled, and I can think of many ways you can repay me. First tell me, with a last name like Monroe, do you look anything like Marilyn?

An arrogant man indeed. He was certainly related to Kalen. I wondered if he looked anything like his gorgeous brother.

To: Connor King

From: Elizabeth Monroe

Subject: Non-starter

How I look shouldn't matter. But to stop any further imaginings in your mind, the only thing Marilyn and I have in common is hair color. Though you are being an ass, I still would like the name of the artist. I'll do my own digging.

My hope was he was a flirt and not a true jackass. Otherwise my one last hope to bring my company out of the red might be over.

To: Elizabeth Monroe

From: Connor King

Subject: True?

Are you a true blonde? There is a way to find out.

Egotistical... I exhaled before responding as my

blood pressure rose.

To: Connor King

From: Elizabeth Monroe

Subject: Business only

I won't dignify that with an answer. I'm looking to help the artist be seen. If you don't know his or her name, please say so and we can stop. You have my phone number you can pass on to the artist. I have favorable terms for any art I sell. But I will not be answering any more emails.

I had my hand on my laptop poised to close it when a final email came through.

To: Elizabeth Monroe

From: Connor King

Subject: Contract

There will be no calls. The artist is gun-shy. Email the contract and I'll get back to you. When do you need the art if he agrees?

Well, it was a he. Breaking the rule I'd just enacted, I sent another email with a copy of the standard contract, minus the special terms I gave my more widely known artists.

To: Connor King

From: Elizabeth Monroe

Subject: Contract terms

I've attached the contract. As the showing will be on Saturday, I'll need the art in two days. Have the artist send me 5-10 pieces and I'll look it over. As the contract states, there is no guarantee of

placement or sales. I can arrange for pickup of the art if he prefers.

That time I did close the laptop. I was done with the conceited King. He was too full of himself. I bet he thought he could have any woman—or person, for that matter—he wanted.

I couldn't help that he got my blood going. I found myself texting Striker three letters: DTF.

THIRTEEN

CONNOR

NOTHING HAD EVER GOTTEN MY DICK HARDER THAN those three dirty letters texted by the blonde. Elizabeth wanted to know if I was down to fuck. I had had three letters in response. FML. Fuck my life. Damn, it was good.

When the Soho penthouse door opened, her lips were on mine. Soft and sweet. What was better was she stood in a lacy black bra and panties. Her tits may have been small, but damn if my mouth wasn't watering.

I cupped her ass, and she obliged me by wrapping her legs around my waist. I carried her to the bedroom like the champ I was. I felt like beating my chest because I was the one who had

the privilege to fuck her. Scissoring her legs, one up and one down, I was deep inside her when she hit the bed. I groaned as her leg easily extended so her foot was beside her head.

“Limber,” I said out of surprise.

“There’s so much you don’t know about me. Now shut up and fuck me.”

I could have come at that moment like a teenage boy. Holy shit, the woman did things to me no other had in maybe forever. I took her mouth in a kiss that spoke volumes I hoped she didn’t hear. She was making me weak, making me want her. I was losing control.

Then her inner walls clamped down on my cock until I was shooting rapid fire come shots at her bull’s-eye and damn if she didn’t sport a smirk. Game on.

Several orgasms later, I said, “I wish I could stay, but I have to go. Unlike you, I have work to do.”

Her scowl was cute. “I work.”

“You do? Yet you called me to fuck in the middle of the day.”

“Maybe I had an itch,” she said.

“I’m all for scratching,” I said, giving her a lopsided grin.

A part of me wondered if a certain email conversation had gotten my girl horny. I had to figure out a way to bridge the two worlds we were

building. Then again, if this was just a fuck as she said, what did the truth matter?

I parked my car in the King Enterprises garage. My father would blow a gasket when he saw I was wearing jeans and a tee. I'd planned to dress the part for today's meeting, but I'd chosen fucking the blonde over making my father happy. Maybe I was more like my brother than I thought.

"Hi, Connor," the receptionist said. "Your father will see you in his office."

I nodded and walked in that direction until I stopped short in front of the office designated for me. One I never used.

"Connor." Just inside the door stood Charles, my father's right-hand man and lawyer.

"What are you doing here and in my office?"

Was this a new trend I was missing? Blindsided twice in my workspace.

"Connor." And for the third time my name was called, the voice had a familiar Irish lilt.

I brushed past Charles and into my office to find my mother standing there with her hands fisted. "I have nothing to say to either of you."

What could I say to the two people betraying my father in the worst way? His best friend and wife were fucking.

"I think he knows," Mother said to me, probably worried because the prenup she'd signed would leave her with nothing if she were caught

cheating.

“Of course, he knows. You think you could keep that a secret for that long?”

“Did you tell him?”

I chuckled, but it was dark and lacked any resemblance to humor. “Why would I do that? Your shit-storm would take me under too—because he’s my actual father, right?” I pointed at the man standing by the door.

“Keep your voice down, boy.”

I glared at Charles. “Don’t you call me boy. You’re either the man who stood by and let another man raise your son or you’re the coward who sleeps with his best friend’s wife because he can’t get his own. Or maybe both.”

“Listen here,” the old man said. I bet he wanted to stand up to me, but he was a few inches shorter.

Mom got between us. “Stop.”

I just glared at her.

“I promise you, Connor. Royce is your da, but”—she glanced at Charles.

Da was what my mother had called my dad when I was growing up. *Do what your da tells you. Don’t argue with your da.* It was an Irish thing, and my mother had been born and raised in Ireland. She moved to America when she married my father.

“I’m done with the both of you. When I come back, I don’t expect to see you here.” Mom grabbed my arm, and I pulled away. “Don’t act like

you care. I was nothing but a way to make him marry you. As soon as that happened, you shipped me off to boarding school. And we both know how that went.”

I stormed out, afraid I may say something I’d regret. As I walked, I realized I had no one in this world. My brother and I barely knew each other. He’d been raised by his mother in Scotland. We’d only met a couple of years ago and he wasn’t exactly welcoming. He had Griffin, and I had...

“Connor.”

I glanced up to see Royce King walking to his office. The man who may or may not be my father. He waved me in, but his smile quickly disappeared when he noticed I wasn’t dressed for work.

“Can you at least show me some respect?” he said, scorn filling his face.

“I don’t work here.”

It was the wrong thing to say, but Charles and my mother had spoiled my mood and I was looking for a fight.

“You should. You should be the future of the company. Not your brother.”

“We’ve talked about this. A nine-to-five job isn’t my thing.”

“Your thing?” His mouth opened, but he clutched his chest. His face grew redder by the second.

“Dad,” I said, reaching for him as he collapsed

to his knees. I caught him in time to lower him to the floor. “Call 9-1-1!”

You never really know how you feel about a person until you’re about to lose them. As the seconds churned into minutes and a blur of activity flew around me, flashes of holidays and Dad showing up to baseball games filled my mind. Yes, he’d been absent for most of my life. But when he was there, he was always fully present.

“Dad,” I called as EMTs arrived.

I moved backward on hands and knees to give them space to work. I couldn’t imagine this was it. Time felt irrelevant as I somehow ended up in the hospital, holding myself up in the hallway just beyond the doors they wheeled my father through.

My mistake was calling my brother.

“This is Kalen.”

“Brother,” I said.

“Connor, please tell me this isn’t about Lizzy.”

“This isn’t about her and don’t ask me anymore. You don’t control my dick.”

One of the passing nurses flushed but smiled as she walked by.

“I’m calling about Da.”

“What about him?” Kalen asked.

“He’s had a stroke or a heart attack.”

Kalen was silent for a moment. “And? We know he’s been sick.”

My brother’s relationship with our father was

non-existent. The way Kalen saw it, Da had left him and his mother for dead.

“So that’s it?” I asked.

“What do you want from me? He’s your father, not mine.”

He didn’t mean that biologically. If Kalen had any idea about my mother and Charles, he wouldn’t have made that comment. He meant it because he believed Da was more of a father to me than he was to him. Little did he know.

“Yeah, okay,” I said, tired of all the fighting. I hung up and hated how alone I felt. I wasn’t supposed to need anybody, and I needed a distraction.

Me: What are you doing?

It didn’t take long to get a response.

Lizzy: Working. Something you’re probably not familiar with.

I felt the beginnings of a smile.

Me: Some consider shopping hard work.

The dots circled as she typed.

Lizzy: Ha Ha. I am working. What about you? Have you killed anyone today?

She didn’t understand how close to the truth she was. Had my fight with my father killed him?

Me: Maybe. What are you wearing?

Lizzy: Don’t go all cheesy on me, killer boy. You have better lines than that.

Me: Your eyes go all unfocused when you're

about to come all over my cock.

Lizzy: Damn big boy. How am I supposed to finish work after that?

Me: You can always come.

Lizzy: Where?

Me: At your desk. I can talk you through it.

I could visualize her smile as it crinkled the corners of her eyes.

Lizzy: I wish I could. I have to take a rain check. My 4 o'clock meeting has arrived.

Me: Think of me.

Lizzy: Damn you.

I had an inappropriate grin when the doctor came out to talk to me.

FOURTEEN

LIZZY

FRESHLY OUT OF THE SHOWER, IN ONLY A ROBE, AND reading through my earlier texts with Striker, I was caught off guard when a knock came at my door. I checked my phone, and I had no missed calls. The only person it could be was Griffin, but he was supposed to be in Scotland. Then again, I hadn't been able to shake the security detail I'd been given, even after a scathing text to Griff. Maybe something had gone wrong. There was another possibility.

But my grin stretched the length of my face when I found Striker on the other side of the door with a six-pack of beer in his hand.

"Can I come in?" he asked.

When I stepped back, he walked in smelling again like leather and wood. A scent I'd now always attribute to him.

"I didn't get a text," I said, closing the door.

"I figure you owe me. You sent me an SOS earlier."

"A DTF."

"Same difference," he said, gracing me with his killer smile. "I've had a shit day and thought a good fuck would help."

"The beer?" I asked, trying to hold back a grin.

"I couldn't come empty-handed." When I lifted a brow, knowing he had a different reason, he grinned. "Or pay off any asshole you might have over."

I laughed. "You're in luck. The only person you need to bribe is me." I held out a hand for a beer, and he gave me one. "Now tell me the real reason you're here."

"I thought the only thing you wanted from me was my cock?"

"True," I said, walking into the kitchen for a bottle opener. When I turned to offer it to him, he was already drinking his. I shrugged. "Be general, no specifics. Get it off your chest, then fuck my brains out."

"You're a therapist now?"

I shrugged. "For the next five minutes."

He chuckled. "What would you say if I told you

my father had a heart attack and named me his successor?"

"Does that make you the biker king?"

Striker coughed. "What makes you think my dad is a biker?"

I raised my shoulders and let them fall. "It's that, or you're the son of a billionaire because who says successor? The latter means we couldn't fuck."

"If I'm rich, you won't fuck me?"

"Exactly. Rich guys think they own you, so your dad is a biker to keep things simple. Besides, a billionaire's son wouldn't have the ink you have."

He nodded. "You like my ink?"

"I think it's interesting you have it only where it can be viewed from the back. Like you've got some Jekyll and Hyde envy."

"Maybe I do."

Letting my grin widen, I teased, "Maybe you just thought it was cool."

He let his head fall back with a rich belly laugh. "You are something."

"I am, but let's not dwell on me. Tell me the name of your gang." When he looked confused, I added, "Biker gang."

He didn't let me down and said, "The Devil's Kings," as if I'd been right about his affiliations.

"Ah, makes sense," I said, tipping up my head. "And you don't want to be top dog?"

“My brother’s better suited.”

I waved a finger. “Too much information, but now that you’ve said it, I’ll say my brother has the same

daddy issues you have.”

“He didn’t want to be top dog either?”

“Nope. He’d rather play cops and robbers like we did as kids.”

“Who was the cop?” he asked.

I gave him a coy glance. “My brother. I was always the robber.” I didn’t know why I said it so seductively.

But Striker joined in the new game. “What kind?”

I moved to stand in front of him. “A jewel thief.” I cupped his, catching him off guard.

“It seems I’m going to have to arrest you.”

Suddenly, my beer disappeared and so did his. He spun me around and pulled my arms to my back. I felt the tie of my robe slipping from around my waist.

“Does this mean I’ll get a body search?” I teased.

He moved quickly, and I found my back pressed to the nearest wall with his big hand on my sternum. “A thorough search is required.”

I’d never really role played before, but I found it so hot. The man would look good in uniform. His eyes never left mine as his hand moved to one

breast then the other, giving each a squeeze and a tweak of my tightened nipples.

When that hand slid over my belly, I felt a flutter I didn't expect. But when his finger slipped inside me, I couldn't think of anything else. In fact, I might have let out a tiny gasp that stretched his sexy smirk wider.

"There," I said with as much dignity as I could, which came out as more of a breath than a spoken word.

Damn him, he took that hand away. I glared at him.

"Sorry, princess. Prisoners don't get treats." I felt my jaw unhinge as I prepared to give him hell in the form of four-letter words unbecoming of a lady, if my mother was to be believed. "Of course, I'm not above being bribed."

Tongue in cheek, I kept my mouth shut, but not for long. I got to my knees. Slowly, as my hands were still tied behind my back. I looked up with my eyes but not with my head. He took his time before moving his hand to unzip his pants, releasing that colossal cock of his. I licked my lips before licking the plump head of his cock aimed directly at my mouth.

I wanted my hands and subconsciously pulled at my bonds. His hand slid over my head and cupped it at the back. With one hand at the base of his cock and the other on my head, he created a

rhythm as he closed his eyes.

“Tilt your head back. It will help me to slip past that gag reflex of yours,” he said.

I did as he asked and found he was right. It became easier to swallow his dick, so to speak. When my eyes watered, he pulled out.

“Not so fast, princess. When I come, it’s going to be deep inside that pretty cunt of yours.”

With his help, I was on my feet and spun around to face the wall. My hands were released and guided above my head. Then he was inside me fast and hard. It didn’t take long before we were both coming.

I would have collapsed to the floor if he hadn’t scooped me up in those muscled arms of his. As he set me down on the bed, he said, “I’ll get something to clean us both up.”

His cock was covered in my orgasm as his had filled me up. I closed my eyes, wondering what was happening to me. Soon after, he used a warm towel to erase the evidence of our lovemaking, then he slid next to me in bed. I tucked myself in the crook of his arm.

I would have dozed off, but my phone vibrated on my bedside table. When I grabbed it, I kept the motion going and got off the bed. When I looked back, Striker’s eyes were closed. I couldn’t be sure if he was asleep, but I left the room anyway.

When I looked down, I realized I’d accidentally

accepted the call. It was too late to hang up, he'd only call back. So I answered with, "Hans."

"Hey," he said with his alluring Swedish accent. "I thought maybe I could come over with wine and we could watch a movie."

It wasn't lost on me that Striker had beat him to it with beer instead of wine. But we hadn't gotten to the movie. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Striker's foot. He was still on the bed.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said.

"Why? I miss you."

I almost said it back because it was true, but not in the way he hoped. We were better friends than anything else. And saying anything too kind might have given him hope where none existed. "Hans, we've talked about this."

"I know, but I'm close and—"

Hans knew about me staying in Soho.

"Should I go?"

I pivoted and watched Striker unabashedly stride into the room, dick swinging. I found myself captivated by the sight. The man was glorious, and my mouth watered.

"Lizzy, is someone with you?" Hans asked.

FIFTEEN

CONNOR

LIZZY SHOOK HER HEAD AND HELD UP A FINGER I took as an answer to my question if I should go. I didn't stop and kept moving in her direction. What she said next, I couldn't make out as she'd lowered her voice. When I reached her, I parted the robe she'd slipped on and captured her hips.

Her breath caught before she hastily said, "I have to go," and ended the call.

I nuzzled her neck and nipped my way to her ear. "Boyfriend?"

She squirmed, hardening my cock. "No. More like an ex."

"Lovesick then," I whispered.

She giggled as I took her earlobe between my

teeth in a gentle tug and walked us backward.

“What are you doing?” she asked on a laugh.

When we reached the wall of windows, I pressed her back to the cool glass. She gasped.

“What am I doing?” I repeated. She nodded as I slipped my hand between us. “Giving your boy a show if he’s waiting outside with a speaker in his hand, hoping a love song might change your mind.”

“He’s not—”

As I worked her clit, I said, “If you can still talk, I’m not doing this right.”

I palmed her pussy, using the heel of my hand to keep pressure on that tight bud of nerves while slipping my finger inside her, pumping as she moaned her pleasure. When she was on the brink, I lifted her off her feet and positioned my dick for her to slide down. I was determined to excise the image of any other man from both of our minds. The only man she should be thinking about was me.

“God, I love your dick,” she cried out as her inner walls tightened around me.

A man who thrived on domination and control, I was undone by those few simple words. I grunted as I came long, hard, and deep inside my prey. Yet, my craving was far from sated. I walked her in my arms back to the bedroom. I pulled out as I laid her on my bed, and I stood there for a second.

She giggled some. “What about my butt print?”

“That’s what window cleaner is for.” I’d grown

used to her being in my space. My need to paint diminished next to my need for her. “I’ll go get something to clean us up.”

Her come coated my dick. My seed was deep inside her. What the fuck was I doing? I only had her word she was clean and on the pill. The way we’d been fucking, if she wasn’t, she was certainly pregnant. I’d never once saw me as the fatherly type, but I could envision a child with the color of her hair with my eyes or the other way around. And why didn’t that scare the living hell out of me?

Yes, she was well off and an unlikely gold digger. But what did I really know about this woman other than she challenged me and didn’t take my shit? She was funny, and I enjoyed her company. No other woman in my life had intrigued me more.

“Did you get lost?” she asked from the other room, only slightly raising her voice.

I turned on the water and washed off my dick. Then I got a washcloth to do the same for her. Her sleepily sexy smile boiled my blood, and I found myself on my knees, dragging her to the edge of the bed to feast on her again.

Her giggles turned to moans until she was shouting my name. I didn’t relent until she was limp, eyes closed on the bed. I shifted her and covered her with the sheet as she dozed. Before I stood, I pressed a kiss to her temple, surprising

myself. She wasn't my sub, not yet anyway, but damn if she hadn't performed beautifully.

I wanted to stay, but I had obligations. With Eliza on leave at my direction, I had to go to the club. There was no time to visit my father. I would have to do that in the morning on my way to work.

After getting dressed, I let myself out. Down the hall stood a man, and I gritted my teeth. Of course, Griffin still had her under surveillance. Whatever trouble Kalen had gotten into had spilled over to her. I wanted to call Griffin and give him a piece of my mind.

Not out of jealousy. I was angry for her privacy. How much had the man heard and what would go into a report? Who would read it? If anything leaked, there would be hell to pay. I didn't give a shit about myself, but I was starting to care about her.

In the elevator, I called the hospital to get a status update and warned them my dad shouldn't have any visitors—even his best friend, Charles, or my mother, his wife. I didn't trust either of them. And unless he specifically asked, they wouldn't get access to him considering I was listed as having control under Dad's medical power of attorney.

By the time I made it to the club, I was in all business mode. I listened to my staff's updates about the night's events as I made my way to my office. It was the usual stuff, including who was in

the house.

Once I was alone, I got to work. I needed to scrub Eliza's computer because I couldn't be sure it wasn't also compromised. I'd spent time at boarding school educating myself on several things. One made me a self-taught computer guru—some might call me hacker considering my skill level.

A complete dive and scrub would take hours. While I worked, I had to decide Eliza's fate. Tomorrow was guest night at the club, and it was all hands on deck. Like Mardi Gras, everyone wore masks—at least over their eyes—and lots of beads would be on hand.

By the time I made it to my apartment, I was dead on my feet. I didn't bother with taking off my clothes before sinking in a chair and falling asleep.

When the alarm went off, I could have shot it. Good thing my gun wasn't anywhere in reach. Today I had to play the dutiful son, but I had to do something first.

After a shower and a shot of espresso, I chose to drive my SUV. Timing was everything for what I had to do next. Not only that, I had a short window to do it in. I also needed to make it to the hospital to visit my father before my first official meeting of the day.

When I reached my destination, I pulled out a tablet. Security footage should show if the apartment was empty. I was betting my blonde was

an early riser and would be off to work like most New Yorkers by this time.

A string of curses left my lips when I realized I'd been locked out of my security, no doubt by Griffin. As I opened another window and typed code, I almost smiled. Griffin had no idea of my tech skills. That was a well-hidden secret. Hacking the system they'd added to mine took a little time—because his team was good—but in ten minutes, I was in. Apparently, my sexy blonde had balked at being watched inside the apartment. The interior camera had been turned off. I would return the security protocols back to the way they had been.

She was expecting the paintings that were currently in storage in the hidden attic. I'd paid a premium to buy this place because I'd wanted that feature. To get them to her, I needed access to my apartment.

I checked the cameras again and was slightly disappointed she wasn't there. I was unlikely to see her over the next several days and I was surprised to find I was dissatisfied with that.

There wasn't time, so I let that go. I felt like a thief stealing inside my apartment with my key. With no time to waste, I went directly for the concealed access door to the attic inside the pantry. I let it shut behind me as I made my way up a staircase to the vast area about the size of my apartment below.

I hit the lights, which were dim. I could open makeshift shutters to let in natural light when needed. Canvases lined the walls, and my latest project was on an easel. I'd painted from one night after leaving her sleeping after a fuck session. Looking at it felt like I'd walked into the memory the night I found the beautiful stranger in my bed, tangled in my sheets with hints of skin showing here and there. Her face was hidden, and I wondered if she would recognize herself.

As if to remind me how short of time I was, my phone buzzed. I checked the screen and saw it was a call from my father. I didn't accept, as I was sure he was calling to make sure I planned to see him before going to the office.

I didn't have time to carefully choose. I picked those pieces I could part with. I signed them JCK to comply with the terms of the contract I'd yet to send her.

Time continued to march on as I made several trips to get the canvases into my SUV. I was in the hidden stairwell with the last and largest canvas when I heard voices inside the apartment. It was a good thing I'd closed all doors as I entered and exited, just in case.

I walked the painting back up the stairs and set it carefully at the top before returning to the bottom. Just like that first time, I cracked open the pantry door to peek at who was inside.

“See?” Lizzy said to a man even I had to admit most women would find attractive. He stood far too close to her for my liking. “It’s genius.”

“What I see is a sexually repressed man in turmoil over his desires,” he said.

Lizzy giggled, and I wanted to kill the guy—especially when his hand landed on the middle of her back.

“You’re something,” she said, shaking her head. “I just need to grab my phone, which I could have done by myself.”

“No way was I letting you travel across town alone without a phone. This is New York.” He turned a predatory smile toward her. “Besides, I’ve been wanting an invitation to your new place.”

My grip on the door handle tightened.

She shook a finger in his direction. “We’re going to be late.”

Lizzy disappeared into my bedroom. If he had followed, I couldn’t see myself hanging back and watching. But seconds later, Lizzy appeared, and they left the apartment.

I hadn’t brought my tablet, but I could access building security on my phone. I watched the screen as they exited out the front.

I didn’t wait. I jogged up the stairs and took the painting back down and out of the apartment while checking my phone to make sure she didn’t come back. I didn’t want us to meet in the elevator.

As I drove to the hospital to visit my father, a jealous part of me wondered who would fill the princess's time if she had an itch when I wasn't available. Would it be the asshole who'd been with her?

If she was my sub, it wouldn't be a question. In that moment, I decided she would be at the club with me tonight. If there was one thing I didn't do—despite the club I ran—it was share.

SIXTEEN

LIZZY

ANDERSON WAS SUCH A FLIRT, AND I ADORED HIM for it. Though he hadn't had to, I was grateful he'd come along. I'd felt naked without my phone. Much like how I'd felt when I'd woken alone this morning. I'd been so off, avoiding my phone because I didn't want to see that he hadn't texted, that I'd forgotten my phone completely.

Oh boy, what had I gotten myself into?

"So, when are these magic paintings going to arrive?" he asked as we walked back into the office.

I blew out a breath. "I haven't heard back from Connor King. I'm not sure I'll even get them."

My assistant went dreamy-eyed. "Connor King.

Prince of New York. Have you seen him in person?"

"No. Have you?"

He shook his head. "I haven't. But I heard he's delish."

"If he looks anything like his brother, he most likely is."

"Oh, that's right. Bailey is dating the elder brother."

I shook a finger at him. "Not exactly, and don't ask me for more information. It's her business to share, not mine."

"You're no fun. And lucky you, looks like we have a customer."

The telltale soft musical chimes of the front door opening sounded. With only two of us, it was important to have that notification.

After Anderson left to see to our visitor, I sat behind my desk and checked my email. Nothing from Connor and I didn't know how to feel. Especially since I had mail from my accountant. Bailey was an accountant, but I hadn't asked her to do my books—mostly because I was embarrassed. My business was failing. My last chance rested in the hands of an arrogant, rich boy.

So I typed:

To: Connor King

From: Elizabeth Monroe

Subject: Bad Business

Since you didn't have the courtesy to notify me in writing, I'll assume the artist has chosen to decline my offer. Or maybe you never passed on the message. I have to say, I thought you'd have better manners.

Before I hit Send, I read it twice. I didn't want to be intrigued by the man, but I was, hence my strong wording. An overconfident man like him had to be put in his place. His handling of our initial email exchange had pissed me off. How had I allowed myself to think I'd gotten the upper hand?

Besides, I wasn't at all interested in Connor King. I had Striker—or did I? I'd become far too attached to his presence in my bed. The difference between the two was cavernous. Connor was everything I hated in a man: rich and entitled. Sticker was everything I loved in a man: confident and good in bed. Neither was mine.

Until this point, I hadn't really thought about what more I could want. Hans? Good-natured, good-looking, and fun to be around. There was only one thing he'd been missing. I hadn't known sex was so important, but I would never be ashamed of that fact.

“Lizzy.”

I glanced up as Anderson waved to gain my attention. “Sorry, I was thinking.”

“I think your paintings are here.”

Just as I was about to get to my feet in surprise,

an email came in. “Give me a minute. I’ll meet you in the back.”

Anderson nodded and left, closing the door.

To: Elizabeth Monroe

From: Connor King

Subject: Apology?

I’ve just confirmed delivery to your place of business. However, if the artist had gotten your last message, I would imagine he’d tell me to void the contract I have. I’ll leave it up to you. Do you want me to send? BTW, you have one minute to reply.

My jaw possibly hit the floor as I checked the time on my computer. I couldn’t be sure if my time was up. How long had it taken me to read? Twenty seconds? More?

To: Connor King

From: Elizabeth Monroe

Subject: Asshole much?

I accept under protest. Original terms still stand. Send me the contract. You have thirty seconds to do so.

I chuckled, knowing the curse in the subject line wasn’t professional, but I didn’t care.

To: Elizabeth Monroe

From: Connor King

Subject: Quid pro quo

The signed contract is attached. I’ll forward financial information if you can manage to make a sale.

I closed the laptop, afraid I might type something else unladylike. As I got to my feet, my phone chimed. A quick check of the display showed it was my brother.

“Matty.”

“I don’t have a lot of time. I got your text.”

“Yeah, jackass. I’m worried. I haven’t heard from you in days.”

“I told you I might not be able to talk you for a while.”

I groaned. “A text or something?”

“I can’t leave a trail to you.”

“I can’t wonder if you’re dead?”

“I’m not dead. Things are coming together. I can’t say more.”

“Just text me you’re alive every few days. And you could also send something to Mom and Dad.”

“You, yes. Mom and Dad, no, and you know why?”

“I don’t. I hate this.”

“Look, I have to go and please trust me. I’m fine.”

Before I could ask more, he was gone. I wanted to go back to my computer and do what he suggested, but Anderson was waiting. I was worried, but I trusted my brother more than anyone in the world. He’d been doing this for years. Before I’d known it.

Reluctantly, I set down my phone and headed

to the back while trying to put the fear for my brother's life on hold. Knowing my assistant, he would have already locked the front door and put up the sign telling anyone wanting entrance to ring the bell.

By the time I'd gotten to the storage room, all the paintings were lined up on opposite walls. I sucked in air at the sheer majesty.

The art in the apartment was mostly landscapes and a few abstracts. I hadn't been sure what to expect, but what I got was landscapes with a twist. In each, a subject faced away as if enjoying the view beyond.

I didn't agree with Anderson's take that the artist was sexually repressed. He—my assistant, that was—injecting sex into almost everything. I did think the artist, with his short, almost angry strokes, felt unseen. None of the subjects were facing forward. I wasn't a psychotherapist, though I had taken a few psychology classes in undergrad, but the landscapes were painted as if the artist was looking through a window. The ones with subjects, it was as if he was watching them without their knowledge or they didn't notice him.

But the largest of the paintings didn't have a landscape. In it, the woman was lying on a bed, tangled in sheets, and wasn't looking in the direction of the artist.

“You have a winner here,” Anderson

announced with glee.

I agreed. I couldn't compare his paintings to Haven's, but the detail from both was magnificent.

"These will work well with the headliners in the show. This one"—I pointed at the non-landscape painting— "we'll put in the back. I don't want it to compete with Haven's work. But we should show it."

As much as I wanted to hang them all, I had limited wall space, even with my floating walls. So after another look, I let Anderson know which paintings we would display for the show this weekend. Mentally, I roughly calculated the price I could sell them for. If all sold, for the first time in months, I could be in the black. My accountant would be happy.

As I walked to my office, feeling a smile grow, my phone signaled an incoming message.

Striker: Meet me tonight.

He sent the name and address of a place I'd never been to but had heard much about. Flame wasn't far from here. I was no prude but had never had a desire to go to the exclusive club. I might have wondered how Striker could be a member, but at the bottom on the message, he'd indicated it was guest night.

His exact words were: You're invited. Guest Night, Masquerade Ball, Dress- optional.

The last bit was telling. The question was if I

would go. The better one was if I should.

SEVENTEEN

CONNOR

I HATED MYSELF FOR PERPETUATING THE LIE THAT Striker and Connor were not the same man. A part of me used the excuse that Lizzy had stopped me from telling her, which was true. The other part had decided early on that there would be nothing more between us than a good fuck she wanted, so why would I care if she knew the truth or not.

My phone rang, and I answered, “Speak.”

“Aye, boyo,” Kalen said.

“Brother. Mixing your Scottish and Irish?”

He muttered something in Gaelic I didn’t understand.

“Say what you want. I have a busy day.” Lack of sleep had thinned my patience. I had a feeling I

knew why he was calling me. I had expected this conversation.

“I would think being on top would put you in a better mood.”

With my eyes closed, I breathed through my mounting anger. “I never asked to be king of the castle. You can bring yourself back to New York and I’ll happily sign over my duties to you.”

Kalen thought of himself as the forgotten son. After his mother took him back to Scotland, Dad hadn’t forged a relationship with his firstborn.

“Why would I do that when the prodigal son is where he belongs?” he asked.

Kalen’s return to the US after Dad had a mini stroke a few years back had been my first chance at a relationship with my brother. If I’d thought we’d forged a better relationship over the past couple of years, I was apparently wrong.

“I don’t know what Griffin’s said, but I’ve never lied to you. I told our father I didn’t want to be the next CEO, and he called you.” After it had come out of my mouth, it was too late to take it back. Though I’d meant to exonerate myself, I’d unwittingly made it seem like Kalen was second choice. “I didn’t mean that. I did tell him that, but he’d thrown it in my face that you were his firstborn.”

When Dad had called for him to help run the company, despite their differences Kalen had come.

What Kalen didn't need to know was how Dad continued to try and groom me to be the next CEO. Kalen was better suited to running the company than I was.

"Didn't you graduate from Wharton Business School?"

"Yes, you know that."

"Yet you're happy with only being a club owner and not the CEO of a Fortune Five Hundred company."

I had other business ventures Kalen didn't know about. We all had our secrets and I had plenty of them.

"I am," I said.

"Maybe it's best you get a taste of CEO life before you answer that."

"I don't need to," I said.

"Well, I'm not coming home."

"Are you staying for the curvy redhead who keeps your dick up at night?"

"That's none of your—"

"My business. I get it. I'm making the point that some things are more important. I know you got a raw deal from Da and he won't be winning any prizes for Father of the Year. But he isn't the monster you think he is. You could speak to him." Even I was surprised I'd said that.

"I guess it's all a matter of perspective. You had boarding school. I had the streets."

Dad, being Dad, had left his first wife a destitute single mother because she'd chosen to leave him and not the other way around. One of the richest men in the world, he hadn't paid a dime for child support until he needed my brother. But that didn't make Kalen's experiences worse than mine.

"Yeah. You have no idea what my life was like. Stop making assumptions. I would choose your childhood over mine any day."

Kalen laughed darkly and said something else in Gaelic. "Stay away from Lizzy."

It was my turn to chuckle. "I know you would have preferred Griffin as your blood brother, but he lost this round. Lizzy doesn't want him. She and I are adults and can fuck each other senseless if we choose."

"You've touched her?"

"That's none of your business. I'm ending this call, but you say nothing to her. Come back and take the throne or not. I don't care."

Dressed in a Roberto Cavalli suit I'd had sent to my home last evening, I headed to my first meeting of the day. Suit delivery was one of the perks of being the son of Royce King. As a rule, I didn't wear suits, but as acting CEO, I was obligated to dress the part. I had a suit or two in my closet, but they weren't the latest. The men and women I would be meeting over the next couple of days would notice if Royce King's son was wearing last

season's fashion.

Lucky for me, the store had my measurements on file and the off-the-rack suit they'd sent fit perfectly. I had two more coming that would be tailored fit to me. I hadn't bought more because I hoped my father or Kalen would be back to work by next week.

By the end of the day, I was one hundred percent certain I had no appetite to step into my father's shoes.

My father's assistant practically ran after me when I left the office a little after six. "But, Mr. King, you have—"

"Reschedule," was my response as the elevator doors shut between us.

Though my father wouldn't have left the office so early, I wasn't his clone and I had my own business to look after. I couldn't wait to get out of the monkey suit and tie when I reached home. I changed into my preferred leather pants and T-shirt and snagged my favorite leather jacket. The one I'd purchased with the first profits I ever made from my club. Though it had seen better days, it was a reminder I was my own man, not just Royce King's son.

I was already late for a meeting with Eliza, but it would be good for her to wait. I grabbed my helmet and was off to my preferred office.

When I got in, I was told Eliza was waiting. I

went to my office and sat before I called for her to be sent in. She wouldn't like that. It meant all the employees knew she was on my shit list. But I didn't care because she'd almost fucked us both. She'd been the closest thing I had to a best friend, and she'd shit on that.

"Boss."

I glanced up long enough to give her a cool stare before turning my attention back to the paper before me.

"Boss," she tried again. "I said I'm sorry."

Anger burned brightly in me. "Your apology doesn't mean shit when we could be dead from your stunt."

"I know."

"Really?"

The word had so much steel in it, she flinched.

I added, "Because out of everyone in the world, you should know better."

"I know," she repeated with downcast eyes. "I just missed—"

"Don't say us. We both know that didn't work and nothing's changed."

"I know."

I was really getting tired of those two words. "I need you to fully understand that I rule here. We are nothing more than two people who work together. Me, the boss, and you, the loyal employee."

“I am loyal.”

We were finally getting somewhere.

“You’ll prove it tonight. I have a guest coming and I need you to be on point when she’s in house. No one is to call me anything other than Sir. Do you understand?” Before her screw-up, I might have explained myself. Not anymore.

“Yes, Sir,” she said with her eyes on her lap and not on me—as any submissive would do in a show of complete submission.

Truth was, tonight, I needed all my employees, including her. I’d complicated things by inviting Lizzy. It had been an impulsive move. A dick move would be more accurate, because my dick was most certainly anticipating her arrival.

“Get to work.”

She had an uphill battle now that people knew she wasn’t top dog anymore. It was time for me to groom someone to take her place. Eliza’s mistake made me fully aware of the error of putting my trust only in her.

There was much to be done before the doors opened in less than an hour. I needed to be sure that all the guests had been vetted. It should have been done, but I liked to check myself. I had extra security from Griffin’s security firm, and I needed to personally check them as well. I would have done so before now but working two jobs was eating much of my time. Lizzy was taking up the

rest.

Though I was pressed for time, I had no regrets there. What got me through was the anticipation of her arrival.

When the call came, a wicked smile crossed my lips.

EIGHTEEN

LIZZY

THE QUINTESSENTIAL LITTLE BLACK DRESS COVERED my skin, or at least some of it. The square neckline barely covered my chest. With the spaghetti straps and the hemline at mid-thigh, much of me was exposed. But thanks to the lacey mask, I didn't feel completely bare as I walked into Manhattan's best kept secret—at least to those without the money to be in the right circles to have heard such rumors.

Security had been thorough, including a pat-down—by a female bouncer. I would have objected otherwise.

I wasn't allowed to bring anything inside, including my purse and cell phone. I'd been required to secure those items in a small locker like

you might find at an amusement park. There was even a computer monitor to lock it with only my fingerprint. No other personal information was taken, which was the reason I hadn't objected to that either.

When I'd finally been allowed inside the inner walls of the club, I actually felt safe given the level of security. I also wasn't as weirded out as I thought I'd be. The music drowned out any crowd noise, and many of tonight's guests lacked much in the way of clothing. Some only wore a mask to cover the upper part of their face.

I laughed to myself, imagining if Bailey had been with me. She would have been bright red from embarrassment. I had no such qualms as I moved deeper into the room.

Spaced out were small, short stages with various apparatuses. Only one was in use. In the center of the room was the largest stage, and a man I knew carnally stood upon it.

The man was ripped. How had I not noticed before? Shirtless and wearing only a pair of dark leather pants, he was breathtaking. What caught my eye was the long black whip in his hand and the woman intricately tied face down on a bench of some sort.

A crowd had gathered on all sides. Even I was drawn in. Though he didn't speak, he was definitely a showman. I found myself at a spot with a clear

view of the woman's bare backside as he flicked his wrist. The whizzing sound in the air was unmistakable. As if choreographed, the music had softened, and the crowd was silent with anticipation.

The whip didn't hit her bottom as I expected, from the pink marks on each of her cheeks. It landed between her legs. Instead of screaming, the woman moaned in pleasure. I found myself tightening my thighs in an unexpected reaction. For a second, I wanted to trade places with her.

At that moment, I met a pair of familiar eyes. Even wearing a mask, I would recognize him anywhere. I froze in my spot as he made no move toward me. It became a battle of wills, with me tilting my head in question.

When he glanced away, he walked over to the woman, whispered something in her ear, then nodded to someone off stage. A pair, a man and a woman dressed in black, appeared and went over to the woman. They spoke softly to her, stroking her back, before the man lifted her.

I WAS SO ENGROSSED; I HADN'T SEEN WHERE Striker had disappeared to. When I searched for him, I found him surrounded by a circle of women. One kneeled. He must have noticed me noticing them, because he straightened and walked in my

direction without a single word to his groupies.

It wasn't as if I couldn't blame his fan club. I was considering submitting my application to be president of it. The man had a presence that made me want him to do all kinds of dirty things to me I would have never allowed another man to do.

"You came," he said when he reached me.

"Not yet," I said, though I was definitely wet from that show of his. I licked my lip while letting my eyes trail down his body and back up. I had to bite my lip when I met his eyes, unable to ignore that damn sexy smirk.

His chuckle was dark. The fact that I heard just went to show how damn close to me he was. "We can do something about that."

The man hadn't touched me, yet I had to hold in a shiver.

"Promises, promises," I said, striding away with no real destination other than to make him chase me. If the man wanted me, I'd make him work for it.

"Going somewhere?" he said, catching up to me and placing a hand dead center, low on my back as we walked.

"Taking in the sights. Is this your thing? Whipping women?" I asked, stopping in front of what could only be described as a wooden cross. Nothing biblical. The planks were too wide. The telling restraints at each end made it clear what it

was for.

“It can be,” he said, reminding me of my question.

I turned to face him. I wanted to see his eyes when he answered my next question. “Why here?”

He leaned down. “You didn’t seem to mind being tied up. I thought we’d test our boundaries.”

“Our boundaries or mine?” I countered.

The corner of his mouth curled up as he held out his hand for me to take. In that moment, we were the only two people in the room. I had to admit to curiosity as I took his hand.

That damn smile of his grew as he lifted my hand to his lips and brushed a soft kiss over my knuckles. Then he led me through the crowded room. There were people in absolutely nothing but masquerade masks and others fully covered literally from head to toe. I felt the freedom of choice as we continued forward.

I didn’t gawk, but I did take in the sights as we moved. When we got to a hallway, I saw picture windows showing rooms on either side. The rooms weren’t empty. From what I glimpsed, each had at least a bed and people engaged in various acts of sex. If he thought I was down for that, he would get a rude awakening. I wasn’t a prude, but I wasn’t an exhibitionist. Although I wouldn’t lie to myself and say the idea of getting caught didn’t thrill me at times when I’d engaged in sex in less-than-private

locations.

We rounded a corner. The lighting was even dimmer here. At the end of the hall, he opened a door on the left. I stopped just inside it. There was a bed in the far-left corner, but that wasn't what caught my attention. Leather straps hung from the wall in front of me. Behind it was an odd padded bench with additional pads protruding from the legs, which I guessed were for arms and calves. There was also a place for one's head to rest.

I let out a nervous laugh. "Okay," I said more to myself.

"Anything we do in here is your choice." He glanced toward the bed as if in challenge.

His deep rumbling voice sent vibrations through me and I felt myself growing wet.

"How sanitary is this?" I asked.

His eyes crinkled in the corners as his grin widened. "This is a private room. Rarely used. Almost everything in here is new, including the swing. The bed has fresh sheets, and the obedience bench is wiped down with Clorox after every use."

"Obedience," I repeated because yes, that was the word that stuck in my mind.

He stepped closer and extended his arm. The door clicked shut, and I stood there with a decision to make.

"I'm not an exhibitionist," I blurted.

"There are no windows here." He glanced

around as if to make a point. “There is a camera.” He pointed at the corner above my right shoulder. “Your choice.”

I looked up and spotted the camera. I shook my head, unable to speak, and he flipped a switch down. I assumed that meant the camera was off. A little light underneath it had changed from green to red. I felt like a teenage about to “do it” for the first time. What was up with that?

He caged me in against the door. “Nervous?” he asked at my ear before nipping at my throat.

I shouldn’t be, but I was. “No.”

Trying to be the bold woman I knew myself to be, I ducked under his arm and stepped farther into the room before facing him again.

“Where do we begin?” I asked.

“Nowhere. Not until I know you want this.”

His stare penetrated right to my core. I reached behind me and dragged down the zipper on my dress. When I flicked each of the spaghetti straps off my shoulders, the dress sank to the floor in a black pool of fabric. I stood there as his darkened gaze took in every naked inch of me.

“I came prepared,” I said with false bravado and a wink—I’d worn nothing underneath the dress.

When he didn’t make a move, I remembered the first thing he’d told me. I wasn’t his type. Everyone had insecurities, and he hit mine. The

beautiful man made me feel small that moment thanks to the memory. I hadn't realized my eyes had dropped until he was there with his fingers under my chin, lifting it.

"I was wrong," he said as if he'd plucked my thoughts from my mind. "I can admit that."

"Wrong about what?" I asked, stubbornly lifting my chin from his fingers.

"I've seen plenty of beautiful women—"

"Not off to a promising start," I said.

"See? You. It's you. No woman has ever gotten my dick this hard by just looking at her."

I angled my head, silently willing him to say more.

"It's not just that. Your snarky responses to put me in my place should send me to the hills, yet I keep coming back for more."

If I'd wanted a declaration of our relationship status, that wasn't what I'd gotten. I didn't want complicated, right? "What now?"

His answer came in the form of scooping me up, which wasn't at all disappointing. When he put me down, it wasn't on my feet. My butt rested in the leather straps I'd spotted when I first walked in. I opened my mouth, but he filled it with his tongue, stroking it over mine as if he wanted to take things slowly as he drew off my mask. I had no idea where it went. With him so close, slow was the last thing on my mind. I grabbed his cock, finding it

hard and ready.

“Not yet,” he said, his lips hovering over mine.

I reciprocated by removing his mask and flinging it off to the side. He removed my hand from his pants and guided it up to a loop above my head attached to the straps, all while holding my bottom up. I let him slide my hand through the loop and I held on as he did the same with my other hand.

“Hold on,” he said, spreading my legs.

I watched as he got to his knees, leaving my core open and exposed to him at eye level.

“Try not to scream,” he said cockily before taking a long lick up my slit to circle my clit.

When I leaned back, I might have fallen out if not for the extra straps that cradled my back. What he was doing reminded me of the saying *Eat your heart out*, though I would substitute heart with a different part of the body.

After an orgasm rocketed through me, I lay in bliss. He got to his feet and undid the top button on his pants. When his dick nearly sprang out, I wanted to get to my knees and thank heaven for creating such a specimen. The man was beguiling. Clearly, I was under some sort of spell, following him to a back room of a sex club where he claimed the cameras weren't rolling.

“I want to fuck you there,” he said, pointing over my shoulder at the obedience bench.

My eyes widened as I remembered the name he'd given it. "What? Are you going to spank me?"

"Only if you want me to."

Was I crazy for considering it?

"Are you in or out?" he asked.

"I want you in. I'm just not sure about that." I glanced over my shoulder with suspicion.

"You only live once."

"I know. That's what I'm worried about." When I met his eyes, I dissolved in his hungry gaze.

"We can stop whenever you want," he said.

"Are you going to give me a safe word?"

"Do you need one?"

I shrugged. "I thought—"

"This is just you and me, not a scene. We aren't testing your limits here."

"Aren't we?" I asked.

His smile was wide. "The way we will use that bench is just like on your knees in the bed. Nothing more. But if you need a word to trust me, pick one." As I tried to think, he opened his fly wider, his jeans slipping down his hips. "Time's up."

He stepped forward and thrust his monster cock inside me.

"So much for the bench," I said before I lost all reason.

Feelings and sensations overwhelmed me. The musical notes of our flesh meeting as he thrust inside me filled the room as I climbed toward the

edge of desire.

After another two long pumps, he stilled inside me. "I'm not ready to come."

He lifted me out of the straps, so I let go of the loops.

"The bench?" It was the best I could do to get any words out. I was so damn close.

"No. You're not ready for that." When I glared at him, he added, "You had to think about it."

The mattress dipped under our weight as he laid me on my back. Before I could anticipate what would come next, he hooked an arm under my knee and bent my leg toward me to slip deeper.

"Yeah, that's it," he said, slowly kicking into gear as he ramped up his speed.

Friction did wonderful things to my insides. Every magic button was hit until I was spiraling out of control. Without giving a damn, I let out a scream that would surely inflate his ego. I owned my sexuality, and in this instance, I'd won the orgasm lottery.

Once the last of the aftershocks had disappeared, I was so relaxed, I closed my eyes for a second, speculating about what would come next.

"Are you up for the bench?" he whispered.

This time I didn't hesitate. "Strap me in," I said sleepily, feeling loose and limber and up for anything.

His chuckle stoked another fire in me as he

scooped me up and gently positioned me on the bench. The padding was cool against my stomach. Whatever endorphins were running through my body had me smiling as he indeed strapped me in.

“Hold on,” he said.

NINETEEN

CONNOR

THE VIEW BEFORE ME WAS WORTHY OF A CANVAS. It was an image that would stay in my mind until I could do it justice with paint. For now, I positioned my cock at her entrance and watched as it swallowed my cock whole.

She moaned, and I nearly groaned. I'd prolonged coming for as long as I could. Seeing her bound after her willingness to do so had me teetering on the edge. But her trust deserved much more than a quick release on my part.

I rubbed her ass and fought the urge to tap it. Nothing that would cause pain. I wasn't into that. Instead, I worked to get her there while I fought my orgasm.

“Do it,” she said.

I needed clarification, so I asked, “Do what?”

“Spank me,” she said, sounding half drunk.

I hadn’t seen her drink, nor had she tasted of alcohol when we’d kissed. But I knew the signs of subspace and seeing her there had my balls heavy and ready to explode. “Spank you, huh?”

She nodded. So I did. A light smack that left a faint pink mark. She squirmed, no doubt getting some pleasure from where her clit made contact with the padding.

“More,” she said.

I pulled my cock fully out and tapped her pussy with the flat of my fingers. When she gasped and tightened her thighs, I knew she’d gone over the edge. I plunged back in as her walls quivered around me, and I let myself go.

Afterward, I stood there, catching my breath. The woman was getting under my skin. Sex with anyone hadn’t ever been this explosive.

My beauty lay there, eyes closed in the bliss I felt. I took my time unstrapping her, not wanting to disturb her moment of contentment or rather subspace. When I was done and she hadn’t opened her eyes, I picked her up, grabbed her dress, and covered her as best I could as I cradled her in my arms.

No one was in the halls, so I brought her to my office and laid her on my sofa. As she rested

peacefully, I pulled on a shirt and grabbed my keys. I wouldn't leave her alone to wake up wondering where she was. Instead, after getting her in her dress—with some help from her—I got her to drink some juice. I held her for a while and talked to her to make sure she was in the right head space before I drove her home. Aftercare was really important, and I asked her a few questions to check her well-being before tucking her in bed. I wasn't surprised she slept most of the way there and slipped back into dreamland once I'd covered her. Orgasm released a cocktail of hormones—when they wear off could lead you to feel relaxed and sleepy.

Unfortunately, that phenomenon didn't work on me. Sleep was something I found hard on any occasion.

It was hard to leave her, but I had to get back to the club. It was one of the busiest nights of the year. When I arrived, Eliza found me before I could walk the floor.

“You know who that is, right?” she asked.

“No,” I said, dismissing her. I wasn't up to petty jealousy, which I hadn't ever witnessed from her.

She blocked my path. “She's dating that supermodel Hans.”

That stopped me. I didn't know who this Hans was, other than guessing he was the guy who had called her the other night, but I said, “They aren't together,” as though it didn't bother me thinking I

could be wrong about that.

She laughed as if I was stupid for believing that.
“I’m pretty sure they’re engaged.”

“It’s really none of your business,” I said, though my mind replayed everything Lizzy had said. I believed her.

“She’s not even your type,” she said.

I faced her then and squarely met her gaze.
“My type hasn’t worked out for me, has it?”

I hadn’t set out to hurt Eliza, but I turned and walked away. She was becoming a problem. Her jealousy was disappointing. Training her replacement would have to become a priority. I had a feeling that our business relationship would change significantly soon.

The night ran better than I hoped, only a few problems resulting in us removing certain individuals not following the rules. We also had an increase in applications for membership. If I was all about the money, I could let in more. For me, the quality of our membership mattered more than the quantity.

After a couple of hours of sleep, I went to the hospital to see Dad. He’d requested my presence, so dutifully, I arrived on time.

“My boy,” Dad said jovially as I walked into his hospital room. “I’m ready to get out of here.”

“I bet you are. What do the doctors say?”

He waved me off. “They don’t know what

they're talking about."

I nodded because there was no use arguing with him over that point. He knew as well as I did it was bluster on his part.

"Give me an update," he demanded.

He wanted to know what was going on in his company. He had his phone, and I was sure his admin was giving him hourly play by plays. Still, I gave him a rundown of the meetings I'd had since we'd last spoken.

"It should be Kalen doing this," I said in closing.

"He wants to spite me."

"Do you blame him?" I asked in a moment of complete honesty.

"You know, I was grateful the day you were born. I thought, here's my second chance," he said, not answering my question. "I didn't know where Kalen was at first. When I found out, I had you. I let your mother talk me into leaving things as they were. I only have one regret."

"What's that?" I asked, knowing he wanted me to.

"Leaving you at that school."

I looked away not wanting to discuss the topic.

"I went there," he said. "I didn't—"

I waved him off. "What's done is done. What you can do is make peace with Kalen."

"You could run this company," he said. "You're

doing it now. Everyone is so impressed.”

“You know that’s not going to happen.”

His face hardened. Any empathy he’d shown disappeared. “How long are you going to make me pay?”

I wasn’t making him pay—or was I? There were those who deserved cruel punishments for the sins of the past, but was Dad included on that list?

“This is about what I want, and it isn’t being CEO,” I said instead.

“Do you think your little underground empire will last?”

There was so much more to me than the club. But I had no intentions of explaining myself to him, Kalen, or anyone. “Long enough. Make peace with your firstborn. He’s your legacy, not me.”

I strolled out of the room as Dad called after me, but I didn’t turn around. Unable to leave without getting Dad’s status, I sought after the attending physician. I was relieved to learn they would release him in the next few days, if all went well. He’d had a minor heart attack and the doctor thought he’d fully recover but wanted to monitor him. I would hopefully be done playing King by next week. That day couldn’t come soon enough.

My next stop would prove even more interesting.

In the therapist’s office, I sat in a high-backed chair across from a formidable woman who wore

an open expression meant to be inviting.

“It’s been a while,” she said, tipping her glasses down. “What brings you to my office?”

I felt like a boy about to give a confession to a priest and I wasn’t Catholic. “I’ve come to a crossroads.”

“How so?” she asked, as it was her job to listen more than speak.

“I’ve met someone.”

She gave only the briefest hint of interest. “This is significant, how?”

“I’ve found myself drawn to her more than any other woman before.” I watched her face for any tells.

“Do you think this is wise, given your past?”

“I thought your purpose was to help me get past that.”

“It is. But we haven’t spoken in a while. Does this woman have any idea about your—”

“Needs,” I supplied.

“Yes,” she said, happy with my choice of words.

“She’s performed beautifully so far.”

Her lips pursed. “Well, it appears you have it all under control. Why see me?”

“I’m still not sleeping.”

“The prescription isn’t working?”

I didn’t take the sleeping aid unless absolutely necessary. I chose to keep my answer simple. “No.”

She sat straighter. "I can prescribe something stronger."

"No."

"What do you want?" she asked.

To be normal, if that was possible.

"It's been ten years," I said. "How long does PTSD last?"

"That's really up to you. Do you still suffer nightmares?"

I hated to admit it, but I nodded.

"It takes time. Regular therapy can help. Something you've stopped," she said.

"Can you recommend someone?"

Her eyes widened. I knew I'd caught her off guard. "If you no longer deem my help as good for you, I have a few colleagues I can refer you too."

"Yes, I'd appreciate that."

"What was this?" she said with a little wave. "I feel like you're breaking up with me."

This was the first in a long line of steps to get rid of things and people who weren't working in my life.

"It's been years and nothing's changed. I thought it important to have closure, as you've suggested on a number of occasions."

"I haven't helped you?" she asked, now on the defensive. It was probably less than professional on her part, but I'd blindsided her.

"You have to a point. I appreciate everything

you've done. But we've hit a wall I haven't broken through."

"Is this *her* suggestion?"

Her. She had to be referring to the woman I began this conversation about.

"No. But she is the catalyst. She's made me see that trying new things isn't bad. I can be different without compromising who I am."

She huffed and my brow rose. "I'm happy for you." Though she sounded less than pleased. As I got up to leave, she added, "One last piece of advice."

I hovered there without standing or sitting back down.

"She may not hang around when she finds out who you really are."

I chuckled as I got to my feet. Professionalism had fled the building. "Who am I? Do you even know?"

I didn't wait for an answer. This woman, who'd been a savior when I needed it, had turned bitter now that I didn't need her anymore. Our doctor-patient relationship had evolved over time, but now I saw it for what it was. Toxic. She wanted to control me. I was no longer a vulnerable boy looking for absolution. I would excise my demons somehow, but not with her guidance.

My next stop was the first step in a plan to lay claim to what was mine. Lizzy.

TWENTY

LIZZY

MY MORNING WAS A MIX OF EMOTIONS. I WAS disappointed to wake alone again. Striker hadn't stayed—not that I'd expected him to. But I was forced to face the truth, at least to myself. With fresh eyes, I reevaluated my relationship with Hans and what I missed from it. Intimacy. Could I have that with Striker, or anyone, despite my past?

Still I couldn't keep a smile off my face. Last night with Striker had been amazing, and I had no regrets. There had been plenty of orgasms, but what happened after had truly struck me. There had been tenderness when Striker removed my bonds and carried me to another room. He'd probably assumed I was asleep, but I had been in some space

between awake and there. I had the vaguest of memories of him driving me home and putting me to bed. For a guy who seemed as relationship-phobic as I was, he'd cared for me in a way a boyfriend would have.

"Are you going to tell me why you're so happy?" Bailey asked.

Her hair had changed, and I hadn't reconciled it with the girl I'd met freshman year at college. She'd been so naïve, and in a lot of ways, she still was.

"I had the most interesting night of sex you could imagine," I admitted.

When she turned a bright shade of red, I remembered who I was talking to.

"I'm afraid to ask," she said.

"Don't be. I'll spare you the details and just say Striker took me to a sex club and I let him tie me up." Her jaw dropped, and I clarified. "Okay, it was more like Velcro and straps than rope and ties." As she sat there in stunned disbelief, I remembered something. "Oh, there might have been a spanking or two involved as well."

My friend had only recently discovered sexual freedom. She'd come from a religious community separated from society, and my admission had obviously left her speechless.

"Yeah, I know what you're thinking," I said. "Believe me, I thought the same thing when I

stepped into that room. But honest to god, Bails, and this scares me, I trusted him.”

“Wow,” she said.

“Exactly. I mean, I barely know the guy. But on some level, I knew he wouldn’t do anything to hurt me.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “The spanking?”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. It didn’t so much hurt. Maybe it was the forbidden nature of it all, but it was the best sex I’ve had in my entire life.”

“That’s good, I guess.”

“Tell me something. When did you know you were falling for the big Scottish lug?”

“Falling? I stumbled, tripped, and now I’ve righted myself. I’m so over that mistake.”

I still didn’t believe her. She had hearts in her eyes for Kalen.

“Besides all that. When did it switch from sex to something more for you?” I asked.

Her mouth curled away from the frown that had formed when I mentioned her gorgeous but grumpy boyfriend or ex. I couldn’t keep up with the pair’s status.

“Is someone falling for Striker?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

“I think falling is a strong word. I will admit I miss what I had with Hans.”

“Everything in the news I’ve read says Hans is

there for the taking.” She dangled the idea like a lifeline.

“We’ve been through this. I can’t. He and I don’t fit.” Literally and physically. “I wish sex wasn’t a huge part of who I am, but it is. I’d end up needing a sexual partner outside of our relationship. That’s just the truth of it.” She nodded, and I sighed. “I’m a jerk, aren’t I?”

“No. You’re honest. It’s a good thing. Others would just cheat.”

“Exactly. He’s a great guy.”

“And Striker?” she probed.

“I don’t know. He’s a mystery.”

“Why’s that?”

I shrugged. “My choice, to be honest. I don’t want to know much about him because I didn’t want to fall for the guy. And no, I haven’t. But I am getting attached to his presence in my bed.”

“That’s how it starts.”

“What?” I asked.

“That’s how it started with me. I got used to Kalen being there. It was comfortable.”

“Not to mention great for your sex life,” I said.

“That’s the point,” Bailey said. “I’ve been reading up on this. Women are far more likely to develop feelings when involved in a strictly sexual relationship, despite the rules a couple comes up with.”

“What are you saying?”

Getting relationship advice from my friend was almost weird. In all our years of knowing each other, she'd depended on me. But the fact was, the last time I'd had a relationship that resembled anything close to a boyfriend before Hans was in high school. And how had both turned out?

Bailey's face softened. "I'm saying be careful. You're not as tough as you think. You have a soft gooey center inside that hard-as-nails heart of yours. But I'm not saying don't try. You never know. Maybe you should invite him to your art show."

I hadn't thought about that.

"See how he fits in your world. You know the sex works between you, but what about the rest? You should know that before actual feelings get involved."

"You are wise," I teased, though she was.

We slipped into conversation about my upcoming show and her plans for moving to D.C. to take a new job, which saddened me. I'd gotten used to having her as a roommate.

"Have a fun dinner with your parents," she said in jest before we ended the call.

"Thanks for not being here and taking Mother's matchmaking mischief off me."

She laughed. "Oh, and how are the renovations going?"

"About as well as your reconciliation with

Kalen," I teased. "Slowly."

She sighed. "You can't reconcile with a man you don't see."

"Trust me, he's there. He has eyes on you somehow. There's no way they have a security guy following me and not you." Though I hadn't seen mine lately, I knew he hadn't been reassigned.

Kalen and Griffin were taking the threat seriously. But nothing had happened for a while and I was beginning to think whoever was behind Bailey's troubles had given up.

After we ended the call, I got ready for dinner with my parents. I still hadn't heard from my brother. Again, I tried not to worry, but that was impossible. The twin instinct inside me said he was still breathing. Though I didn't see myself as psychic or anything of the like, I had to trust that he was okay.

When I arrived, Mom air-kissed my cheeks lest she mess up her perfectly applied lipstick. For a woman who'd had my brother and me late in life, she still looked good.

"Elizabeth."

"Mom," I said.

"Lizzy," Dad said, walking into the room. He wrapped me in a big hug.

"You're just in time," Mom said. "Let's retreat to the dining room. How is your brother?"

Before answering, I took my seat at the table

better suited for entertaining large parties. I was torn between giving them the assurance they wanted and protecting Matt's privacy.

"He's good," I said in compromise. It wasn't exactly true. But they didn't need to worry about him like I did. They would have questions I couldn't answer and that would further distress them.

The staff came in to serve the meal, which halted further conversation for a time. Dad eventually piped in, giving the news of the day. I had to admit, I wouldn't know about half of the current events if not for him.

When he was done, I needed to ask the question that had been troubling me since my conversation with my accountant after Matt had cryptically suggested I check my trust. "Dad?"

"Yes, sweetheart."

The sentiment always warmed my heart. Though he and my brother had had a falling out that had yet to be resolved, I saw myself as Daddy's little girl.

"My accountant said that you'd requested access to my trust?"

When his hands paused in the middle of cutting his steak and he looked away from me, my heart sank.

"I'm sure your father had his reasons," Mom chimed in.

I kept my eyes on Dad, saying nothing.

Finally, he met my gaze. "I wanted to be sure you were taken care of. Nothing more."

If anyone else had said those words, I'd question them. But my father had never lied to me, so I nodded. "Next time, just ask me. It felt weird for my accountant to blindside me with that question."

I had a feeling Dad knew my business wasn't going well. He'd probably wanted to confirm that I'd been using it to cover the shortfalls. Knowing my dad, he hadn't wanted to embarrass me by asking me if I was a failure.

"Well. Can we talk about something besides business?" Mom asked. "Tell us about your show this weekend."

Mom didn't think my gallery was a business but a hobby. Still, I told them anyway. I made sure to put in that I'd made a promising acquisition of an unknown artist who would take the art community by storm if I had anything to say about it. The preview photos I'd posted on my website had gotten a lot of interest. I wanted Dad not to worry about me. He would likely offer to give me money to keep me afloat if I didn't have encouraging news. Much like my brother, I wanted to earn my achievements on my own.

When I got home that night, a package waited for me. I hadn't ordered anything, so I was really

curious. No one besides Kalen, Griffin, and his staff knew I lived there. There was another possibility as my finger hovered over the send button to call Griffin's security company.

Striker.

I put down the phone, which could be a mistake. Someone had targeted Bailey. That was why Kalen had moved me out of my apartment and planted me in Soho. The package could be something very bad. Then again, it could be something harmless from Striker. Did I really want some random security guy to see whatever it might be and report it to Griffin?

Cautiously, I slit the tape on the box and pulled out a tissue-wrapped box and a small card. As much as I wanted to see what was inside the box, I opened the card first.

Just in case you have an itch and I'm not around. -S

The small rectangular white box had the word Crave on the lid. Inside was a gray, suede-like pouch. I used the rose gold chain that rested outside to pull out something similar to a silver bullet, but a lot longer. On the side was a button, which I pushed. The bullet came to life with a telling vibration.

I laughed. The man had bought me a wearable vibrator, and I knew where and when I'd wear it.

A few days later when Saturday evening

arrived, I was at my gallery in a banging red dress that fit me as though it had been painted on. The sweetheart neckline plunged low, and between my breasts hung the Crave necklace Striker had gotten me.

“Is the artist going to show up?” Anderson asked between running around and making sure catering was ready.

My email to Connor King about that very question had gone unanswered. “I don’t know. Let’s just assume no.”

Anderson reached up to touch my vibe, and I slapped his hand away. “That’s not nice.”

“It’s just so unusual. What is it?”

I wasn’t about to explain. “It’s a gift. Keep an eye out for anyone who shows up not on the guest list.”

“You think the artist might show up?”

According to the addendum to the contract Connor had signed, the artist wanted to remain anonymous. But even when people said that, they tended to be curious. I nodded. “Like a criminal at the scene of the crime.”

He caught on with a knowing smile and rushed off to coordinate with security. I couldn’t imagine doing this without Anderson. He was invaluable. If the show didn’t go well, he would likely seek other employment.

I pushed that aside. Another question was

plaguing my mind. Would Striker show up, given my late invitation? Like Bailey mused, how would he fit in my world? And if he did, what next?

As people showed up, I greeted and played hostess.

But everything changed when someone not on the guest list arrived. I went to the door as security had requested.

The first thing I said was, “Hans.”

TWENTY-ONE

CONNOR

WHEN I GOT HER TEXT, I COULDN'T HOLD BACK A smile. Though I'd planned to attend Lizzy's event somehow, she'd gifted me an invitation that surprised me. So much of what had gone between us had been sex, I had to wonder if she was changing her mind about what we could be.

Though I knew a Fifth Avenue gallery showing was a formal event, I didn't go in a suit or tie. That wasn't my style. I'd done my duty for Dad this past week and had buried those monkey outfits in the back of my closet. I stepped up to security in ripped white jeans, a tee, and my worn leather jacket.

He eyed me up and down and said, "Name."

That was the thing about being incognito. When

I said, “Striker,” he didn’t question it.

Security used a finger to scroll down a list on his phone and stopped at what I presumed was my name. He didn’t look happy about it. I had a feeling he had been looking forward to telling me to shove off—or something with the same meaning. Instead, he was forced to open the door for me. I gave him my best smirk that said all the things I wanted to say but didn’t.

Before I could get far, I was waylaid by an older woman with a severe haircut that looked as though someone had sheered it off an inch above her shoulders with one fluid movement.

“Nice,” she said, putting a hand on my arm. “Tell me, have you ever modeled?”

“No,” I said in a way that wasn’t rude but conveyed the message that I wanted to be left alone.

She didn’t get the message though and handed me a card that seemed to materialize out of thin air. “Call me. We can do great things together.”

It sounded too much like an invitation for something else. Still, I pocketed the card. It was Lizzy’s night and I wouldn’t spoil it for her.

I eyed the art as I went along, not spotting any of my own. Though the artist gracing the prime wall space did have talent. The portraits looked more like photographs instead of paint and canvas. In each subject’s eyes, I could see into their soul. I

stopped in front of a portrait of a priest. There was torment there, and I felt a kinship that sent a cool breeze down my back and I couldn't contain a shiver. I didn't linger.

Through the gaps of the floating walls, I spotted my blonde. She was near the back with a man a little larger than me. He was standing way too close. I hustled through the semi-crowded space to reach her.

"Why are you here?" I heard her ask as I approached their backs.

They stood in front of a statement piece, if I said so myself. The familiar strokes of the paint sparked a memory inside me.

"You know why. I can't stay away," he said.

"We've talked about this," she said softer, but I was close enough to overhear.

"I'm getting the surgery. I know that was a problem for you—"

She cut him off. "I don't want you doing this for me."

I felt a growl in the back of my throat and stepped back to analyze why. I was still in earshot as a couple passed, not noticing the tension around them.

"I'm not," he said. "But it will benefit us both."

"It won't because it changes nothing. We're better friends."

The growl inside me dampened to a purr. *That's*

my girl.

“Is there someone else?” When she didn’t answer, he turned his attention back to my painting. “I bought this because it reminds me of—”

“Babe,” I said, having entered the neutral zone and picked a side. I slid my arm around her waist, making it clear to the interloper who she belonged to. I gave him a winning smile. It seemed appropriate.

Lizzy had other ideas and slipped out of my hold to stand before the painting. Her positioning only brought the memory of the first night I’d found her in my bed to the forefront of my mind. She had no clue, but her ex did—even though I hadn’t captured her face on the canvas.

She spoke, bringing me back to the present. “I can have this ready to ship for you by next weekend.” As she spoke to him, the man who had been in my apartment with her appeared. “Anderson, please get the details from Hans as to where he’d like it sent.”

I stepped forward, leaving the four of us in an odd circle, or more like a square. “Don’t. I’ve already purchased this painting.”

My beautiful blond princess turned her fierce gaze on Anderson. “Is that true?”

Anderson floundered for a second and I looked at her ex, Hans. He gave Anderson a pleading look. I faced the other man and gave him a murderous

glare. I figured it would break the tie.

“Y-yes,” Anderson said. “He did.”

My grin was all teeth and Anderson let out a breath he’d likely been holding.

Through clenched teeth, my now furious princess, said, “We have more in the back.”

I cut that off at the knees. “I bought those as well.”

Anderson nodded when Lizzy glared his way.

“Lizzy,” Hans said. “Let him have the paintings. I’d rather have the woman,” and he knelt.

There were gasps, and suddenly the small area in the back was filled. There was even a camera crew.

“I’ve never loved another woman the way I love you,” he said.

Lizzy looked shocked. I’d like to think she looked a little horrified, but I wouldn’t know for sure until this played out.

“Hans, please—” she said.

“I should have done this before, but I didn’t and I’m making it right. Lizzy Monroe, would you marry me?”

The room went deathly silent as everyone, including me, waited on her answer.

“No,” she said.

Collectively, the crowd sucked in a breath while I let out the one I’d been holding. I almost felt bad

for the guy. He looked like a boy who'd lost his puppy.

"I mean, I can't," she said, faltering as the whispers were clearly not in her favor.

Hans had gone red and the cameras were still rolling. A few spectators had gone over to offer him condolences as other were glaring at her as if she was the devil. Lizzy glanced around, her pretty face in a panic as her eyes landed on me. I took it as a plea for help.

"Why can't you?" Hans asked, bolstered by those who'd come to his side.

Lizzy's gaze remained locked with mine. "I'm already married."

The word passed around the crowd as if they didn't believe her as she covered her naked ring finger.

I wasn't about to let her be crucified by public opinion and stepped forward. "Me. She's married to me."

No one knew me as Connor King, so what did the lie matter? Lizzy looked equally taken aback by my statement, and not exactly thrilled.

I slid my arm around her waist. "It was spur of the moment, but when you know, you know."

All of those who'd looked ready to burn her at the stake suddenly melted with oohs and ahhs.

"I see," Hans said. "Your husband bought all of those paintings?"

He'd seen through the lie, but I one-upped him. "A surprise wedding gift."

More sighs and murmurs from those now thinking how incredibly romantic our fictitious marriage was. The man had no fight in him and didn't deserve her for that very reason.

Hans said, "You're a lucky man," and walked away.

The camera crew seemed confused about whether to follow him or stay with Lizzy. She made the decision easy by taking my hand and dragging us away from the crowd. Anderson, who I now understood to be her assistant of sorts, had wide fearful eyes for me.

He didn't have a clue. The maddening woman wasn't a threat to me. She'd see reason. I allowed her to march toward the front of the gallery with me in tow. She hung a right down a short hall and stepped inside an office. I followed.

The room was small, and I made my way to the front of the desk before turning to face her. She stiff-armed the door like a running back would do to a lineman on the football field. Fury lined her beautiful face—oddly, turning me the fuck on.

"What was that?" she asked. I didn't answer because she wasn't ready for one. "You don't own me."

Somehow, I had been expecting that. "I don't."

She pointed at the door—or rather through it,

metaphorically speaking all the way to the spot we'd been a minute or two ago. "I was handling it."

"Yeah. No one believed you."

"I was about to say I was married to my work, and you"—she jabbed a finger in my direction—"made them believe I was married to you." She threw up her hands. "What do you think will happen when they find out that's a lie?"

I shrugged.

"Let me clue you in. They will make him out as the victim and me the villain."

In my defense, I said, "I was doing you a favor."

She swallowed, and I waited, feeling as if my next breath hinged on what she said. "You didn't owe me that kind of favor."

"Why?" I challenged.

"Because we're nothing, but..." As she struggled for her next word, I moved in her direction. "Fuck buddies."

I caged her against the door with nothing but my body. My hands were fisted at my sides as anger bubbled inside me. "Are you sure about that?"

"What would you call it?" she whispered.

I hadn't defined it yet, though I'd felt whatever it was when I saw her with him. It was the same feeling I'd gotten when she showed up with Anderson in her apartment. It was primal. "I call it

not wanting your showing to get bad press with headlines about the woman who thought she was too good for a proposal from her love-struck ex.”

She dismissed my words with a wave. “What about before that? That weird show of masculinity over paintings I know you didn’t buy?”

“I call it not wanting your ex to buy a painting of a woman in bed who looks a lot like you.”

Her eyes grew large and round, confirming she hadn’t figured that out.

I shook my head. “Every man in that room who looked at it looked immediately at you.”

“Her face isn’t shown. You’re overreacting,” she said.

Ignoring her last point, I asked my own question. “Yeah, and what surgery is he doing for you?”

Her eyes narrowed and held mine. “Haven’t you heard of HIPPA? It’s none of your business.”

I smirked—she’d walked right into what I would say and do next. “Hip,” I said as my hand landed on her thigh and pushed the material up to reach that location. “Pussy.” I let my finger slide to her center and over her clit as she sucked in air. “Ass.” I cupped hers with my other hand. “Yes, I’m very familiar with Hip.P.A.” I grinned, proud of my new acronym.

“I don’t know what you’re playing at,” she said with a hitch in her voice.

Lust and temptation warred with her anger. She had no idea that I had a Master's in seduction.

“Let's get this straight, I don't play fair and I damn sure don't share.”

With a tug, the scrap of fabric between her legs was left in shreds. I pocketed the remnants as I gave her a second to push me away. When she didn't, I used my free hand to undo my jeans. My cock, up to the challenge, was already swollen for her. I put my hand back on her ass and hiked her up. Her back slid up the wall as she grabbed my shirt in both hands.

If I'd bet on her shoving me away, I would have lost and big. She drew me closer, nails raking on my skin. Her pouty mouth arched up, and I slid her down my shaft, going deep before I took her mouth as hungrily as her pussy had swallowed my cock.

Our kiss was frantic, tinged with rage. We were both still a little angry at each other and it fueled our connection. As light as she was, I couldn't penetrate as far as I wanted. With Lizzy in my arms, I moved to her desk, my cock still buried inside her. I shoved aside papers, making room for her to lie in the middle.

She glanced over her head as I removed my shirt. It kept getting caught between us and I wouldn't let that happen. The blinds were partially open, though not wide. Passersby would have to cup their hands against the glass to see past the

opening in the slats.

“We should close that,” she said as the words melted in the air from the heat we were creating.

“Give them a show,” I said.

We fucked as if we wanted to kill each other. As I neared climax, I drew my gift from around her neck and over her head, pleased as punch she’d worn it. I pushed the button, bringing the little vibrator to life, and hit it again to rev up the vibrations. I slid it between us and on her clit as I pounded away, and it worked like magic. It wasn’t long before we came together in an explosion of passion.

I lay on her as we panted, trying to catch our breath. I felt the scratches on my back and knew they’d leave marks, if only temporarily.

“Get up,” she said, the coldness back in her tone.

I pulled out and smeared some of her come on my fingertip. As she stood, I put the vibe necklace back on her. I let our combined come leave an invisible trail between her breasts as I drew a line parallel to the necklace.

“Still angry?” I teased.

Unfortunately for me, she didn’t smile. “No. Not even a little. I just came to a decision.” Her brow lifted as if she wondered if I’d caught her double entendre.

“What’s that?” I asked, no longer smiling.

“I don’t need a fuck buddy. I need a man.” She let the words hang in the air. “See yourself out.”

I shouldn’t have cared. I should have fucking left and never looked back. But a part of me, even grinning inside, knew that a reminder that we had just fucked lay between her breasts and between her legs.

She had to know by that alone, we weren’t done yet.

TWENTY-TWO

LIZZY

WHEN I LEFT THE ROOM, I WAS READY TO LAY TO waste to anyone who got in my way. However, after just a few steps, I realized I needed to go the opposite way to my private restroom for a little cleanup.

“Damn him,” I muttered.

As I was about to pivot, my parents emerged into the hallway.

“Lizzy,” Dad said with open arms.

I couldn’t deny him the hug and walked the few steps to embrace him with my thighs clenched, praying that my eagle-eyed mother wouldn’t notice anything that might make it past my thighs.

“You’ve done great,” Dad whispered.

“Thanks,” I said.

“It’s lovely, dear,” Mom said. “And everyone’s talking about a proposal. Your father didn’t let me find out what happened though. Do you know?”

“No gossiping tonight. This is about our daughter.”

Mom had stepped over to air-kiss me, and I held my pose well enough that no sexual aftermath could escape as I struggled with how to explain my sudden fake marriage. Before I could, Dad’s gaze shifted over my shoulder and I closed my eyes. I opened them just in time to get a glimpse of Striker’s smirk as he passed us.

“Do I know him?” Dad asked.

“No,” I said emphatically.

“He looks familiar.”

I shook my head. “He just has one of those faces,” I said, hating to acknowledge the man’s perfection in any way at that moment.

“What’s this?” Mom asked, reaching forward.

I leaned back as if I was doing an impression of Neo from the *Matrix* movies my brother loved and had forced me to watch.

Her brow crinkled in the middle. “There’s something on your necklace, dear.”

Oh, there was something and I didn’t want my mother to touch it.

“Are you okay?” she asked as I struggled to come up with an appropriate response.

“If you guys excuse me, I really need to use the ladies’ room.”

Mom grinned. “I can tell.” She let her eyes fall to my legs. “I remember when you were three.”

I couldn’t wait. Gravity was winning and my thigh gap wasn’t helping. I dashed into the bathroom, closing and locking the door to catch my breath. Angry, but not at Striker, I inwardly chided myself for giving in. Lust had won the first round, so I’d let my inner bitch have at him after.

Though I hadn’t conveyed it fully to him, I did want a man. A man to be mine in all ways. For months, I’d been longing for something. I thought I’d just missed my best friend, but the truth was, I wanted what she had. I wanted someone to call my own. It was partly the reason I’d stayed with Hans so long.

I’d also come to the conclusion that it wasn’t just the sex that hadn’t been working in that relationship. Hans was a good man—too good for me. I needed a man a little rough around the edges. I needed a man who could protect me. Maybe that was a result of past trauma. My brother had been my protector for years, but he was gone too.

I wanted adventure, and damn if Striker wasn’t a man I could see taking me on those. His show of possessiveness had been kind of sexy, but I would never allow a man to rule over me. There was a thin line, and he’d crossed it tonight.

Worse, I hated that I'd end up in fake marriage headline, because on some level, I desired what my parents had. An unconditional love that lasted a lifetime. Now I'd be the girl who cried wolf—no, cried married when I wasn't. I'd be the laughingstock of the press, and who would ever want to marry the woman who had not only broken the heart of American's Sexiest Single but with a lie?

Anderson knocked on the door. "Lizzy. I really need you out here."

My business! I got to work cleaning up. I also wiped down the vibe, remembering his finger leaving a blazing trail between my breasts.

When he knocked again, I said, "I'll be there in a minute."

I took another moment to breathe before I gathered myself, found my hostess smile, and left the restroom.

BY THE TIME I MADE IT HOME LATE THAT NIGHT, I kicked off my heels and fell into bed.

I slept in Sunday and tried not to think about the man who'd occupied my dreams. Was I in as much denial as my bestie was? After movies, ice cream, takeout, and a little retail therapy, I was

anxious to get out of the apartment and go to work on Monday.

As soon as Anderson walked into my office, I saw his eagerness to ask me all the details about my farce of a marriage. Grumpy about that and how good and rested he looked—when I felt like a bloated cow with the amount of carbs I’d consumed yesterday—I grimaced. It was probably a bad idea that I’d come in. I’d had to come in through the back of the gallery to avoid the few cameras at the front door.

I put the sunglasses I’d taken off on my desk. “How did we do?”

Anderson tapped his phone. “Assuming your husband pays, we made a profit that should make up for the last few months.”

I wasn’t a numbers guru like Bailey, but I’d priced Connor King’s anonymous artist’s work pretty aggressively. The contract required me to pay Connor, as the artist’s agent, within a week of the show.

“Lizzy?”

I glanced up. “What?”

“Will your husband pay or not? And you’re lucky I’m not giving you shit about not telling me. I’m giving you a break because of those bags under your eyes.”

“Bags?” I sputtered.

Anderson gave me a look of disbelief. “Honey,

concealer couldn't hide those shadows."

"He's not my husband and I don't know."

"So it was a lie?"

I nodded. "I'd planned to make an excuse about being married to work and not being able to give Hans what he would need in a wife."

"And Mr. Gorgeous said you were married instead." I nodded and Anderson tsked. "That can't be a hardship. When were you going to tell me you were screwing that man?"

"Why do I have to be screwing him?"

"Because a man like that doesn't claim someone he hasn't tasted."

I groaned and put my head on the desk. "The press is going to destroy me over this."

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Marry him." He shrugged when I glared at him. It was a ridiculous idea. "By the way, if he doesn't pay, we're close to losing money this month—unless we contact Hans and offer him the paintings."

I thought about Striker's comment about the woman in the painting being me. Though I'd been pissed at Striker's possessiveness, he had apparently cured Hans of any thoughts of reconciliation between us. "That won't work. I tried calling Hans to apologize, and he hasn't returned any of my calls."

Anderson frowned. “At least we’ve gotten payment for the rest. I’ll prepare the shipping manifest. I’ll be in the back if you need me.”

“You know, if I don’t say it enough, you’re the absolute best.”

“Not enough.” He grinned and winked before leaving to complete his task.

I sighed and sat at my desk. I had a lot of thank yous to send. I also needed to give Haven the good news that her art had sold out.

Just before noon, I sent out a final email before lunch.

To: Connor King

From: Elizabeth Monroe

Subject: More Art

I wanted you to know that things went really well at the show this weekend. Assuming everyone pays, I’ll send you a check for your artist’s share by the end of the week. I also wanted to inquire if the artist would like to do a solo show. I think it could be a great success. Please let me know.

I flipped my laptop closed and noticed I wasn’t alone.

TWENTY-THREE

CONNOR

THERE WAS A PLACE I FOUND INSIDE MYSELF WHEN I'd come to see Lizzy. Humility. My world was dominance, but not hers. I had no claim on her and shouldn't have acted like a caveman at the showing. I didn't often apologize, but I wasn't ready for her to walk out of my life. And if that meant bending at the knee, I would.

I pushed past two cameramen and inside the door. It chimed, but no one came out. I stepped to the left and down the hall where the offices were. Her door was open, and her eyes were fastened on her computer screen.

"Hey," I said, startling her before her eyes narrowed.

“How did you get in here?”

“The door was unlocked. It shouldn’t be. Not with those cameras out there.”

“Thanks for that,” she said dryly. “But they won’t come in. Anderson already told them he’d call the police for trespassing if they did. Did I mention thanks for that?”

“I’m sorry. I honestly thought I was helping.”

“Helping end my career as I’m proved a liar for a lie I didn’t tell? Yeah, thanks. Again.”

My mouth shut because I had no response. Then an idea struck me. “What if there’s a way to fix this?”

She shook her head as if in disbelief because she saw no way out of this situation.

“Marry me,” I said.

A slow, low laugh bubbled out of her, but it wasn’t filled with humor. “Really? Not you too.”

“Think about it. If we get married, it won’t be a lie.” When I had her attention, I continued. “Marry me, and after a couple of weeks, we’ll get it annulled.”

Her anger died away as a thoughtful expression took over her face. I was getting somewhere.

“How do we accomplish that?” she asked, but I could tell she was placating me.

“I’ll call in a favor.”

“Mmmhmm. A favor?” She gave me side eyes.

“The judge will keep it private. It will be public

enough so anyone who looks will find it, if they look. Maybe they won't." It wasn't like her front door had been swamped with reporters. There had only been two sets.

"A favor," she repeated suspiciously. "From a judge."

"Yes, and this could work. They can't call you a liar if you are really married."

"I can't believe I'm even considering this," she said. "I need a drink."

"Let's go get one." I drew her out in the hallway. "Is there another way out of here?"

"Yes, the back." She led me that way.

As we passed her assistant, I said, "Your boss is leaving for the day."

He grinned from ear to ear, and my girl let me lead her outside. I'd parked my bike in a garage not far from the back entrance. When we got on my bike, her skirt hiked high. I gave her my helmet because I hadn't expected to drive with her and only had the one.

"Is this safe?" she asked.

"Just hold on, princess. I got you."

I didn't drive any differently, and when I arrived at the Soho penthouse, I pulled into the garage without thinking. I parked in my usual spot.

"You know this is reserved, right?"

God, I hated to lie to her, so I shrugged.

I made my second mistake when we got into the

apartment. I went directly to my stash of hard liquor.

When I pulled out a bottle of Glendalough 25-Year-Old Single Malt Irish Whiskey I'd been saving, her expression changed into a frown. "How'd you know that was there?"

It was damn good I was quick on my feet. "The other day when we made breakfast, I was rummaging around and spotted it."

She relaxed. I was slowly burying myself in untruths I would have to own up to sooner or later.

I poured us each a generous glass. Had I honestly offered to marry the woman? She downed the drink in one gulp. I did the same as we stared at each other.

"Are we really going to do this?" she asked.

"Up to you, princess."

"What do you have to do?" She poured us each another two fingers.

I swirled the amber liquid as I tried to figure out what was going on in her head. "I just need to make a call."

She tossed back the second glass. "Let's do it."

"Are you sure?"

"Make the call," she said. "And this doesn't mean I'm not still mad at you."

I wanted not to be disappointed by that, especially when I had the urge to kiss the hell out of her. I nodded instead.

As I pulled out my phone, she disappeared in the bedroom. It didn't take me long to make the arrangements because I had a favor owed to me.

I made other arrangements as well. I had a car come pick us up. We'd both had drinks. Since she was sober when we left Soho, I thought the woman could hold her liquor. That assumption died as time passed in traffic.

We'd made it back to Manhattan before Lizzy yelled, "Stop." She waved at something outside of the window. "There!"

The driver looked at me in the mirror and I signaled for him to pull over. When he did, Lizzy jumped out.

"Wait here," I said to him, following her.

She entered a store, and I sighed. As we waited for someone to appear, she declared, "What this fake wedding needs is a wedding dress."

"We don't have time for this," I muttered.

"I'm not getting married not properly dressed."

This wasn't the Lizzy I'd grown attached to. The stubbornness, yes. But the way too bright eyes and over excitement as she danced around the room was a side of Lizzy I hadn't seen. Drunk Lizzy.

When the salesperson showed up, my fake fiancée jubilantly described what she needed and why. She was whisked off to the back, and I dropped into a chair up front. I called the driver

and advised him to circle the block a few times or find a legal place to park until we were ready.

Twenty minutes passed—I'd been eyeing my watch—before they came from the back. My breath caught. Lizzy was a beautiful woman—that I'd never denied—but the dress she wore took it to another level. Lace clung to her curves, hiding everything from her neck to her hands, but managed to be sexy as hell. It ended at mid-thigh with a short flare, leaving her long legs bare. I grew hard at the sight.

“You like?” she asked.

I nodded because damn if I wasn't tongue-tied.

“I'll buy it,” she said to the woman, handing her a card.

“Go get the rest of your things,” I suggested, wanting to distract her.

When she left, I swapped cards with the woman. She grinned and rang up the purchase using mine. When she handed Lizzy her card, my girl wasn't the wiser. The woman took the dress Lizzy had worn to work and put it in a garment bag, sending us off with Lizzy wearing her fake wedding dress and a big smile for the small fortune I'd spent.

I had my phone in my hand when she tugged me forward toward Roberto Cavalli. “Your turn.”

I made a beeline for a different store. “We should go here.”

Her eyes found the signage above the door.

“Harry Winston.”

“We need rings,” I said, grinning because her smile was infectious.

She chortled. “They don’t have sales here, you know.”

“You never know.”

When we walked in, her glittering eyes focused on the jewelry cases in the middle of the room, and she headed in that direction. A salesman walked over.

I said, “Go with everything I say.”

He eyed my jeans and scuffed leather jacket. I pulled out my wallet and handed him my black card and his tune changed. He followed me to where Lizzy practically had her nose against the glass display.

“What are you looking for?” the man asked in an arrogant tone.

“That’s pretty,” Lizzy said, almost slurring. The bridal shop attendant had given Lizzy champagne I couldn’t pry from her hands. “But we can’t afford that. Something simple please.” When the guy waited for more information, she added, “Bands. Simple wedding bands.”

He nodded and went to work, waving us over to a desk with two chairs in front of it. We sat, and he took out a tray. Then he laid out a few sets of bands spaced out precisely as if invisible lines were there as a guide.

Lizzy sighed dreamily. “I like these.”

She pointed at what the sales guy called, “An infinity band. Excellent choice.”

Diamonds wrapped the band in an endless loop. Lizzy sighed while touching it, then she looked at a different set. “It’s too much. We’ll go for these.” The set was simple with no gems. She focused on me. “Are you sure you can afford this?”

“Yes.”

She waved me off. “I forgot. I’ll pay for this.”

“No,” I said.

“Yes. It’s tradition for the bride to pay—”

“For the groom’s ring,” I finished with a frown, and she nodded. “Fine. You can pay for mine and I yours. But we also need an engagement ring.”

“No, we don’t,” she pressed.

“It’s tradition,” I said, tossing tradition back at her.

She gave the sales guy a glare. “Keep it simple and small.”

The guy eyed a woman waiting off to the side. They traded knowing looks before she disappeared in back. She returned with a tray and removed the other after our salesman had removed the bands we’d chosen.

“This is the Classic Winston.” He went on to explain, “This ring embodies Harry Winston’s timeless elegance and signature style. It’s an exceptional engagement ring featuring a brilliant

round center diamond flanked by two tapered baguette stones on a platinum band.”

“Sounds expensive,” she said as he slid it on her finger. “It fits.”

His smile was filled with pride. The man had nailed her ring size without even measuring it.

“We’ll take it,” I said.

“No way,” she said with her eyes glued to the sparkler on her finger. “It probably costs the same as some cars.”

“No. You’ve made our budget very clear. I’m sure this ring is on sale.” The guy winced but didn’t deny my statement after a stern look from me. “You have my card. Ring it up.”

I should have been sweating. I’d just bought rings for a fake wedding. When he returned with a folded invoice in an envelope, I saw Lizzy had been right. A small domestic car wouldn’t cost much more.

He handed me a nondescript black bag with HW embossed on one side. “The bands are in here. The box for the engagement ring is here too. Thank you, Mr.—”

I cut him off before he could say my name. “Thank you. Come, princess. We’re already late.”

“Don’t think you’re going to get out of getting a suit.”

I groaned as she dragged me into Roberto Cavalli. I gave a slice in front of my neck to the

sales guy who'd been the one to deliver my suits the past week. He understood and choked off calling me by name.

"He needs a suit. Something formal, but not a tux. And make it blue, not black. I don't want him looking like an undertaker for our wedding." Then she was off, flitting about and humming to herself.

I gave the guy an excuse about her wedding comment as we went to the fitting rooms. Lucky for me, the average Cavalli suit fit me off the rack.

That's how I ended up waiting in a suit in the judge's office for him to come in, because we were late. Lizzy helped herself to some whiskey she found in a cabinet.

"You shouldn't," I warned.

"I should, and you should too. We're about to get married." Then she was quiet and thoughtful. "Do you think it's legal for him to have this stuff here?" She pointed at a mini bar in the cabinet, including crystal glasses and an ice machine.

I was in the middle of trying to wrangle the glass from her when the judge walked in.

"I have to say, I hadn't filled one these out in over twenty years. But here you go." He placed the marriage license on his desk.

I walked over and inspected it. Lizzy wasn't far behind.

She giggled. "James."

I waited for her to figure out the rest.

“O’Con-co-b-hair” She butchered it.

“O’Conchobhair is pronounced o-con-chob-hair,” I said slowly.

Her laugh wasn’t just filled with amusement as she continued to butcher my name.

The judge eyed me. “Maybe you should wait until she sleeps it off.” He looked at his open cabinet and the bottle of whiskey sitting on top.

“Sorry about that.” To her, I said, “Come on, princess. We have to try again to get married tomorrow.”

“Wait? What? Why?”

By the time I got her into our waiting SUV, she was far gone.

“Sorry, Uber driver, I’m horny,” she said as she worked at my pants.

I raised the privacy glass before she got my dick free. It sprang up, and before I could stop her—though I probably wouldn’t have—she was sliding down my cock.

“I love your dick.” Though I stilled her hips, she managed to wiggle around, stirring my primal desires higher. “Now say it back.”

I raised a brow in question.

“No, silly, say you love my pussy.”

“I love your pussy.”

She threw her head back on a squeal of delight and rode me in earnest.

If I’d only known what tomorrow would bring, I

might have done things a lot differently.

TWENTY-FOUR

LIZZY

LIGHT POURED THROUGH THE WINDOW AND I blinked away the brightness, grabbing my throbbing head. I glanced around, disoriented. Images of yesterday played in my head as a sickly feeling boiled in my gut. I barely made it to the bathroom before I spewed out the contents of my stomach.

I brushed my teeth before I entered my room and realized Striker was nowhere to be found. Had yesterday really happened? Praying to a higher being, I promised eternal sobriety as I went to get a glass of water.

Slouched in a chair, Striker sat with his eyes closed. His parted shirt revealed the slow rise and fall of his chest. My eyes dropped to his boxer

briefs.

That was when I noticed my lack of dress. I wore a garter belt of all things. The thigh highs hooked to them had rips. I didn't remember putting them on. I let my mouth curve upward as I picked up the trail of clothes that started at the door and led to the bedroom.

When I got his pants, something tumbled out. I bent and saw it was his wallet. It had opened with his license on full display. I picked it up, wanting to see the picture better. He looked like a model. I was about to tuck it away when I saw his name. Everything else spilled out of my hand as I read it again.

CONNOR

WATER WOKE ME WITH A SPLASH, AND I JOLTED upright. My hands were up prepared to fight until I realized where I was. I wiped away water as it dripped down my face. When I could focus, my ID was shoved in my face before it flicked from Lizzy's fingers to bounce off my face and land on my chest.

“Who the fuck are you, Connor with a K?”

“James Konnor O’Conchobhair King,” I said. “Mom named me Konnor with a K to get back at my dad. The joke’s on her not researching more because that spelling is mostly used by the Scots. And she hates Dad’s first wife.”

Instead of laughter, I saw the end in her eyes. “Don’t you mean Liar, Connor with a K?”

“Lizzy, let me explain.”

She leaned back and crossed her arms. “It’s a little too late to explain, don’t you think?”

As everything crumbled around me, I felt the walls of my defenses rise.

LIZZY

WHILE I FELT RIGHTEOUS IN MY ANGER, I WATCHED his gaze harden.

“You set the rules. I had every intention of telling you the truth. But you stopped me with a finger to my lips. Remember?” he declared, then wiped water from his face.

I had to square with the truth of his statement. “What about the other times you could have told me?”

“You didn’t want to know,” he yelled, matching

my volume.

I didn't regard his truth as a get-out-of-jail-free card. Especially when I felt foolish for believing everything he'd ever said or done. "I guess you just laughed your ass off as you flirted with me in the emails. It makes sense now why you didn't call me. I would have recognized your lying ass, *Striker*."

CONNOR

SHE CURSED ME WITH A NAME I'D GOTTEN FROM someone long ago but stuck.

I stood, feeling my prone position was aiding in me losing ground. "Does it really matter what my name is? You only wanted a good fuck."

The verbal slap hit her square in the face as she stumbled back a few steps. I ran a hand over my face, wishing I could take it back. I was flailing because I didn't know what to do or say to make this better. An ache in my chest built as I felt her slip further away.

"What I want is for you to leave." I reached for her, but she jerked away. "Just go."

Instead of reminding her it was my apartment, I picked up my clothes and left. For the first time in

my life, I understood how the women from my past felt as they cried and begged for us to work things out.

Karma was a bitch.

LIZZY

AS SOON AS THE DOOR SHUT BEHIND HIM, I FELL TO my knees and sobbed. I clutched my chest as if I could stop the bleeding even though I wasn't physically hurt, despite how it felt. I'd allowed another rich prick to use me.

I'd been such a fool, hadn't I? I'd let my guard down and now I felt as if I was drowning. Somehow, through the racking sobs, I sent Anderson a text explaining I wouldn't be in today.

I hadn't felt this way since Beau. He'd ripped my heart to shreds, and I now felt that same way. I didn't understand how I'd become so attached to a man I obviously didn't know. Was Karma teaching me a lesson? Was this how Hans felt?

That was when a sparkle on my finger caught my attention. I ripped the rings from my finger and threw them across the room to clatter away.

I looked after them, wondering what I'd done.

My sobs only got harder as I felt betrayed by a man I thought I could trust. What was I supposed to do now?

TWENTY-FIVE

CONNOR

THE BOTTLE OF JOHNNIE WALKER STARED accusingly back at me. I'd never been a heavy drinker, but over the last few months, I'd tried to find my soul at the end of several bottles. So far, I'd failed.

Just like I'd tried and failed to move on without Lizzy.

I hadn't sent flowers. I knew her well enough to know that they would end up trash like their sender.

I hadn't sent her the paintings she'd requested. My reply to her email requesting more work had gone unanswered.

I hadn't sent texts begging for forgiveness. I had my pride and I wouldn't be like those other

guys who'd failed at winning her.

What I had done was left her alone as she'd requested. Respecting others' wishes was a big thing for me. If she wanted to let go of the possibility of us, who was I to stop her?

I might have gone to the apartment in the last few days with the excuse of getting some things, hoping to get a glimpse of her. She wasn't there. All her things were gone.

Kalen wouldn't tell me where she was, asking me to leave it be.

That didn't mean things were good, or even as good as they were before her. When you meet someone you click with, you realize when they leave how pathetic your life was before you met them. Who did I have outside of Eliza? My brother had Griffin. My mother had no use for me, besides being a buffer between her and Dad. He only needed me to fill in as he tried to find the work-life balance his doctors said he needed if he wanted to see another year of life.

Lizzy had broken me—something I hadn't thought possible after I'd rebuilt myself from an unthinkable childhood. Sex wasn't the same after her. Not that I'd been interested in any since her, including a one-nighter or a new sub.

“Boss.”

I looked up to see Eliza in my office doorway. If anyone had profited from Lizzy's abrupt exit

from my life, it was her. I'd planned to fire her. But after the Lizzy storm blew my world apart, I'd needed someone to fill in as I tried to find the piece of myself I'd lost.

"Yes," I snapped, but Eliza wasn't the target of my anger. The ever-present ghost haunting my memories was. Lizzy.

Sadness filled Eliza's eyes. My guess was even though she remained my number two, she'd felt the distance between us. "We have a situation which bears watching. I know how you like to be made aware of these situations."

I nodded then swallowed the rest of my drink before getting to my feet. It wasn't often we had situations that needed my personal attention because the rules were clear. Anyone who broke them was out. My team could handle it. But if I was around, I liked to be notified. Not all situations were problems. But there were times when the lines of consent could be called into question.

When I'd remade the place after I'd bought it from the previous owner, my goal had been to make sure it was a safe place for every member to be themselves while respecting everyone else. Once the word was out a premier club had replaced the former one, I'd had no problem filling my membership quota.

On a side stage, A man stood above a sub with a flogger in the air, ready to strike. Since I made it

my business to know all the members by face, I recognized them both. Tears smeared the makeup on the sub's face as she begged him to stop.

Eyes glazed with the gleam of a true sadist, he barked, "You haven't said the safe word."

Security could have handled it. If she'd said the safe word and he hadn't stopped, they would have interceded. But when the lines were blurred like this, we paid attention in case we needed to jump in. If I was in, I was usually called to diffuse the situation.

The woman continued to cry but said nothing. I watched her carefully. She hadn't passed out. She was conscious and able to speak. Though I didn't get off on causing others pain like this, I did nothing because no rule had been broken.

When he was done, he spoke to his sub. She nodded before he walked off the stage unapologetic for his actions. I had a team who would go in and take care of our subs if the dominants didn't. Tonight, I took that honor and kneeled next to the woman.

"Sweetheart," I said instead of her name, for privacy's sake. I wouldn't assume she gave out her real identity here. "Are you okay?"

She choked out, "Yes."

But I knew it wasn't that simple. I made quick work of her bindings and took her gently in my arms as if she was a baby. I stalked past the

gawkers and back to my office. I settled us on the sofa and let her cry as she curled into me. Before long, her tears turned into a need I didn't feel.

When her hand slid down my chest, I caught it before she embarrassed us both. It wasn't that I was unsympathetic of her need. I would have loved nothing more than to move on with a willing partner, but my cock was having none of it.

What she really wanted was to be close to someone, or maybe what we both needed was just to be held. Or I was projecting my own need on her as I clung tighter. I kissed her head as she cried harder. Her tears represented something I'd felt all my life. A deep-seated loneliness I only acknowledged now. Until Lizzy's abandonment, I'd been able to ignore it. Not anymore.

A few weeks later, I wasn't able to avoid the one woman who'd been able to put a crack in the armor I'd forged long ago.

TWENTY-SIX

LIZZY

I'D STOPPED COUNTING THE DAYS, WEEKS, AND months it had been since I last saw Connor. It hadn't been easy. A dark part of me had hoped he'd call me on our bet. *One more time* was all the sadistic part of me said I needed, then I could stop thinking about him.

"Where are you?"

I looked into Bailey's kind eyes. Here I was worried about myself when I should be focusing on her and all she'd been through. "I'm here. Sorry. Don't worry about me. Today's your day, not mine."

"I know. I can't believe it."

"I can," I said with a grin. "It was written in the

stars, no matter you were both fighting it.”

She twirled in her wedding dress. “You were right.”

“You were always in love with that man.”

“Maybe. I guess.” She sighed. “Yes. I loved him and now I’m getting married. Can you believe it?”

Kalen hadn’t given up, even when the odds were against him. He’d won her mind, body, and spirt. After a long-fought battle of wills, at least one of us was finding her happily ever after.

Today was about their happiness and how they got here. So I got to my feet and we squealed in delight.

What I hadn’t shared with my bestie was my fake marriage plot. Not because I was keeping it from her, but because she’d been going through her own worries. She hadn’t needed to hear mine. Besides, the press had cooled not two days later. A senator had been arrested on charges related to sexual abuse of his mistress and shifted the media’s focus off of me. Plus, Hans had gotten engaged a week later to his former girlfriend. So much for his undying love. I was off the hook.

“I hope this isn’t going to be weird?” she asked. “I mean, who knew Connor was Striker? I can’t believe he didn’t tell you.”

“It was partially my fault. The whole ‘let’s keep it casual and not tell each other our names’ thing.”

“Yeah, that was stupid. But still...” That was

my bestie for you. She had my back even when I was partially to blame.

There was a knock at the door. It was time.

I hugged my best friend fiercely. “You deserve this more than anyone I know.”

“Don’t cry,” she said. “Then we’ll both ruin our makeup because I’ll cry too.”

When I took my spot in the church hall, I had to lock arms with the man I’d avoided for the last several months. It was worse because he looked fantastic in the black tux I’d drunkenly told him would make him look like an undertaker.

We didn’t look at each other. He didn’t say a word, and neither did I. We’d done the same the night before at the rehearsal.

But my damn heart fluttered as we walked down the aisle, all eyes on us. Who would have the last laugh if they knew our past? When he let go and we separated, I felt cold all over. He’d been the one to lie, even if by omission. How could I possibly still want him?

The wedding itself was a blur. As the vows were said, I did everything I could to not throw up. My heart ached something awful, and I felt a little faint. As soon as it was over, all the pictures taken, and we were at the reception, I did my best to self-medicate with as much alcohol as I could.

It didn’t help that every unattached woman there was fawning over Kalen’s baby brother. I was

doing my level best to pretend I didn't care. Last I saw, Striker or rather Connor had been cornered by a middle-aged woman.

Matt walked over to me. "What's got you pissed off?"

I downed the scotch I'd gotten. "Nothing."

He obviously didn't believe me—probably the twin thing. I could never lie to him. "Is it that asshole who walked you down the aisle?"

I glared at him. "You make it sound like we were getting married. He escorted me."

"Just let me know if I need to punch him."

I sighed, seriously considering it. "No. I don't want to ruin Bailey's wedding."

"Second wedding, you mean. The lucky bastard."

"You were too late."

"I know. Don't remind me," he said, eyeing the crowd. I saw him notice some girls from college who had begged for an invite. I'd talked Bailey into letting them come.

"Keep your dick out of my friends, Matty," I said.

"I can't make promises," Matt said and strolled off.

I turned to order another scotch and came face to face with *him*.

TWENTY-SEVEN

CONNER

“IS IT THAT ASSHOLE WHO WALKED YOU DOWN THE aisle?” I overheard her brother say.

“You make it sound like we were getting married. He escorted me.”

My brother had asked me to be in his wedding and I couldn't refuse. I'd thought I'd be paired with his bride's sister, but I was wrong. Fate had other plans. Lizzy and I were forced to endure one another's company for a few hours at the rehearsal dinner and today, the wedding.

Her contempt and the way she'd seemed repulsed by my touch had pissed me off. If I had any chance in hell at making it through the night, I needed way more than one drink.

Though I tried to ignore them, and she apparently hadn't noticed me, my ears perked up when she said to her twin, "Keep your dick out of my friends, Matty."

"I can't make promises," Matt said and strolled off.

When she turned, I'd made the mistake of not turning away. "Hiding from me? Or are you waiting for Griff?"

Griffin had done his best to piss me off by staying way too close to her.

"Why would I do either? You mean nothing to me," Lizzy said. "And Griff and I are just friends."

Griffin had made a show of touching her any time he caught me looking. "That's not how I saw it."

"Saw what?" she asked.

Instead of saying Griffin and you, I said, "You and me." I willed the words back, but it was too late.

"We fucked. So what?"

"I'm not used to women ghosting me." Way to go, I chided myself because why had I admitted that?

She shrugged, and my eyes dropped down the long expanse of her neck. "You had my number. You didn't use it."

"I don't chase women."

She rolled her eyes. "Yet here you are."

There I was, entertaining this conversation. Time I shook it up. “You look tense. I know exactly how to work that out of you.”

Her eyes looked like frozen pits when she said, “I don’t fuck liars.” The only problem with her statement was those pits of hers had dilated. She wasn’t as unaffected as she wanted to appear.

“I didn’t lie.”

“I asked you the question.”

I wasn’t sure which question she was talking about. She’d been the one who’d wanted to keep things simple. Her words, not mine. But I wasn’t going to debate it.

“Not the right one,” I countered.

“Okay, Connor King, or should I call you Striker? Not telling me you were Kalen’s brother is a breach of trust I’ll never forgive.”

She took a step around me, but I couldn’t let her go. I caught her arm and gave it one last shot. “Let me make it up to you, princess.”

Her eyes were filled with disgust as she peeled my hand off her. “Not going to happen.”

“I’ll have you again,” I said confidently.

“Not in this lifetime.”

I had an ace in my sleeve, as they said—a bet I’d won and never used. “We’ll see about that.”

Once all the events in the reception were over—from the speeches, first dance, and cake cutting—I’d finally had enough of Griffin’s hands on

Lizzy and I tapped him on his shoulder.

When they turned my way, I asked, “Can I cut in?”

In concert, they said, “No.”

“Lizzy, we need to talk.”

“She doesn’t want you, mate,” Griffin sneered.

I glared at him and Lizzy glared right back at me.

“How many times do I need to say no for you to let it go?”

A million popped in my head, but I didn’t say it.

“If I told you I was fucking Griffin now, would that be enough? Go find someone else to *fuck*.”

What I’d said to her that fated night came and bit me in the ass. If I’d needed a push to let her go, that was it. She hadn’t had to yell for the word to cut deeper than a knife. I’d wanted closure, I told myself as I stumbled away, only then realizing I might have had one drink too many.

A woman who’d been eye-fucking me all night moved under my arm before I fell on my ass. “Want company?”

Needing a release from the curse Lizzy had left in my life, I nodded. With each step, my heart blackened, turning to ash from her words.

We ended up in a private bathroom. I sat on the closed toilet, nearly slumping over. Thank God the place was upscale as the girl got to her knees.

Only the curse was still there. I tried to ignore

that nothing was happening. What guy wanted to realize their dick was broken? But when her hand curled around my cock, my eyes sprang open. I was about to call it off when the door opened.

Only when I saw *her* did I grow hard.

“Lizzy,” I said, the two syllables sounding like three coming from my drunken lips.

She looked ready to slam the door.

I said, “Wait,” confusing the woman at my feet.

TWENTY-EIGHT

LIZZY

SEEING THE SELF-ASSURED EXPRESSION WIPED AWAY and replaced by utter devastation on Striker's... Connor's... Konnor's face broke through my *I don't need anyone* walls.

"Where are you going?" Griffin's face came into focus.

"I have to go," I said, spinning on my heels.

"He doesn't deserve you," he said in my wake.

I picked up my pace as I saw a woman snag Connor's arm and lead him out of the room. I battled through the crowd on the dance floor, feeling my heart race. It wasn't as if I was in love with him. Though what did you call it when you still thought about a person every night even when

you were pissed off at them?

Once I made it past the crowd, I wondered where they'd disappeared to. I went to the line of doors under the veranda that led to the parking lot and checked each door. My inability to move on fueled my panic. Why was I following Striker? What could the future King possibly say that could make this okay again? Though I didn't know, I continued my frantic search.

Opening the door that should have been locked, I felt the air suck out of the room. Connor King was sprawled on a toilet with an arm slung over a ledge, the woman he'd left with kneeling between his leg. Worse, she had her hand wrapped around his growing erection.

Why was I mad? I wasn't rational enough to answer that question. Months of wanting him to grovel, wanting him to go fuck himself or someone else as long as it wasn't me had messed with my head.

Disgusted, I prepared to shut the door and walk away from him forever. Yet when he said my name followed by, "Wait," I did.

"Sorry, sweetheart," he said to the woman.

She got up and gave me dagger eyes before shoving past me. I glared back before turning it on him.

"You don't seem to need me," I said.

"I'm hard," he said in astonishment, stringing

the words together as if they were one.

“Good for you,” I said, poised to slam the door in his beautiful face.

“You don’t get it.”

I froze in place, waiting for something I couldn’t name.

“It’s all you. I couldn’t get it up for months unless I was sleeping and dreaming about you. You walk in now and boom.” His hands came down parallel to his dick in a karate-chop motion, his eyes big and round.

“You don’t need me,” I repeated, clinging with a vise grip to the door.

He ran a hand over his hair. “That’s the thing about need and want. They blur together.”

“There are times you can’t have either,” I said.

I thought about my business. I’d received an unexpected gift from my landlord. Only that gift wasn’t without flaws. I’d been given free rent for the next several months while the building’s façade was being worked on. My store front was covered in scaffolding that hindered foot traffic. I wouldn’t host shows there until the work was done. But the time allowed me to continue working, planning on my future by focusing on online and private sales. If I couldn’t make this work, I would have to have a conversation with Anderson about looking for another job. I would have to considering applying for a curator position at the Met.

Then I thought about not getting more art from Connor—I still wasn't sure if he was the artist or not, but I had my suspicions.

“Do you still have the engagement ring?” he asked, spotting my naked finger.

“For a fake wedding?”

His lips pursed. “It could have been real if you'd given me a chance. I mean, how many guys buy a ring worth more than some cars for a woman they don't give a shit about?”

It was a struggle to not outwardly show I'd swallowed my tongue. “Plenty.”

“I'm not one of them.”

I held his gaze. “Since you've proved yourself to be a liar, I can't really believe anything you say.”

“I never outright lied to you,” he said.

“No. You withheld the truth, which is just as bad.”

He sighed and leaned back in what appeared to be a lot like defeat. “I guess Griffin wins.”

My body straightened. “Wins what?”

“The girl. The bet.” He shrugged.

You could have shoved a bowling ball in my mouth for how wide open it was.

“You bet on me?” Had that been why he'd played pool with me after I'd beaten Griffin?

I didn't wait on an answer. I finally had the satisfaction of slamming the door in his face. I might have said something I'd regret.

I needed to get away from him. Get away from Griffin too, before I spoiled Bailey's wedding and throttled them both. My feet weren't in the mood for walking, so I ran toward the driveway and was surprised to find my brother headed in my direction across the parking lot. Where had he gone and why? He better not have fucked one of my college friends.

"Lizzy, we need to go," he said at the same time, I said, "I need to get out of here."

I bobbed my head in agreement. We could figure out the rest later. I would send my apology to Bails. Luckily everything was pretty much over. I wouldn't be missing anything but their exit.

As we got to the driveway, a car came speeding up and the tires squealed to a stop right in front of us.

A lot of things happened next. Matty squeezed my arm in an attempt to turn me around, but it was too late. Four men exited the vehicle with rifles aimed at us.

"Going somewhere?" a man asked.

My adrenaline was off the roof. It was unlikely I processed all the shouts around me enough to repeat to the cops if necessary.

"Just do it, Lily," Matty said.

He was still protecting me. Never had he called me Lily. The fear and calm on his face warned me not to give a snarky response.

When two men stepped forward and slid a black hood over my head, I let them. They dragged me into the SUV. I had a moment to pray that Striker hadn't followed me. I may have hated his guts at the moment, but I didn't wish him dead.

CONNOR

I STRUGGLED TO MY FEET. TRYING TO ZIP MY PANTS was a chore my drunken fingers weren't quite up to. By the time I got the door open, Lizzy was gone. I glanced one way then the next before spotting her near the line of cars, talking to her brother.

In my next breath, a black Tahoe, or something like it, came grinding to a halt in front of them. Men with guns poured out, aiming them at my Lizzy and her brother.

Though I yelled, I wasn't sure if anyone heard. No one looked my way as I half shambled, half ran toward her. But it was too late. The car was several yards away by the time I made it to the drive. I stood there for a second before I was surrounded.

"What happened?" Griffin asked, all business-like.

"You were yelling," Kalen said, his accent thick

with worry.

The panic that gripped me had sobered me up real fast. “They took her,” I said as I formed a plan and found my keys. “And Matt.”

I stepped away, but Kalen caught my sleeve. “Where are you going?”

“After her.”

Griffin stepped into my path, already tapping on his phone. “It likely had something to do with Matt’s undercover work. Let the professionals handle it. Besides, she’s not your concern.”

Whatever Matt was into, that wasn’t the only possibility of who could be behind it. It could be related to me. The senator’s son I’d kicked out of the club. Or Haddad, the drug lord.

With the thoughts spinning in my head, I saw red. Kalen stopped my fist from connecting with his best friend’s face.

“Not my concern? You aren’t the only one with resources.” I shrugged out of my brother’s hold. “*Besides*,” I spit out the word, throwing it back in Griffin’s face, “you may be fucking her, but she’s *my wife*.”

<<<<<<<to be continued>>>>>>>

Kingdom Fall set to release October 7th.

For those of you who've made it to the end, if you post a review on Amazon within two weeks of release, I will mail you a little thank you. Click [HERE](#).

For those new to the All the King's Sons series - Kalen and Bailey's story is available now. Read [Money Man](#).



THANK YOU

I'd like to thank you for taking the time out of your busy life to read my novel. Above all, I hope you loved it. If you did, I would love it if you could spare just a few more minutes to leave a review on your favorite e-tailer. If you do, could you be so kind and **not leave any spoilers** about the story? Thanks so much!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terri E. Laine, USA Today bestselling author, left a lucrative career as a CPA to pursue her love for writing. Outside of her roles as a wife and mother of three, she's always been a dreamer and as such became an avid reader at a young age.

Many years later, she got a crazy idea to write a novel and set out to try to publish it. With over a dozen titles published under various pen names, the rest is history. Her journey has been a blessing, and a dream realized. She looks forward to many more memories to come.

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