



Make Her Mine

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Description: The Indigo Lounge, a vibrant cornerstone of L.A.'s queer community, is lovingly run by the ever-charming Esme Bloom. But when the Ice Queen herself, CEO Nora Hartley, threatens to shut it down, the lounge faces its toughest challenge yet.

To make matters worse, Esme finds herself irresistibly drawn to the very woman determined to dismantle her life's work. Nora leaves her both breathless and furious, creating a storm of conflicting emotions. Will Esme manage to save the Indigo Lounge? Will her undeniable attraction to Nora be returned? Or will she end up breaking her own heart in the process?

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“Well, fuck me,” Nora Hartley spat, taking in the spreading green mess on her white marble counter with no small measure of fury. Chunks of shattered glass and more green liquid were scattered on the pale birchwood floor of her kitchen in her Pacific Palisades beach home, surrounding her thankfully still-slippered feet.

It was a massive, awful mess, and worse, it was entirely her fault for being in too much of a hurry while pouring her breakfast power greens smoothie into her insulated cup. The blender, sweaty from the frozen vegetables and ice she’d filled it with, had slipped from her hands and crashed onto the countertop. Now she was out a blender, had no breakfast, there was a truly horrific mess threatening to stain her floor and her countertop, and she was definitely, definitely going to miss her morning debrief at the office with her assistant, Laurie.

“Call Laurie’s Work Cell,” she snapped into her cell phone, tapping her foot with impatience while the call connected. As she waited, Nora ripped a handful of paper towels off of the roll and started to mop up what she could of the smoothie. It was fortunate that her cleaners were scheduled to come in today, but she couldn’t leave this entire disgusting puddle for them to deal with. She paid them well, she thought, but nobody would be paid well enough to have to clean this up.

“Hi, Boss,” Laurie’s cheerful morning voice chirped through the phone speakers. “Everything okay?”

“No. I’m going to miss our meeting.” Nora dumped the sodden paper towels into the garbage can and tore off more. “And I’ll be very late. I dropped my blender.”

“Ouch.” Laurie made a sympathetic noise. “No worries. You don’t have any morning meetings besides ours, and I can debrief you over the phone if you call me when you’re in the car and on your way. I’ll have breakfast waiting for you here, and everything is going to be fine.”

Nora sighed and dumped the second handful of wet paper towels into the trash. “Bless you. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Suffer,” Laurie replied cheerily. “Kidding! Slow down, take a deep breath, and you’ll be here when you get here.”

“Bye, Laurie.” Nora was smiling by the time she got off the phone with her assistant. Laurie was right, she would be suffering without the world’s best right-hand gal, and she was lucky she’d found her ten years ago. Laurie kept her organized and as chill as it was possible for a woman of Nora’s age and position to be.

It was an age Nora felt as she got down to mop as much green smoothie off of the floor as possible, her knees reminding her that she’d just turned 40. She grimaced. She could have as many weekly facials, blonde upkeep appointments, and personal trainer sessions as she liked, but nothing could permanently stave off the effects of hitting middle age. Still, she reflected as she stood and successfully tossed the final clump of towels into the garbage can, at least she could get down on the floor still, and back up again. She didn’t need assistance with that, not that there was anyone around to assist, and there hadn’t been for a while...

Nora shook her head to clear it and hustled off to her bedroom so she could slip into her favorite charcoal-gray Prada suit. She was going to be late for work, but she would be absolutely perfectly put together no matter what.

Thirty minutes later, she was sleek, polished, and in the back of the Lincoln Town Car that took her to her office every morning. She had a file folder in her hands with

all of the information she'd intended to go over with Laurie at their morning meeting, and she flipped it open now. "The Fairchild Building," she read aloud, clicking a pen in her free hand. "Downtown LA, six stories, corner lot. Office space on the upper five floors, retail on the ground." She flipped to the specs pages. "Only two of the office floors are currently rented, both to the same call center. Of the four retail spaces on the ground floor, two were vacated this year. The small accessories boutique is struggling, as is the café-slash-bar, but...hm, to a lesser degree." Nora tilted her head and clicked her pen. "Huh. It's actually profiting, but damn, those margins are razor-thin." She squinted. "Indigo Lounge. Now, that sounds familiar. Why?"

As she closed the file to mull over the café-bar, she felt something stretch and snap under her ivory silk blouse. Surprised, Nora reached up and felt around. "My bra strap? Seriously? The smoothie wasn't enough of a disaster?" She sighed. At least she kept some spare clothing items at the office, and they were pulling up in front of it now. Nora shuffled the folder into her Mulberry briefcase and got out of the car, walking briskly up to the high-rise that The Hartley Group called home and heading upstairs in the elevator that opened out directly into their executive office floor.

"Laurie, help," she called as she entered the spare, elegant space. "Wardrobe emergency. My bra broke."

Cheerful, redheaded Laurie bustled out from the tiny kitchen, a green smoothie in one hand and a big mug full of delicious-smelling coffee in the other. "On it, Boss. Go to your office, I'm right behind you." She set the breakfast goods down on her desk. "I'm waiting for DoorDash to bring some oat milk creamer for your coffee. Sorry, I didn't realize that we didn't have any."

"No creamer? The universe really is targeting me today." Nora sighed and walked into her office. "Thanks for ordering some, though."

“Of course, I’ve always got your back.” Laurie leaned in the doorway with a smile, arms crossed over her crisp, white cotton Oxford shirt and black suspenders, then glanced over her shoulder. “Oh, it’s here now. I’ll bring you a bra from the closet and your breakfast. Sit down. Settle. Breathe.”

Nora sat down behind her desk, tossing her phone aside as she pulled the Fairchild file out of her briefcase again. “Indigo Lounge,” she muttered. She knew she’d heard the name before...

Fifteen-year-old memories hit her in a flood. Leah, her blue eyes bright with happiness, her brown curls flying as she’d come home to Nora from a night out with friends. “It was amazing, they took me out to this Indigo Lounge bar, well, it’s a café too, the food is incredible, and the music, there’s live music, and Nora, the vibes there... the community... what. A. Night.” Leah had flopped down into Nora’s lap and beamed up at her. “I’ll take you one day. You don’t get out into the community enough.”

But they’d never gone to the Indigo Lounge together. Nora had chosen to focus on her burgeoning corporate real estate career, and that didn’t leave time for going out to clubs. Eventually, it hadn’t left any time for Leah, either, and they’d parted ways. Amicably enough, Nora thought, no hard feelings between them. Leah was married now, she’d heard. That made Nora happy, because it was something Leah had always wanted, but Nora had never warmed to the idea of tying the knot.

For the second time that day, Nora shook her head, trying to beat back the memories she’d unlocked from a deep-held Pandora’s box in her psyche. She began to shuffle around the papers on her desk. All of a sudden, she heard a thunk. Blinking, Nora looked around to see what had fallen off her desk. It took a moment for her to register that her phone had vanished. “Fuck,” she muttered, standing up to peer over and around her desk.

Her phone was in a glossy red protective case. The flooring in her office was, like her home, pale birchwood. So the phone should be instantly visible, and yet... nothing. It had vanished without a trace. Nora lifted her head. "Laurie!"

"Coming. Sorry. I've got your breakfast, your bra, and your coffee with oat milk creamer." Laurie trotted in and laid everything out on Nora's desk. "I didn't mean to take so long."

"You didn't, you never do," Nora said. "No, I've dropped my phone somewhere, can you call me on yours so I can find it?"

"Consider it done." Laurie pulled her phone out of the pocket of her sleekly tailored black trousers and speed-dialed. Nearly instantly, Nora's phone chirped, and she got down onto the floor for the second time that day. Groping under her desk, she located her wayward device, grabbed it and stood up—only to nearly topple over when the heel of one of her Ferragamo stilettos snapped.

Panicking, Nora windmilled her arms to try and regain her balance. Laurie darted forward and grabbed her to steady her, guiding her carefully down into her chair. "You okay, Boss?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I think." Nora put a hand over her heart and tried to get in some of those deep breaths Laurie was always telling her to take. It was a struggle. She closed her eyes and tried to relax into her seat.

In the next moment, she felt Laurie kneel down and get her broken shoes off of her. "I'll get these to a cobbler this afternoon. I know they're some of your favorites. Right now, I'll go get one of the spare pairs out of the closet. Do you think you'll feel up to wearing Manolos?"

"Sounds good. Thank you." She sighed and opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling.

“God, it really does feel like the universe is against me today.”

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“No,” Laurie said, coming back almost immediately, black Manolos in hand. “It’s just getting all the bad crap out of the way so that your meeting at the Fairchild goes off without a hitch. Did you read the file?”

“Some of it.” Nora took the new shoes and wedged her feet into them. She flipped the file open again. “The location is amazing; this building is smack in the middle of some of the most up-and-coming development projects in Downtown LA. The office and retail spaces are being all but wasted. If they’re in good shape, I’ve got any number of contacts I can reach out to in order to fill them once I overhaul the whole joint.”

Laurie sat on the edge of her desk, swinging one ankle-booted foot. “You’re going to have trouble with that café,” she said, a note of warning in her voice.

“So you’ve already scoped it out.” Nora grinned. No surprise there, Laurie liked being organized and prepared as much as she did. It was part of why they made such a good team. “Now I really do wish I’d made it here for our meeting. Give me the bullet points.”

Pulling her phone out again, Laurie opened the Notes app. “The owner of the Indigo Lounge is a woman named Esme. She opened the place twenty years ago, and it’s always been in the Fairchild Building. It’s evolved from a little hole-in-the-wall lesbian bar into a real community hub.” She scrolled with her thumb. “They host drag shows, fundraisers, regular open-mic nights with local musicians—Mia Cortés, that singer who’s really hot right now, she was discovered there—lots of live entertainment showcasing local queer women. It’s also a brunch and lunch spot with a wide coffee and tea selection and a gourmet menu.”

“It sounds busy,” Nora remarked, flipping through the file folder again before returning it to her briefcase. “But that can’t be the problem? Because it definitely didn’t look profitable enough that this Esme could hold up the sale.”

“No, you’re right, she’s barely turned a profit the last ten years, and the pandemic really stretched her resources thin; she’s been able to get some of those small business grants to stay afloat, but that’s not going to last forever.” Laurie tucked her phone away. “No, the issue is that she seems to be a very stubborn and determined lady. And the place may not be very profitable, but it is popular within the community. You’re likely to meet with strong opposition.”

Nora was good with concrete details, valuation, location, but Laurie always had her beat with the real personal heartbeat of any building The Hartley Group bought. She couldn’t wait for the day Laurie finally decided to take her real estate licensing exam and join her as part of the firm. She really would make a formidable commercial realtor. “Got it. Well, you know me. I don’t think there’s any problem too big for money to solve. Any community hub can be relocated. That building is too valuable for a barely-profitable bar serving a tiny, marginalized segment of the city population to keep taking up space in it.” She stood up and slung the strap of her briefcase over her head. “Besides, after twenty years in one place, I’m sure this Esme person will find she’s itching for a change. It might breathe new life into the place.”

“Maybe so. If anyone can get past an owner standing their ground, it’s you.” Laurie smiled as they walked to the elevator together.

“We’ve done it before, we’ll do it again.” Nora clapped a hand on Laurie’s shoulder before she stepped into the elevator. “See you later. Thank you for the intel today. As always.”

“Anytime, Boss.” Laurie winked as the elevator doors closed. “Go get ‘em, Tiger!”

It was rarely a good sign when Oliver, Alexandra, and Matt paid a visit to the Indigo Lounge together. Esme Bloom eyeballed the owners of the Fairchild Building warily as they walked through the door of the café-bar. “Trouble at ten o’clock,” she muttered to Sasha Ashford, her executive chef, who was delivering a tapas plate to romance author Ruby Fierelli, a Lounge regular. Ruby, as usual, was sitting at the bar with a mocktail at her right hand and her laptop in front of her.

Sasha blew out a puff of air that made her droopy quiff of black curls dance over her bold eyebrows. “What are they doing here? Did they tell you they were coming?”

“No, not a whisper.” This annoyed Esme to no end. Usually, they were better about keeping her in the loop on their infrequent appearances. Then Esme had time to prepare herself to sparkle and dance for whatever prospective building investor or tenant they were trying to impress. Because it was always about impressing someone.

Ruby peered at the Trouble Trio from under her blunt-cut red bangs. “Is it me, or do they look even more... I don’t know. Shiny? They look way more bright and shiny than usual. Extra hairspray, designer accessories, and Oliver is actually wearing a suit.”

Trust an author to catch the little details. Esme squinted in the direction of the owners and saw that Ruby was right. Oliver, usually clad in jeans and a casual half-open cotton button-down, was now in an actual suit jacket and slacks. She would have bet good money on pale, lanky Matthew thinking Gucci was a type of pasta dish, yet today his shoes bore the unmistakable horse-bit adornment across his instep.

And Alexandra? Well, she’d always been the most impeccably turned out of the three Fairchild siblings, but yes, today she’d dialed her polish up to eleven. Esme didn’t like any of what this signified—the lack of notice, the extra effort put into their

appearances... they were up to something very big, and that couldn't bode well for her or her beloved Lounge.

Esme washed her hands and dried them on a clean towel before she lifted the bar hatch and let herself out of the enclosure, leaving Sasha and Ruby whispering behind her. As she walked over to the Trouble Trio, she felt uncharacteristically self-conscious in her long skirt and flat sandals. With advance notice, she at least wore closed-toe shoes and smoothed her wild mop of chestnut and silver curls back into a low bun. It wasn't that she felt the need herself to impress any-damn-body, she just didn't like feeling wrong-footed. Well, too bad. Today, she'd just have to make the best of whatever this situation was. "Hi, folks."

Oliver and Matt had the grace to look slightly guilty upon her approach, but the unflappable Alexandra simply tilted her head back slightly and smiled. "Esme, how nice to see you again."

"I wasn't expecting you." Esme saw nothing wrong with getting straight to the point. It was an added bonus that her directness always seemed to get under Alexandra's skin. She fought back her smile as Alexandra's black eyes narrowed.

"No? An oversight. I'm sure one of us told our assistants to give you a call. We'll have to have a talk with them." Her tone was smooth and cool, and Esme knew that no assistant of Alexandra had been informed of anything. Likely Alexandra had even impressed on her younger brothers that they weren't to breathe a word about it, either, judging by the increasingly guilty looks on their faces. Something was definitely up.

Esme crossed her arms and leaned back on her heels slightly. Her goal was to look casual and unbothered. "So what's going on? Another potential tenant for one of the retail spaces?" If so, she hoped it was the one by the accessories boutique. She'd been trying to convince the siblings to let her expand into the space next to hers for years now. If the Lounge was going to thrive, she needed more space, to expand the

postage-stamp stage and backstage area, to give Sasha a bigger kitchen. But they'd resisted all her efforts.

Alexandra's wide mouth, always painted an unforgiving crimson, turned up into a sly little smile, and her brothers both began actively avoiding looking at anyone. "Oh, we're past that, Esme." When she tilted her head, her sleek black ponytail fell forward over her shoulder, and she began to toy with the end of it. "No, we're meeting someone who wants to buy the whole building." Without another word, she beckoned to her brothers and swept off into the dining area of the Lounge, commandeering the large table they always sat at during their meetings.

Esme stared after them, open-mouthed with shock. They were going to sell the Fairchild Building? But what about everyone who was still renting space in the building? Shouldn't they have been given some kind of notice about this?

What was she going to do?

She didn't realize she was frozen in place, gripping the back of a chair and staring off at nothing. When a small, featherlight touch brushed the back of her arm, she nearly jumped out of her skin. "Jesus!"

"E! Calm down." Sasha's blue eyes were wide. With care, she pried Esme's fingers off of the chair and led her back behind the bar. She expertly poured a shot of Grey Goose and handed it over. "Drink that."

"It's nine A.M.!" Esme protested.

"It's five in London," Sasha replied, unperturbed. "Drink, E."

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With a nervous glance at the table where the Fairchild siblings all sat, heads together and deep in conversation, Esme shot back the little glass of alcohol and grimaced. “Yeah, no, it’s too early for that, Sash. Never again.”

“Well, you looked like you needed it.” The chef leaned on the counter next to where Ruby sat, and both of them had identical expressions of concern on their faces. “What’s going on?”

Esme did feel a little steadier, though on the whole she might have preferred a super strong coffee. She took a deep breath and looked at the Trouble Trio again. “They’re looking to sell the whole building.”

“What?” Ruby gasped, tears immediately welling in her dark eyes. “Why?”

“I don’t know. We didn’t get that far. I don’t know anything except that they’re not looking for tenants anymore, they’re looking to divest.” Esme looked around the Lounge, taking in the beating heart she’d built from the ground up. She’d painted the irregular walls, white with the occasional deep red accent wall, with her own two hands. She’d picked each and every charmingly mismatched chair and table at thrift stores around LA. She’d chosen every poster of Kate McKinnon, Megan Rapinoe, Frida Kahlo, Lily Tomlin, Sarah Paulson, Samira Wiley, and more queer female icons herself, framed them with care and stood on a ladder to hang them high on the walls. Just last week, she’d added Chappell Roan and Reneé Rapp to the lineup.

The Lounge’s velvet-draped stage was known as a breakout venue for queer musicians; she’d had all the latest big queer acts playing here before they’d really started to take off. Her own friend, Mia Cortés, had been discovered on the tiny end-

table-sized stage just a couple of months ago. She, Esme, had made that a cornerstone of her business plan when she opened the Lounge twenty years ago. That queer women would be showcased on her stage, that there would be somewhere they could play to their target audience, that there would be somewhere the audience could even go to hear the music they craved.

When she'd decided to expand the bar into a café and needed someone to make delicious, creative gourmet meals, Esme had hired Sasha straight out of culinary school. They'd worked hard together on that initial menu, with everything from simple chili crisp avocado toast to an elegant twist on Oysters Rockefeller with locally sourced smoked oysters available for new customers to nosh on. Six years later, they were still creating culinary magic together, and Sasha's work had been reviewed with high honors from a number of notable publications. Esme had printed or cut out each one, framed them in ornate thrifted frames, and displayed them proudly around the perimeter of the café space—much to Sasha's delighted embarrassment.

Esme had done that. Esme had brought in the clientele; Esme had secured her own financing; Esme had enacted the physical transformation that took an empty, dusty cavern of retail space and made it into a cozy sapphic retreat. No, it didn't make the money that it used to... no, it had never been a record-breaking profit machine. But Leonard Fairchild had seen Esme's vision and supported her from the start in a way his children were failing utterly to do.

Twenty years ago, Alexandra Fairchild had been a disgruntled teenager following her father around while he showed a thirty-year-old, starry-eyed Esme the space that would become Indigo Lounge. Now she was barely older than Esme had been, and she was in total control of what would happen here. Everything Esme loved and had built was in Alexandra's hands—not the boys, Esme dismissed Oliver and Matt, they'd go along with whatever their big sister wanted to do. No help from that quarter. No, Alexandra was in charge, and she and Esme had never really gotten

along. She'd never had the sight her father had.

Oh, how Esme missed Leonard Fairchild. No lesbian bar in America had ever had a more fervent, dedicated supporter. Even on his deathbed ten years ago, he'd been sending Esme information on small business grants and financing opportunities to help her keep the Lounge afloat. Fuck cancer, Esme thought, feelingly.

"E..." Sasha was staring at the doors of the Lounge, and she grabbed Esme's arm so tight, it felt like the circulation was being cut off. "Who the hell is that?"

Esme watched as a tall, statuesque blonde strode across the threshold of Indigo Lounge. She was in head-to-toe designer power suit chic, so perfectly tailored and styled that it made Alexandra's Dolce & Gabbana look like a Goodwill rag in comparison. Her hair was icy blonde, cut into a longish, sharp-edged bob that swung down below her jaw. As she pulled off a pair of black, oversized sunglasses, Esme caught a glimpse of glittering blue eyes taking in the Lounge, with only the barest arch of one blonde eyebrow betraying any interest.

She wasn't what she'd describe as drop dead gorgeous, Esme decided, but there was something intriguing about her haughty face, something that made it transcend mere prettiness. Something of mystery. And she didn't have Resting Bitch Face, but she definitely gave off an air of elevated indifference that would keep people from bothering her without damn good reason. Something about her drew Esme in, made her stomach twist and her heart begin to race.

"Nora!" Alexandra was up on her feet and hurrying over to the blonde at the door. "Thank you so much for coming out."

"Of course... Alexandra, is it?" The woman was looking around the Lounge, that one slightly arched eyebrow curving further upward by the second, and one corner of her pale rose mouth tilting up to match. "Interesting place you've got here."

“Oh, it’s not ours. It’s just one of the retail spaces that come with the building. Come, let me take you around and show you what you’re dealing with. We’ll come back for lunch.” Alexandra swept off out the door, heading for the main building entrance, and the blonde, with one last glance around the café, followed her out.

“Esme,” Oliver’s soft voice interrupted her thoughts. “Sorry to bother you, but can I put in an order for four cappuccinos with oat milk and a pitcher of lemon-cucumber water?”

“Sure.” She exchanged glances with Sasha, who nodded and went off to the kitchen to get the drink order started with the Lounge barista, Natalie. Then she turned her attention back to the middle Fairchild sibling. “Ollie. Who was that woman?”

His dark eyes were something approaching sad as he shrugged a shoulder and sighed. “Nora Hartley. She’s this big deal commercial realtor. Alexandra saw some article on her in Forbes magazine and said that she was exactly what we needed for the building.”

“But why sell?” Panic flooded Esme. “What about me?”

“I don’t know everything, Es. I’m sorry. All I can tell you is what you already know—that we can’t get tenants into the office space and those other retail spaces.”

She grabbed a towel and twisted it in her hands. “I can still expand into the space next door...”

“We’re barely treading water with this building, Es. You know that. You expanding this place isn’t going to turn that around. I wish it could.” Of all the Fairchilds, the usually idealistic Oliver was the most like his departed father, but he lacked the power and charisma Leonard had had in spades. He was more often than not the only one who ever sympathized with Esme. “I’m really sorry. But maybe Nora can help

you find a new space for Indigo Lounge if she closes you down. Somewhere you can really make all your expansion dreams come true. Make a fresh start. She's supposed to be a real wizard in commercial real estate."

The suggestion that the Lounge could be anywhere other than it was made Esme's heart hurt. But she put on a brave face in front of Oliver. She'd known him since he was a kid, and she wasn't about to break down in front of him now. "Maybe she can. Great. Thanks, Ollie." She glanced toward the kitchen. "I see Sasha and Natalie coming with your drinks."

"Great." He smiled, and Esme was sure there was no small measure of relief in it that she wasn't going to cause a scene.

Not in public, anyway. Nailing her smile on, Esme walked into the Indigo Lounge kitchen, brushing past Sasha and Natalie, and making a beeline for the walk-in freezer. She stepped inside and closed the door behind her, taking a deep, frigid breath into her lungs.

Then, crouching down and grabbing a handful of her long skirt, she stuffed it over her mouth and let out a soul-deep, agonized scream that felt like it might never, ever end.

3

The outside of the Fairchild Building, all pale pressed brick and rather unprepossessing as a whole, didn't exactly catch the eye. Nora was sure she'd passed by it dozens, if not hundreds, of times in her life and not paid it a second thought, even though she knew, thanks to her Masters in Architecture from UCLA, that it was considered significant due to its nearly unidentifiable mixture of styles. How a blend of beautiful styles had turned out such an extremely normal building, she had no idea.

But it wasn't the outside that interested her, anyway. Nora was itching to finally visit

the legendary foyer of the Fairchild, a huge open-air atrium wreathed in wrought iron and illuminated by wide, frosted glass skylights. She was positive that the photos she'd seen, even the glossy high-definition ones included in her file on the building, didn't do it justice. Excitement propelled her out of the Town Car and onto the sidewalk, briefcase in hand.

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While the Fairchild Building hadn't done much to catch her eye, a rainbow flag in one of the ground-floor windows did. She scanned the other windows, where an array of what she presumed were different pride flags acted as curtains.

Nora had known who she was since she was a teenager and one reckless party game of Spin the Bottle had left her with a solid "no thank you" attitude toward boys and a raging crush on her pretty cheerleader biology lab partner. Nora liked girls, and she was comfortable with that. She was a Taurus after all; pragmatism was baked into her soul.

But the small LA suburb that she hailed from hadn't felt entirely safe enough for her to indulge her newly-discovered urges in the late 90s. So, she'd bent her head down and channeled all her energy into getting out. Her goal had been lofty, but that only motivated her further: Nora Hartley wanted to go to the all-women's Wellesley College. With as many scholarships as she could stuff into her pockets as possible.

And she'd done it. Off she went to Massachusetts, ready to study hard and to explore her sexuality. The next four years of her life were an education in How To Be A Lesbian 101: there were muffled hookups in library study carrels, hot kisses in the corners of sorority parties, noisy competitions with her suitemates... there was hardly a girl in her graduating class that Nora hadn't at least seen topless. And she'd still managed to graduate summa cum laude, emphasis, she sometimes chuckled to herself, on the cum.

What she hadn't done was join any Gay-Straight Student Alliances, participated in Pride parades, or fake-ID'd her way into any lesbian bars during her time at Wellesley. There hadn't really been any time, for one thing, not between her studies

and her extremely active social life. And as an only child who'd largely been a studious loner all through school, she didn't feel much need to be part of any kind of community. Nor was she particularly political. Nora just... was. She was a lesbian, an honors graduate, fiercely determined, and fine on her own. The following several years of her life at UCLA did little to change that. Meeting her ex-girlfriend Leah was the closest she'd ever come to being interested in the larger LGBTQ+ world she was meant to be part of.

Now, Nora surveyed the pride flags in the windows of the Indigo Lounge, amazed at how many there were. She could identify the main rainbow Pride flag, though it seemed to have evolved over the years. And she was fairly sure the flag in various shades of pink, orange, and white was the lesbian flag. That was it, though. That was all she knew. She was curious, though, so she resolved to ask Laurie about the rest of them later.

Onward. She drew her shoulders back and headed for the door of the Lounge, where she was due to meet up with the Fairchild siblings.

She didn't really like them, she'd decided. As people, that is. Not one of them was a person she'd spend time with if there weren't money and a good building on the table. Matt was basically a non-entity as a person, Oliver was too earnest and dreamy, and Alexandra... well, Nora didn't usually use the word, but Alexandra was a bitch. And not in the fun way. A bitch with delusions of grandeur about herself to boot, which Nora found very off-putting. A little self-awareness never killed anyone, but she felt like Alexandra thought it might, and she seemed to avoid it at all costs.

As she passed over the threshold of the café-bar, Nora looked around, curious. She really had not spent a lot of time in any queer establishments in her lifetime, certainly not one that centered on women. There were a few men sitting at scattered tables enjoying coffee drinks and glasses of sparkling fruit water, but in general the clientele was female. Women were in the posters on the wall, a woman's voice was streaming

out of the speakers—Nora thought it might be Melissa Etheridge—and the two people behind the bar who were staring at her were both women.

One of them had to be the owner. Emily? Emma? No. Esme. The owner was Esme. And since the bar had been here for twenty years, Esme was probably not the stocky young woman in the chef's coat with the tumble of black curls spilling over her brow. Nora glanced at the other woman and nearly tripped over her own feet.

Wide brown eyes. Long, thick chestnut brown curls down to her waist with a hint of red and threads of silver shot through them. She was older, Nora could see that in a few gentle lines on her heart-shaped face, but there was a youthful air about her as well. She could be any age between 35 and 55, in Nora's opinion.

She was Nora's opposite in so many ways. Soft, curvy, in a simple white sleeveless top. Nora wondered if, behind the Spanish tile-topped bar, she was wearing loose jeans, flowing pants, or a maxi-skirt. It would be one of the three, certainly not anything like Nora's designer suit and heels.

Nora knew this because looking at Esme was like looking at Leah. Taller, and of course the hair and eye color were different, but Nora saw so much of Leah in this woman. She wondered if Esme smelled like roses, or fresh grass, or lilacs? What did she like to read? How did she relax? She looked gentle, and while there was concern in those big brown eyes, Nora thought she saw an innate kindness, too.

She thought about walking over to the bar to introduce herself, but then a voice she personally found grating rang out over the chatter in the bar. "Nora!" It was Alexandra Fairchild, bustling over with a smug, avaricious look on her face. "Thank you so much for coming out."

"Of course... Alexandra, was it?" Of course, Nora knew the woman's name perfectly well. They'd met a few times already. But she just couldn't resist an opportunity to

get under the irritating woman's thin skin. She felt her mouth curving up into a half-smile as she saw a flicker of annoyance in Alexandra's eyes. She went on as if nothing had happened. "Interesting place you've got here."

Oddly, she meant it. The Indigo Lounge was interesting. It was in entirely the wrong place for what it was, for what the neighborhood was becoming, but she couldn't deny that it was an amazing space, just like Leah had said all those years ago.

"Oh, it's not ours." Alexandra waved a dismissive hand. "It's just one of the retail spaces that come with the building. Come, let me take you around and show you what you're dealing with. We'll come back for lunch." Alexandra swept past her in a clear effort to regain the upper hand after Nora's little prick to her ego. Nora had to take a moment to stifle the grin that was threatening to spread across her face, and she looked around the Lounge one more time.

It felt, in some peculiar way, like she'd come home. She sighed before she turned and followed Alexandra out to the Fairchild Building's main entrance. The Indigo Lounge was incredible. It was too bad she was going to have to get rid of it.

"What did you think?" Oliver Fairchild leaned back in his seat at their table, smiling in what Nora was sure he thought was a charismatic and appealing way. To her, it was inauthentic, all of him was. His brown hair was too perfectly gelled back, his suit didn't hang right on his body, everything about him screamed that he was trying too hard. She much preferred the Oliver she'd met before, in his linen pants and open button-down. He looked like a friendly frat boy, but at least that seemed to be closer to his real personality than this vaguely desperate polishing could ever hope to be.

Nonetheless, she smiled and inclined her head in a slight nod. "The atrium area was as gorgeous as I'd always heard it was. I can't believe I've never made the time to visit it before."

“Well, if you buy the place, you’ll have all the time you want to see it over and over again.” The inauthentic smile widened. “Right, Matty?”

The youngest Fairchild, who was a successful CPA, but looked like a lanky, pale, and extremely morose undertaker, nodded and made a vague noise that might be assent. Nora didn’t think he’d uttered more than five words in the past several meetings.

Alexandra poured herself some lemon-cucumber water, vibrant green and yellow slices tumbling into her glass. She took a long drink, set the glass down, and looked at Nora. “So? Now you’ve seen the place. Will you take it off our hands?”

Even her brothers, even the normally expressionless Matt, seemed shocked at her bluntness. Nora appreciated a direct approach, but coming from Alexandra, it just seemed like a crass money-grab. She smiled politely. “My interest remains. I think we’ll need another meeting to discuss the price.”

Alexandra’s return smile was steely. “Fifteen million is an extremely fair price for a heritage-rated building with as much history as the Fairchild has, with the location it’s in.”

“It’s a well-located heritage building that you can’t keep occupied.” Nora raised an eyebrow. “The office floors need refurbishing. The atrium is beautiful, but you’ve clearly had upkeep issues with it. And I’m pretty sure I spotted mold on the exterior in several spots, so that’s going to need to be taken care of. And that’s expensive for a historic building.” She lifted her cappuccino to her lips and stifled a grimace; it had cooled while she toured the building with Alexandra. Whose bright idea had it been to order coffee before a building tour? “As I said. We’ll need to meet again to discuss it.”

Alexandra’s mouth tightened into a thin line. “Okay. When would you like to schedule it?”

“I’ll have my assistant reach out to your office.” Nora got to her feet. “Please excuse me. I’d like to get a fresh, hot cappuccino on my way out.”

Leaving the three startled Fairchilds behind her, she picked up her briefcase and made a beeline for the bar. While she did want a fresh drink, her primary objective was to meet Esme. Her eyes had been drawn to the bar owner as soon as she re-entered the Lounge, and to her surprise, the attention seemed mutual. She’d felt Esme’s gaze on her all through the brief discussion with the siblings. It was a bad idea to indulge her interest in someone she was aiming to put out of business, but something kept pulling her to Esme, and she wanted to know more.

Nora smiled and placed her bag on the bar top. “Hi there. I’m on my way out, but I wondered if I could get a fresh oat milk cappuccino to go?” She extended her hand. “I’m Nora. Nora Hartley.”

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To her surprise, Esme's eyes met hers and narrowed. "Esme Bloom. The owner," and she emphasized the word, "of this establishment."

A sudden hostility crackled off of her, and Nora nearly took a step back in surprise. Earlier, Esme had seemed gentle, worried, kind in demeanor. Now, she looked like she might reach across and slap Nora rather than shake her hand. Nora cleared her throat. "It's nice to meet you."

"The feeling is not mutual." Esme pointed towards the door. "Please leave."

Now, that really did rattle Nora, and this time she took that step back. "Come again?"

Esme's finger moved to point at a neatly hand-lettered sign taped to the front of the cash register. She read it aloud, slowly, as if Nora were deficient. "Management reserves the right to refuse service to anyone," she said, lifting her chin high. "This is me refusing. Goodbye, Ms. Hartley." With a snort, she turned her back on Nora and walked away, lifting the bar passthrough and stalking off towards the Fairchilds.

Nora noticed she was wearing a long, full floral skirt. That answered that question, at least. Leah had also favored long skirts.

But Nora could see now that Esme was not Leah. Not even a little bit. Taking a deep breath, she gathered herself together and left the Lounge as she'd been asked, feeling like she'd just been run over by a semi-truck.

Four days and a number of disheartening Google searches later, Esme was still in such a thoroughly foul mood that nobody wanted to talk to her. She'd noticed Sasha and Natalie going out of their ways to not bother her unless they really needed help. There'd even been a day she saw them waving regulars off away from her. And normally when her open office door seemed like an invitation for everyone to come have a chat, for the last two days she'd been left alone to such an extent that she actually finished payroll and scheduling a week earlier than usual, an unprecedented feat.

It hurt her heart to know that she was exuding such a hostile air that nobody wanted to be around her. Esme prided herself on her welcoming spirit. She'd baked it into the walls of the Lounge; it was her entire ethos. But now the looming sale of the Fairchild Building had left her sleepless and out of sorts for two days and it did not appear that the black cloud over her head would be dissipating anytime soon.

Because the sale was looming. Inevitable, even. Oliver had confirmed it to her again when she approached them after this Nora person had walked out of the Lounge. Alexandra had rolled her eyes and simply left, and Esme was grateful for that. If she'd had to try and get answers out of her, Esme might have started pulling hair.

But Oliver, and even taciturn Matt to an extent, had both looked at her with sympathy as she pulled out the chair Nora had vacated and sat down herself, her hands in her lap. She didn't say anything, only gazed at both of them steadily. It was a tactic that had paid off well for her in the past, and it didn't fail her now.

"I'm sorry, Esme," Oliver said, reaching over to pat her shoulder. "I think it's going to go through with Nora."

It was a hopeless thing to even think about, but she had to try. "How much are you all wanting for the building?"

Matt looked at her, an uncharacteristic pity in his eyes. Soberly, he pushed the long sweep of his bangs back from his face. “Esme. You’ve barely managed to profit the last few years.”

“Tell me, Matty.”

He sighed. “We’ve decided on a fifteen million dollar asking price.”

She had no way of raising that much money. The bar could have been fully profitable to an insane degree every year it had been opened and she’d still never be able to get her hands on fifteen million dollars. She certainly didn’t have enough of anything she could call collateral for a loan that high. Besides, what would she do if she could buy the Fairchild Building? She didn’t know the first thing about trying to rent out office space.

She was certain she was staring down the barrel of the Indigo Lounge’s closure. Someone like Nora Hartley was going to come in and wipe all of the last straggling tenants of the Fairchild off the map.

All Esme had ever wanted was to create a safe community space catering mainly to lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. Her nearly lifelong dream, and she’d achieved it, yet now some manicured shark in a designer suit was sailing in to take a sledgehammer to the walls.

She wanted to cry again. Instead, she’d simply gotten to her feet. “Thanks, boys.” With a curt nod, she’d turned and fled to her office.

Now, today, it was insane to her that something that was so, so important to her and so many others was now under threat because of money. It was so crass to her that the entire meaning of the Indigo Lounge was worthless next to cold, hard cash. The Fairchilds had no idea the blood, sweat, and tears that had gone into just creating the

Lounge. No idea what they'd be taking away from people like Mia Cortés, whom Esme had supported until her now-agent and girlfriend Harper Nightingale had discovered her singing on the tiny stage here. Or from the people that Esme's fundraising efforts helped—people with medical needs and no healthcare, women needing help to escape domestic violence situations, the soup kitchens in the LA area.

Ever since she was a sixteen-year-old runaway from Temecula, in shock after her parents had kicked her out for coming out, Esme had vowed that no one else who needed shelter, food, and community would go without as long as she could help provide it. The Indigo Lounge was so much more than just a café and bar, damn it. It was worth more in importance and sheer meaning than fifteen million dollars...

But money was what made the world go 'round, as the saying went. Esme braced her elbows on her desk and thrust her hands into her hair so she could massage her aching head. Music drifted in from the Lounge through her cracked-open door; there was a folk-piano player from Kansas City who had come all the way to LA to do a week-long residency at the Lounge. An earnest twenty-year-old with glasses and a short, black and pink haircut, Chloe Riley had arrived with nothing more than a keyboard strapped to her back and a backpack in her hand. She was staying on Esme's couch, and Esme was certain that she was the next big thing. Would she be the last lesbian breakout star that would be discovered on the Indigo Lounge stage? The thought made Esme's stomach curdle like bad yogurt.

"E..." Sasha's voice was all but a whisper, followed by a gentle rap of her knuckles on the door. She slipped through and held up a red plastic basket filled with an avocado mushroom veggie burger and garlic-parmesan fries. A Nalgene bottle full of what looked like pink lemonade dangled from her fingers. "I made you lunch. You've got to eat."

Esme looked up and turned slowly in her desk chair. "I'm not hungry," she replied, placing a hand over her churning stomach.

“You are, actually. You think you’ll be sick if you eat, but E, you’re going to be sicker if you don’t.” Sasha came around and carefully placed the basket and bottle on the desk in front of Esme. “Come on. Eat something for me. You’re no good to anyone, especially yourself, if you’re not nourished.”

Esme looked at the basket before her. This good old-fashioned comfort food was her favorite thing that Sasha made. And the sautéed mushrooms and grilled onions topping the burger patty did smell good. She picked it up and took a bite. This was the first real food she’d eaten in days.

Flavor exploded on her tongue. Esme let out a little groan and heard Sasha sigh in relief as she tore into the burger, demolishing it in just a few minutes. The fries, perfectly crispy and golden, followed in short order. She washed it all down with the perfectly tangy pink lemonade. At last, Esme leaned back in her chair, hand draped over her now-stuffed-full abdomen. “Okay. You were right. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Sasha smiled. “Couldn’t have you waste away on me. I need you in peak form if we’re gonna start talking about how to save this place.”

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“You think we can?” Skepticism didn’t normally have a place in Esme’s way of thinking, but it had been a rough couple of days. “I haven’t even told you how much they’re asking for the building.”

Sasha reached out and hauled her to her feet. “Well, get your ass up to the front of house so you can brief us, then.”

“Us?”

With a chuckle, Sasha pushed Esme through the door and down the corridor towards the main room of the Lounge. “I know you didn’t think you’d be trying to do this alone, did you? Come on, E. It takes a village, and all that.”

As they emerged into the big, bright main room, Esme’s jaw dropped to see a crowd of her friends and regulars around the bar, all of whom broke out into a cheer at the sight of her. Punky Mia and statuesque Harper, geek-chic Ruby, elfin Chloe... they were all there along with androgynous Cam Casey, a regular who moonlit as a part-time bartender for the Lounge so she could flirt with half the clientele. Esme’s friend Deborah, a TV executive who was usually too busy during the day to make it to the Lounge for lunch, was there next to Mia and Harper. This core group was surrounded by still more people—some of the drag queens and kings that often performed at Lounge drag nights were there, sans their greasepaint and glitter in the daytime but still glowing with delight to see her. Regulars who had been coming here for years, night and day, people whose health problems she’d heard about, relationships she’d given advice on, work challenges she’d helped them solve.

Esme had never asked any of them for help, had never thought she’d ever be in a

position to need it. And yet, here they were, gathered here to save their community home. To help her. Tears sprang to her eyes.

That, of course, was the moment Nora Hartley chose to walk through the door, and Esme's heart stuttered in her chest.

After her reception from Esme Bloom four days ago, Nora wasn't sure it was a good idea to go back to the Indigo Lounge. If she was going to buy the Fairchild Building and kick the Lounge out, surely the best strategy was to simply conduct everything through legal channels and paper. That way would be clean, efficient. No messy emotions or having the scene where Esme's sweet demeanor had given way to hostility and an order for Nora to vacate the premises continue playing in her head on a loop.

But something told her to go back. To have lunch, to try to talk to Esme. To see if she could get a feel for just how difficult the bar owner was going to make her life. So here Nora was, once again standing on the sidewalk outside of the Lounge, surveying the pride flags she was now well on her way to being able to identify, thanks to Laurie.

She felt it would be best to come in a bit more casually, not in her designer suit and carrying a Mulberry briefcase. Instead, Nora had opted for a blue silk wrap dress and carried only a simple black Launer wallet clutch in her hand. It was her hope that she would seem more approachable, although why exactly she wanted Esme to think of her that way was beyond her at the moment.

Nora walked through the door of the Lounge, and her eyes went straight to Esme. Esme, who was standing in the center of a knot of people at the bar, all of whom seemed to be trying to hug her and talk at once. Esme, who looked appealing in a simple long gray shift dress and dark red ballerina flats, her silver and brown curls loosely tied back at the nape of her neck. She was lovely, but she also looked very

tired, and Nora felt a touch guilty about the dark circles under her eyes. It wasn't hard to guess what had caused those.

Esme spotted her right away, and the happy expression on her face turned stony. The chatter around the bar died away, and as everyone there followed Esme's gaze to Nora, the atmosphere in the room grew distinctly chilly. Nora tilted her chin up. "Ms. Bloom."

"Ms. Hartley." Esme disentangled herself from the group and walked over to stand in front of Nora, barring her further entry. She crossed her arms over her chest and stood hipshot, her chin lifted as well. "I believe I made my feelings clear four days ago."

Nora wasn't about to beg. It wasn't her style. She kept things simple, spreading her hands wide to indicate she meant no harm. "I just came to have lunch. And maybe to talk with you." She smiled. "Maybe there's somewhere a bit more private?"

Esme stared at her for a moment before rolling her marvelous brown eyes and turning on her heel. She beckoned back to Nora without looking. "Come on."

She had to bolt her smile on a little firmer and held her head high as she strode behind Esme, ignoring the hostile glares coming at her from the gang at the bar. The stocky chef broke away from the group and came to the booth Esme led Nora to. Her attitude towards Nora was somehow even less welcoming than Esme's; she outright glared at Nora as she settled herself into the purple vinyl cushioning of the booth.

"Sasha, can you bring us two Diet Cokes and a medium plate of your Heapin' Helpin' Nachos?" Esme glanced at Nora. "Unless you have anything else you'd prefer?"

"Are the nachos chicken or beef?" Nora asked, wondering if she should be put out that someone had ordered for her. Nobody ever ordered for her.

“Neither. They’re black bean. I’m a vegetarian.” Esme sent Sasha off with a warm smile that faded as soon as she was looking at Nora again. “Well, here we are. What do you want?”

“I feel like we got off on the wrong foot the other day.” Nora took in a deep breath and folded her hands on the table in front of her. To her dismay, Esme tossed her ponytail and scoffed.

“Given who you are and what you represent, I don’t see how there was any other foot to get off on.” Esme regarded her with a challenging glint in her eyes. “Oh, yes, Nora Hartley. I knew who you were before you told me your name. And I’ve had a few days to get to really know you.”

Nora felt her eyebrows lift in surprise. “I sincerely doubt that.”

“Do you? There’s a lot of information out there about you. I bet I know more about you than you know about me or the Indigo Lounge.” Esme smirked. “I’m surprised, really. A California girl like you coming in to close a Californian business. I mean, that’s going to be your goal for this place, right? You’re going to buy this building, throw all of us out, and strip the Fairchild of all its character, then sell it on to some other sucker who has no idea what got plowed under for his investment—am I right?”

Being disliked wasn’t a new thing for Nora; but being so profoundly misunderstood by someone she’d met once four days ago was, and it stung. “You really, really do not know me.”

“Maybe not. Or maybe I know what I need to know.” The once-over that Esme gave her was as sharp as an airport scanner and Nora felt like it might be just as thorough. “You come in here in your designer gear, dollar signs in your eyes, and you size this place up with no regard for its value beyond the wallet.” Esme crossed her arms and leaned across the table. “How many lesbian-owned businesses have you crushed

under your Prada heel?”

“Wow. Wow.” The bitter laugh that burst out of Nora at being challenged and misunderstood this way was well out of her control. “Ms. Bloom, this is business. Not personal, not targeted. This is an amazing building in an amazing location. I didn’t even know there was a lesbian bar here until four days ago. I’m not coming for you.” She pointed at herself. “I mean, I’m a lesbian.”

“Oh, I know. Honestly, that’s what makes all of this even more incredible. You’re not even denying that you intend to close one of the last original lesbian bars in America.” Another scoff. “Amazing.”

“Now, hang on a minute.” Nora shook her head. “You’re not even giving me a chance to talk. I told you; this isn’t personal.” She looked around the bar, at the posters and décor. She avoided making eye contact with the group still clustered at the bar, all whispering heads together and looking at the booth where she and Esme sat. “Your bar is great, but yes, the likelihood is that I’m going to ask you to leave if I buy the building. I like to start fresh when I buy important real estate.”

Esme opened her mouth to reply, eyes glinting, but just then the chef came by with their drinks and a huge plate of divine-smelling loaded nachos. Nora’s stomach growled, and for the first time that she could remember in recent memory, she blushed. Esme rolled her eyes.

But she stayed quiet, not continuing with whatever she was going to say. Nora took the chance to leap in and continue explaining. “If you’re open to the idea, I can help you relocate. There are gay bars all over the city, we can find a place for yours.”

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Immediately, she sensed that this had been the wrong thing to say, but she didn't know why. Esme was quick to let her know her mistake, though. "This is not a gay bar," she snarled, her hands curling into white-knuckled fists. "This is a lesbian bar. A sapphic hot spot. It is also a café. It is a safe space for queer women. It is one of only thirty-three bars in the entire United States that is a women-centered queer space. You don't even know the basic stats of the community you claim you're part of?"

Never in her life had Nora felt so unprepared and wrong-footed. "I..." she began, unsure how to respond. No, she hadn't known that.

"Gay bars are great! I've been in dozens of them. But they're not a space that is specifically centered around the experiences of queer women. Of course, everybody is welcome here, but I want to shine the light on those who get pushed aside." Esme's face worked in a combination of what Nora thought might be anger and sorrow and who knew what else. She clearly had a lot of feelings on the subject. "You truly have no idea what damage you're going to do. How many people you're going to hurt. You're selfish, ignorant, and not welcome here." With a noisy smack of her hands on the tabletop, Esme got to her feet and glared down at Nora. "This conversation is over. Enjoy your nachos and please leave." She turned and stalked off, leaving Nora sitting in shock.

The chef walked over with a brown cardboard box in her hand. "Want me to box those up for you?" she asked, gesturing to the untouched plate of nachos. Although it was couched as a question, Nora got the distinct feeling that it was, in actuality, an order. She sighed.

“Yeah, go ahead,” she said, slumping back in the booth, feeling like she’d been hit by a freight train, and not knowing what she could do to fix anything.

5

“We can come down to twelve million. No lower.” Alexandra Fairchild crossed her arms over the lapels of her tweedy red Chanel blazer. Nora got the impression that Alexandra thought she was a tough negotiator. In that suit, which hadn’t been tailored for a perfect fit, she just looked like a petulant teenager. Veruca Salt came to mind. Daddy, I want it now!

Nora stifled her grin at the thought, hiding it behind her mug of coffee. God bless Laurie for suggesting they get the oversized mugs for the office. She drained every last drop of her French roast before she felt calm enough to put the mug down and smile at the trio of siblings sitting in front of her desk. “You’re getting warmer. That’s not a bad number.”

In fact, it really was the best she could expect for the Fairchild Building. She and her team had crunched numbers, gone over inspection data, the rental history, the likely prospects of the building and the neighborhood... twelve million was a great number for a historic building in Downtown LA. And she was 98% sure she was going to take it.

The thing was, she just really liked annoying Alexandra Fairchild. Nora watched with glee in her heart as the woman exchanged glances with her brothers. The men shrugged. Alexandra looked like she wanted to chew through sheet metal. “It’s the final price tag,” she spat, shooting up to her feet. “Take it or leave it.”

Nora remained seated and looked up at Alexandra with as bland an expression as she could muster when all she wanted to do was laugh in her face. “All I said was that it’s not a bad number. I’ll have to discuss it with my team.”

“See that you do.” Surprisingly, Alexandra didn’t actually flounce out of Nora’s office, and that was a good thing. Nora wasn’t sure she’d have been able to control herself if she had.

Oliver and Matthew had also stayed seated during Alexandra’s display. “I don’t want to keep apologizing for Alexandra’s behavior,” Oliver began, and Nora waved him into silence.

“You don’t have to. I’ve met a hundred Alexandras and more in my lifetime.” She shrugged. “I can assure you that her personality is not going to be a factor in whether or not I purchase your building.”

“Just the price?” Oliver raised a dark eyebrow.

“As I said, I need to talk to my team.” Nora got to her feet, prompting the men to get to theirs. “Thank you all for coming in again. We’ll be reaching out to you soon.”

Matthew picked up their copy of the Fairchild Building file from Nora’s desk and gazed at the photo clipped to the front of it. To Nora’s surprise, he actually spoke for the first time since entering her office an hour and a half ago. “I’ll miss the building when it’s not ours anymore. It’s been in the family for two hundred years.” He looked up and met her eyes. “Do you think you’ll keep the Indigo Lounge?”

Nora hesitated. “I don’t know. Probably not, to be honest. I believe in fresh starts. I also just don’t think it’s a good fit for the neighborhood. Shouldn’t a place like that be out in West Hollywood?”

She’d done some research over the last couple of days, lying in bed with her laptop propped on her chest, eating some of the frankly incredible leftover nachos from the Lounge. Now, Nora knew more about the LA gay community than she ever had before. And she was curious as to how Esme Bloom had ever picked downtown LA

for the location of her lesbian hangout.

Oliver looked at her in surprise. “The Indigo Lounge would never work out in WeHo. That’s not the vibe. Esme wanted somewhere away from the typical scene, not a dance club, something more intimate.” He shoved his hands into the pockets of his khaki slacks. “There was a purpose behind everything she did when she created that space.”

“You sound like you admire her a lot,” Nora remarked.

“We’ve known her since we were kids.” Oliver gestured back and forth between himself and his brother, who nodded in agreement. “She came from nothing and nobody, but she wanted to give everything she could to the community. To queer women especially. Other lesbian spaces in LA have come and gone. Esme persevered. And she’s done so many fundraisers, given so much money to aid orgs and non-profits.”

“We thought she’d be there forever,” Matthew said in a low voice. “She’s done a lot of good in that little corner of our legacy. It doesn’t feel right to think of the Lounge not being there.” He sighed. “Selling the building is really Alexandra’s pet project. But we can’t afford to buy her out and keep it for ourselves, and she’s been relentless about offloading it.”

“And I hate that us giving in to her is going to hurt Esme like this.” Oliver was visibly unhappy. “Closing the Lounge is going to be a huge, huge loss, Nora. I know we can’t stop you, but I urge you to consider not evicting her. The office tenants can operate from anywhere in LA, and Shirley who runs the little accessories boutique has been talking about retiring for the last two years. But Esme and the Lounge...” he trailed off. “Esme doesn’t deserve to be booted out on her ass. Not after all she’s done.”

Nora took in a deep breath. “Well, nothing’s set in stone. The fact is, though, that the businesses opening in that neighborhood in the next year or two are nothing like a café-bar-performance space, whatever the Lounge is. I’ve seen the plans that have been filed. Upscale restaurants and retail shops, for the most part. A boho little bistro like the Indigo Lounge will not only stick out like a sore thumb, it may face serious opposition from its new neighbors. And it’s going to struggle even more to turn a profit than it already is.” She gazed steadily at the Fairchild brothers. “It’s not personal, boys, it’s business. And honestly, it may breathe new life into the Lounge if it moves to somewhere more suitable.”

Oliver’s gaze back at her was just as direct. “You know, when I suggested something like that to Esme, I could see it upset her, but I didn’t know why. Now I see what an asshole thing it was to say.” He looked at his brother and jerked his head towards the office door. “Let’s get going, Matty.”

Matt nodded and followed Oliver out, not even looking at Nora.

A business deal had never made her feel so shitty before. She sat back down at her desk and pulled up the Indigo Lounge website. Laurie came in. “Want your lunch, Boss?”

“Yeah.” Nora rubbed her head and clicked around to find the events calendar for the Lounge. “Can you order me a veggie supreme pizza?”

Laurie bent down to get eye to eye with her. “You okay?”

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Nora's hands froze on the keyboard and she looked at her assistant. "Yes. Why?"

"Because it's Thursday. I ordered you the same salad from Sweetgreen that I have ordered for the last 365 Thursdays and beyond." She held up a lidded takeout bowl. "I have it here in my hand. But you want a... pizza?"

"I would very much like a pizza." She clicked on the Menu button of the Lounge website. "Actually, can you DoorDash me this smoked salmon and pesto flatbread?" A thought occurred to her. "Order it under your name, please, and don't put the Hartley Group anywhere on it."

"What, why? Are you starting a new career moonlighting as a food critic?" Laurie came around the desk to peer at Nora's laptop screen. "Oh, I see. Bold move."

"The chef doesn't like me," Nora admitted. "But the food there is amazing."

Laurie stood up straight and observed her shrewdly. "You getting a little personally involved there?"

"No. I just really want the flatbread." Nora looked at the menu again. "And a side order of the Elevated Greek Salad."

"Anything you say." Laurie pulled out her phone and started to put the order in. "That it?"

"That'll do." Nora clicked back over to the calendar page as Laurie left. The Lounge was hosting a fundraiser this Saturday evening to benefit a local chain of thrift shops

that worked with the AIDS Healthcare Foundation. The party would be “Pink Pony Club” themed, whatever that meant. There would be drag performers, Mia Cortés was going to do a set, and there would be raffles of Indigo Lounge gift cards, edible arrangements, items from a local leather boutique, and more.

Nora wanted to see the Lounge in full swing, lights and colors and music and all. She wanted to see Esme in her element.

She wanted to see Esme, period. The dichotomy of the soft long skirts and flowing curls compared to the fire Nora had seen in Esme’s eyes when she defended her life’s work was intriguing to her. If ever a woman contained multitudes, it was Esme Bloom, and that was something Nora found too irresistible for words.

But what the hell, she wondered, was a Pink Pony Club? With a sigh, Nora opened up a new tab and began yet another Google search.

“Esme! This is incredible!” Ruby shrieked from under a pink velvet cowboy hat heavily fringed with silver beads. Her fire engine-red hair was down from its usual ponytail and bounced over her spaghetti-strapped shoulders as she danced with a drag king clad in a sharp candy-cotton pink suit. The Indigo Lounge was full of similarly dressed patrons, head to toe in various shades of pink and coated in a rainbow of sparkling glitter that Esme knew would be impossible to ever fully vacuum up.

That thought made her smile a bit grimly. If she was facing eviction, at least she’d make damned sure that the Indigo Lounge was leaving an extremely annoying mark.

With a smile, Esme waved at Ruby and threaded her way through the crowd, looking around at the transformation the Lounge had undergone for this night. She was pleased with how the place had turned out after days of hard work. Many of the warm white overhead lightbulbs had been replaced with pale pink ones, casting the Lounge in a rosy glow. Strings of silver and pink tinsel festooned the walls and window

frames, interspersed with long strands of silver beads and stars. It was more pink than the Lounge had ever seen in its existence, and it was probably taking the whole pink aspect of Pink Pony Club a little too literally, but Esme didn't care. She'd wanted to go all out for their first Chappell Roan-themed party.

Two years ago, much like Chloe Riley, Chappell and her keyboard had done a mini-residency at the Lounge. Now she was on a world tour and much too famous to perform at a venue the size of a Manhattan studio apartment. But she'd sent Esme a sweet note of gratitude when she'd heard about the tribute night and fundraiser dedicated to her and had even sent in a video message to be played later. Esme was so proud of her, the way she was proud of all her little sapphic music protégées.

Right now, there was a young drag queen on stage bouncing her way through "Femininomenon" wearing a sleek, lilac-sequined jumpsuit with such a low v-neck her silicon boob bib threatened to pop out. The long blonde curls of her wig were flying as she lip-synced with more energy than Esme thought she'd ever had in her twenties. The crowd was into it, singing along to the lyrics and exploding into cheers when the queen jumped into the air and landed in a split.

At the side of the stage, Mia Cortés was tuning her guitar and grinning at the spectacle. Her girlfriend/agent Harper Nightingale stood protectively by, keeping any would-be autograph or selfie seekers at bay with her stern expression. She'd told Esme that she felt a bit silly playing the heavy like this, but Mia needed time to get into her performing headspace and was too soft-hearted to resist pleas from fans who wanted her attention.

Her pearly white smile lit up her face as she saw Esme approaching, though. Harper was a stunning woman, with deep velvety black skin and brown eyes so warm and light they appeared almost golden. She always wore black, in the form of pantsuits cut to fit low and close, and her hair was styled in long, glossy braids that looked like ebony beads. Next to her, Mia looked like a charming ragamuffin, even if her tank

tops and artfully cut up thrift store jeans had been traded in for more deliberately tattered Levis and a vintage pinstriped vest.

“Esme,” Harper purred, reaching out both of her hands for Esme’s. She drew her in for a very continental kiss on both of Esme’s cheeks. “The party is amazing. You’ve outdone yourself.”

“Thank you, Harper. I do feel pretty good about it.” She beamed and turned to Mia. “How are you feeling?”

“Great! I’ve got some new songs for this crowd tonight. Think they’ll love them.” Setting her guitar aside, Mia bounded over to give Esme a bone-crushing hug. “How are you doing? You look wonderful. Like a goddess.”

Esme blushed, self-consciously tugging at the hem of her silver sequined mini-dress. “Ruby helped dress me. I’m not too sure about this.”

“You do look divine. Literally.” Harper stood back and gave her a once-over with a wink. “I’m amazed to discover you’ve got legs, my darling. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you in anything other than those ankle-length skirts.”

“I do feel more comfortable in those,” Esme admitted. “But this is a special occasion. It called for a special look.” In addition to the tiny sequined handkerchief that Ruby had called a dress, Esme was wearing silver kitten heeled sandals—the single inch of them as high as she was willing to let Ruby take her, heel-wise—and her hair had been styled into a thick braid that draped over one shoulder. Ruby had then arranged pre-Raphaelite ringlets and long tendrils of curls around Esme’s face, creating a cloud around her head, and there were sparkling silver and pink rhinestone flowers placed all through the hairstyle, holding baby’s breath in place. Finally, she’d fixed a fragrant flower crown of real full-bloom roses and peonies across the top of Esme’s head and painted Esme’s face in cherry reds, rosy pinks, and iridescent glitter. Esme

felt like Aphrodite, a tempting queen of love and revelry.

It didn't at all feel like she was dressed anywhere near her age, and she was slightly self-conscious about the over-the-top nature of the whole thing, but everyone seemed to think she looked great, so she'd go with that. Leaning up on her tiptoes, Esme kissed Harper on the cheek and then gave Mia a much gentler hug than she'd gotten. "Thank you both. Mia, love, break a leg."

Harper opened her mouth to reply, then frowned and grabbed Esme by the shoulders. "Esme, my darling, I don't mean to harsh your buzz, but I don't want you be unprepared when you turn around."

"Unprepared for what?" Esme laughed, squirming out of Harper's grip. She turned, up on her toes again, and craned her head, trying to find whatever her friend thought would upset her.

Nora. Esme's heart began to race.

Nora's height made her easy to spot at the doors of the Lounge, where she stood surveying the party in mild bemusement. Esme noted with some irritation that she hadn't bothered to costume herself up, giving the impression that she had simply come to the Indigo Lounge to observe the community there like a bunch of zoo animals on display.

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She looked fantastic nonetheless, Esme noted in irritation. Wide bone-colored linen trousers and a matching linen vest top, secured with large, glossy wood buttons in a rich shade of brown. Her hair was a perfectly sculpted gleaming cap of gold, now streaked with pink from the overhead lights. Money, confidence, and security radiated from her—all things Esme had never felt in such abundance within her own life. As much as Esme almost envied that, she also admired it. What must it be like to be able to go through the world never having to worry about a thing?

And why in heaven's name was she continually drawn and attracted to the woman? Of all people on Earth to make her feel anything like sexual interest in over a decade, it had to be the one who was going to take everything Esme loved away from her. Someone who was nothing like her at all, with whom she couldn't possibly share any values.

And yet. Here she was, eyes fixed on Nora as she began to explore the party with interest.

Esme slipped away from Harper and Mia and began to cautiously wind her way through the crowd. She wanted to be near Nora, partly to figure out just what in the world the woman was doing here, and partly to...

Well, Esme wasn't ready to talk about that, not yet. Not even to herself.

6

Nora leaned up on her toes to repeat her question into the drag queen's ear. "What do you like about being here?"

The queen, teetering above the crowd in her six-inch platform stilettos and making 5'11 Nora feel like a pixie, smiled broadly. "What's not to like, sugar?" she asked, sweeping her long-nailed hand to take in the entire room of exuberant revelers, all covered in glitter and feather boas. "Look at all the love here; look how full the donation jars are. We're having fun and doing good." Leaning down, she pressed her full pink lips to Nora's cheek. "Enjoy the party!" she twittered out just before she danced off in the direction of the tiny stage.

Mia Cortés and her backing band were on the stage now, singing what she'd announced would be the last song of her set. She'd held the audience rapt with her sexy, torchy numbers, all spun out like a magical tapestry in her beautifully throaty voice. Even Nora had fallen under her spell for a good chunk of the set, catching herself swaying along to the sultry rhythms on more than one occasion.

Speaking of catching things... Nora looked out the corner of her left eye and spotted Esme lurking nearby yet again. She wondered if the woman somehow thought she was being subtle, trying to spy on Nora in that mile high pile of curls and barely-there silver sequined dress. It was kind of adorable, if so. She'd slipped and slithered through the crowd for the last hour while Nora danced, socialized, and feasted on amazing snacks. Nora felt she was certainly getting her money's worth out of the \$25 cover being charged at the door.

And judging by her impromptu canvassing of the crowd, they all thought they were, too. This was absolutely a deeply beloved place of sapphic community, Nora saw that now. There were huge donation jars all around the Lounge with signs reminding the crowd that all tips and donations were going to the thrift store chain, and they were all very full—but Nora had also seen one coated in deep blue glitter and affixed with a sign that read *Damn the Man, Save the Indigo!* that was positively overflowing with bills. And a lanky, androgynous-looking woman in an Indigo Lounge staff shirt had come by to empty that particular jar into a money bag three times already. As soon as she'd walked away, more donations were pouring into it, filling it again and again.

Oliver had been right. This place was important and did a significant amount of good, and neither Esme nor her patrons were going to go down without a fight.

Mia bowed and vacated the stage, and the Lounge speakers began pumping again with what Nora could now identify as Chappell Roan's music. It was mixed in with other artists, of course, but the primary focus was Chappell, who'd even sent in a fond video message of gratitude to the Lounge that Esme had played on the big screen TV mounted near the ceiling over the stage. Nora had asked a few patrons and they'd waxed poetic over the young superstar's salad days at the Lounge years ago. It seemed young sapphic musicians often found a launching pad in the Lounge, just another indicator of how important the tiny little café-bar was.

Nora ordered a dirty martini at the bar and sipped at it while she thought. There was no denying the enormous value placed on the Indigo Lounge by the people who called it home. And the more research Nora had done, the more she realized that it could never fit anywhere but here in Downtown LA, no matter what went in around it. It wasn't slick enough for WeHo, posh enough for Malibu, or boho enough for Culver City. Downtown could clean itself up as much as it liked, but anyone could see it would still be a little gritty, grounded in reality. And the Indigo Lounge would be the queer beating heart of it.

Unless she closed it down. Something Nora was increasingly unsure she'd be able to justify doing. But she needed profitable businesses in the Fairchild. The Lounge had to make a case for the tiny, valuable space it took up. Nora frowned and drained her drink. Her mind was just going in circles. She decided to find the restroom.

The crowd bouncing to the song Nora now knew was Pink Pony Club was reluctant to let her through, but she kept squeezing and pressing herself along until she got to the dark little hallway she was sure held the restrooms. Carefully, she groped along the walls, squinting at the signs on the doors.

Nora gasped as one door near the end of the hall opened and a slender hand shot out and grabbed her by the wrist. Before she could let out so much as a squeak, she'd been dragged into a tiny closet of an office and thrust down into a rickety office chair. "What are you doing here?" Esme demanded, slamming the door shut behind herself and leaning against it. She crossed her arms over her bosom and scowled thunderously at Nora.

Where Esme's bottom was pressed up against the door, the hemline of her absurdly tiny dress rode up and exposed more of her long legs. Nora swallowed and lost her train of thought entirely. "Sorry?"

"What. Are. You. Doing. Here?" Esme gestured back towards the main area of the Lounge. "Why did you come tonight? Why are you interrogating my guests? Snooping around my office? Are you looking for ammunition? Because let me tell you, Ms. Hartley, you're messing with the wrong woman."

Nora was usually unflappable, but between Esme's legs and the outrageous accusations, tonight she couldn't help it when her mouth dropped open with incredulity. "Jesus! Are you this goddamn bitchy to everyone who accidentally wanders by you while they're looking for a bathroom?"

This seemed to throw Esme off for a second, but she rallied. "No, only the ones who want to hurl me out on the street."

"I don't..." Exasperated, Nora slumped back in the office chair and sighed loudly. "Damn it, Esme."

"We are not on a first name basis," Esme snapped.

"Fine. Ms. Bloom, I am not going to throw you out on the street. I told you, I can help you relocate." Remembering how Oliver had reprimanded her for thinking a move

would enliven the Lounge, she decided not to mention it. “Downtown LA is full of available spaces, I’m sure we could find one suitable for the Lounge.”

“The Lounge is fine where it is. It’s beloved where it is.”

Nora sighed. “I know you love this location. I know the clientele loves it.” She spread her hands wide and shrugged. “Love isn’t profitability.”

“Love is more important than money,” Esme snarled.

She was so tired of these spats. True, a part of Nora couldn’t refute Esme’s assertion. But the part of her that had in fact chosen her career success and money over love was louder. She stood up, drawing her shoulders back. For the first time, she realized how much taller she was than Esme, and that, momentarily, was a very distracting thought. She shook it away and tried to stand even taller. “Not in real estate, it’s not.”

Fire lit Esme’s wide brown eyes. “You are heartless, disrespectful, greedy, selfish?—”

“Your impression of a thesaurus is impressive,” Nora taunted, enjoying the way sparks all but crackled off of Esme’s halo of curls and flowers. “But unless you’ve got money behind it, I’m sorry, Ms. Bloom, the Lounge can’t stay here.”

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Esme's breasts heaved with fury under their skimpy silver covering. Her eyes when they met Nora's were wild with anger, her hands opening and closing in fists. Gently, Nora reached out to take her by the shoulders and move her away from the door, so she could leave. They'd just keep going around and around the same fruitless racetrack if she didn't.

But as soon as her hands touched Esme's bare skin, something sparked between them, and then?—

—then, Esme reached up, batting Nora's hands aside, and pulled Nora down into an explosive, scorching, unexpected kiss.

As furious as she was at the entire situation, Esme had been unable to resist that whatever-it-was-feeling that pulled her towards Nora Hartley all night. The confidence, the way she looked in that pale, expensive pantsuit, the way she was so, so much taller than Esme. She was as appealing as she was infuriating. Or maybe the fact that she was infuriating was part of her appeal to Esme.

Whatever the case, the heat that had been simmering just under Esme's skin since Nora had walked through the door that night erupted when the woman's hands touched her shoulders. She needed to know what it was like to kiss that wide, full mouth with its twisted little smirk, to taste Nora's lipstick and the martini she'd been drinking earlier.

Already energized by their argument, Esme was electrified as their lips met, her nerve endings alight as she gently bit down on Nora's bottom lip and then, less gently, tugged and sucked at it. Her hands slid up under the sleek blonde bob, silky smooth

strands of hair sliding through her fingers as she sought to pull Nora ever further in.

A tiny little groan escaped from Nora's mouth as Esme clutched a fistful of hair at the nape of her neck and pulled. Before Esme knew what was happening, Nora's hands were under her ass and Esme was being lifted up, her back pressed against the office door.

"Jesus," Nora whispered into Esme's mouth, and Esme hummed happily to hear it. She hitched her legs up to wrap them around Nora's waist. As she did, the hemline of her dress rode all the way up to her hips, and the cotton gusset of her panties, warm and damp with her sudden arousal, made direct contact with the skin of Nora's stomach where her vest had also lifted slightly.

Now it was Esme's turn to groan. No one had been as close to her pussy besides herself in years. Her clit throbbed where it was pressed against Nora's tense torso, and she let her head fall back against the door. To her delight, Nora took advantage of Esme's undefended throat and leaned forward to plant a firm bite just under Esme's ear that made her shudder with pleasure.

Slowly, Nora peeled one hand from Esme's ass and stroked it over her thigh before wedging it between their bodies. Her thumb pressed down over Esme's clit, rubbing ever so maddeningly slightly. Esme let out a gasp and her hands wound tighter around locks of Nora's hair. Her entire world narrowed down to the mouth at her throat, her hands in Nora's hair, Nora's thumb pressed lightly over her clit. Esme's back arched.

"Nora," she whispered, and it was a plea. "Nora," she said again, more loudly as sense began to invade and she realized who she was with, what she was doing. Horrified, Esme pulled her hands free and began to squirm out of Nora's grasp. "No, no, I can't do this. What is this?"

“Esme,” Nora began as she carefully began to lower Esme down to the floor. “Wait, what?—?”

“Leave, please leave,” Esme said, a blush of humiliation burning its way up her neck and face. She couldn’t look at the woman, not now, not after what had so nearly happened. Squirming away, she sat in her desk chair and put her face in her hands.

There was a sigh, and then the office door swiftly opened and closed with a click. Esme sat, frozen, unable even to breathe. What had she done? Why had she let herself give in to a moment of madness with the woman who was threatening her entire livelihood?

And why, she wondered as she crossed her legs, her core still warm and full and aroused, did she wish she’d let Nora finish?

7

“Fuuuuuuuuck,” Nora groaned, her body tensing and arching up off of her bed. The fingers of her left hand closed tightly around a handful of her Egyptian cotton bedsheets, digging into the fabric as her breath hissed out between her clenched teeth. Her right hand pressed her favorite toy tight against her clit as she came for the third time that Sunday afternoon, visions of the kiss between her and Esme playing like a movie against the back of her closed eyelids.

She wrenched her hand and the toy out of her panties, wishing it was Esme’s hand that had worked the orgasm out of her. Or better, her tongue. After that kiss last night, the way Esme’s hot mouth had bitten and sucked at Nora’s lips, Nora just knew that mouth would make her come until she was all but blind. With another groan, she shoved the toy back in between her thighs to tease one more orgasm out of her throbbing clit.

Nora had been in bed since she got home Saturday evening, spending way too much on DoorDash to keep herself fed between bouts of getting herself off to dreams of Esme. Her Lelo had only gotten a break when she slept, and she'd made extra sure to get it onto its charger before she drifted off each night, so that it never had a chance to run out of juice at an inopportune time. Having long been a woman who got herself off efficiently, mostly to tend to a need and get herself to sleep each night, this Nora who'd been unable to keep her hands out of her underwear for a hot second was a new creature. She wasn't sure what to make of it.

One last soft sigh escaped from her as she finished off, and this time when Nora pulled the toy free, she set it firmly aside and rolled out of bed with reluctance. She needed a quick shower to wash the sex and sleep off of her body, and then she was going to make herself go to the gym. Maybe if she got in a really taxing workout, she'd be too tired to fantasize about Esme.

An hour later, she was walking into the gym and realizing she'd made a terrible mistake. Because on a Sunday afternoon in Los Angeles, her gym was full of women of all ages wearing tiny tops and tinier shorts, their legs on full display. Normally, this was no problem, but normally, Nora would not have spent a few blissful minutes on a Saturday night with Esme Bloom's legs wrapped around her waist, her warm throbbing core pressed against Nora's stomach. Now, after two days of masturbation and fantasizing about Esme, seeing any woman with strong, bare legs was making Nora weak in the knees.

Resolutely, she chose an elliptical machine that faced only a back wall of the gym and shoved her AirPods into her ears. As her favorite 90s techno workout playlist began to blast away and she felt the burn starting in her arms and legs, Nora wondered if it would be too over the top to wear her sunglasses while she took her post-workout shower in the locker room. If she was getting wound up just seeing women walking around in shorts, she didn't want to think about the effect seeing them wet, naked, and soaped up might have on her. Nora groaned at the idea and had

to stop the elliptical.

On second thought, she decided, hopping back off of the machine and hustling her way out of the gym without making eye contact with anyone, maybe it's time for me to order that home elliptical setup I've been thinking about.

For now, she was going to go for a run on the beach and do her very, very best to not look at anyone for the rest of the weekend.

Since the Indigo Lounge was closed on Sundays, Esme and the gang had long ago made it a tradition to go on a late-afternoon hike and picnic at Griffith Park at least once a month. Everyone brought their own drinks and a selection of snacks to share, and they'd meet at the entrance to the Firebreak Trail and then choose which route they felt like tackling that day. After a vigorous hour of hiking, they'd stop for a long, leisurely picnic before making their way back to the Trails and splitting up again.

It was a good way to get Ruby off of her laptop, Sasha out of the kitchen, Cam away from whatever lady she was romancing that week, and Esme out of her damn head for once. Mia sometimes joined them, but never Harper, who simply "did not do hiking, my dears."

Today, Mia and Harper had gone on a drive up the 101 to Montecito for a romantic getaway, and Ruby was on a plane to visit her family in New York for a high school graduation, so it was just Esme, Sasha, and Cam gathering at the park. Esme had arrived first and was waiting for the others at a picnic table near the entrance. She'd slung her backpack onto the table and was picking at a loose thread on the edge of a strap. Her thoughts were full of Nora Hartley and that kiss.

She wanted to think that she didn't know what had gotten into her, but that would be a lie. Regardless of how upset she was about Nora's likely purchase of the Fairchild Building—and the subsequent closure of the Indigo Lounge—Esme could not deny

that she'd been interested in Nora from the second the woman had walked through the door of the Lounge.

Each time they'd argued had been as arousing as it had been infuriating. But it wasn't supposed to get so out of hand. Esme was ashamed of her utter lack of control when it came to Nora Hartley. She either exploded in anger or, apparently, ended up writhing in the woman's arms. She'd never experienced anything like this in her life.

Nora's assuredness, the energy of the argument, the closeness of Esme's office... the skin-to-skin contact between them when Nora grabbed her shoulders had completely undone Esme. Just thinking about the way electricity had rocketed through her at Nora's touch made Esme squeeze her thighs together under the picnic table and take in a deep, shuddering breath.

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The beep of a car horn startled Esme out of her fog, and she glanced towards the park entrance to see Cam parking her car and Sasha rolling up on her mountain bike. Esme panicked, certain she was blushing like a fire engine, and that wouldn't do at all. If she couldn't explain this thing with Nora to herself, she certainly wouldn't be able to explain it to her friends! Esme grabbed one of her water bottles out of a pocket on the side of her backpack and began to chug it in an effort to cool down.

After half the bottle was gone, Esme felt reasonably calm and able to make eye contact with her friends as they arrived. She even managed to wave. Cam was grinning as she got out of her tiny little Hyundai, unfolding her lanky limbs one by one. She pulled her ancient blue Jansport backpack out and slammed the door behind her. When she spotted Esme, she waved back and called out, "So, we all survived."

"Well, we're all the ones who didn't drink because we were working, so, yeah." Sasha finished locking her bicycle up and adjusted the straps on her own backpack. "Ruby texted me before she got on the plane. I think she has some regrets."

Esme stood up and slung her backpack on, fiddling with the straps to disguise her returning blush at the thought of regrets. Did she regret last night? What did it mean that she couldn't definitively answer that? She knelt to check the laces of her trail runners.

Sasha nudged at her with her knee. "You okay there, E? I know it was a late night, but you're the morning person of us all, and it's after three."

"I'm fine! Fine, fine." Was her voice squeaking? Esme shot to her feet and put on her best smile. "What have we all got today? I stopped at Whole Foods and got those

marinated mushrooms and the Brie we all loved last time.”

“I’ve got a few of those great mini-baguettes from that bakery by my place, they’re all fresh and crusty. We can make sandwiches out of your stuff, E.” Cam shook her shaggy bangs—her short hair was blue this month—back away from her face. She didn’t seem to think anything was odd with Esme at all, which was nice.

But when Esme turned to look at Sasha, there was still a furrow of worry between the chef’s eyebrows as she met Esme’s gaze while tightening her red bandana around her head. “I made a vegan garlic aioli,” Sasha said slowly, lowering her hands. “And I brought some caramelized onion and fig tarts with goat cheese.”

Cam and Esme gawked at her. “When did you have the time and energy to make those?” Cam demanded, throwing her hands in the air. “Did you sleep?”

“Sure. They didn’t take long to make. I used puff pastry. I just thought we deserved a nice snack after all the work we put in this week.” Sasha tilted her head. “I even saw E going back to her office in the middle of the party. I know you work harder than any of us, but was something really that important?”

Esme tilted her chin up and kept her gaze steady. “I just needed a breather. I’m not like you kids; I can’t go all night long the way you can.”

Cam scoffed. “Please, E. You’ll outlive us all. I know for a fact you’re going to outpace us on this hike today—just like you always do.”

“Fitness and social batteries are different,” Esme said primly, heading off towards the trailhead and beckoning them after her. “Let’s pick a trail and get moving.”

But as she walked off, she felt Sasha’s eyes on her back, still curious, still unsatisfied with her answers. What could she do about it, though? Esme still had a million

unanswerable questions for her own self.

The overstimulating gym visit, the vigorous beach jog, a subsequent very long bike ride through Pacific Palisades and along the Marvin Braude trail... they'd done nothing to help Nora's libido. But they had kept her out of the house, and she was now exhausted and hungry.

She was also sweaty and felt fairly gross, but she didn't dare go back to her house yet. Even getting into her luxurious, custom-built shower wasn't safe. It was fitted with a deep bench seat and a powerful detachable shower head. If Nora got in there right now, she was never getting out again.

So she'd called her driver and had him drop her off near the Fairchild Building. The Indigo Lounge was closed on Sundays, but there was a huge open market hall nearby with plenty of food vendors. Nora could get a late lunch and eat at one of the outdoor tables that faced the Lounge. Maybe Esme would stop by the place for some reason. She didn't need to talk to her, but she did want to just maybe see her for a moment.

Why, exactly, she wanted that, Nora didn't know.

Wandering through the stalls, she picked up an array of delicious nibbles, from gourmet sandwiches with a side of fresh vegetables to a green pressed juice and a tray of miniature birthday cake pancakes. She took her bounty of treats to a table that let her see the Indigo Lounge but hopefully wouldn't let her be noticed by anyone who might let themselves in there. Nora arranged her goodies on the tiny table and began to nibble on a celery stick, her eyes firmly fixed on the Lounge but her thoughts far, far away.

Fifteen years ago, Nora had been a young upstart with a huge corporate real estate firm. She was living in a little studio apartment in Culver City, she bought all her clothing from Nordstrom Rack, and her car was a second or third-hand Volvo that

she'd lucked out buying and kept in immaculate condition.

But she had dreams. And she had Leah. Lovely, sweet, bohemian Leah with her sparkling blue eyes and wild brown curls. Leah worked for a non-profit agency that worked to help unhoused women get what they needed in terms of hygiene, grooming, and clothing so they could better their chances of succeeding in job interviews. Nora had met her at Nordstrom Rack one day during a shopping trip. Nora had needed a new pair of black patent pumps. Leah was talking earnestly to the store manager about donating any backstock they had to her agency.

For Nora, it had been love at first sight. She'd never met anyone like Leah, so idealistic and determined. So authentic—there was no pretense with Leah, unlike all of Nora's colleagues in the firm, unlike anyone she'd grown up with. Leah was direct and efficient, but she had a huge heart and a firm belief that she could help change the world for the better. She was the best person Nora had ever met.

When Nora closed her first big building purchase as the lead of a team, Leah had gotten her a pair of Jimmy Choo heels in celebration. The mesh and leather pumps had been discounted, and Leah had found them through one of her many clothing sources, but they had still cost her a fair amount of money—Leah confessed later that she'd had to eat plain pasta, canned beans, and produce purchased out of the bruised bin for two months to get the shoes. But they were Nora's first designer shoes, and they'd been a thoughtful, hard-won gift from the best person she knew, and the only person she'd ever fallen in love with.

It was part of what had made it so hard for her to decide to end things with Leah. Every time she wore the shoes and worked late instead of going out with Leah, she'd look at her feet and feel the love and the guilt of it all. Whenever she chose a work function over going home to Leah—and saw the disappointment in Leah's eyes as she explained her choice—Nora's heart splintered a little more. She hated to hurt Leah. But she knew deep in her soul that she wanted a hugely successful career. Nora

Hartley wanted her name on a building. She wanted to never worry about the money she was spending on shoes and clothing. She wanted a house on the beach.

Nora didn't know how to balance love and the massive possibilities of her bright future. So she'd picked one, said goodbye to Leah, and wept herself to sleep for exactly one week.

On day seven, she'd looked at her swollen, bloodshot eyes in the mirror and taken a deep breath. "Life is about choices," she told herself firmly. "You made a choice. That's all you did. It's an investment in yourself and your future. You've had your crying time, now you get up and you work, and you never get yourself into this position again."

And she hadn't. Until now. Nora shook herself back to the present and looked at her lunch, surprised to find that she'd just about demolished it all, and didn't remember how any of it tasted.

Across the street, there was movement at the door of the Indigo Lounge. Nora leaned forward, eager to see if it was Esme. To her delight, it was.

Dressed in ragged jean shorts, a tank top, and a ratty old LA Dodgers baseball cap with her long curly ponytail sprouting out the back, Esme couldn't have been further from Nora in her Lululemons and Nike sneakers if she tried. But to Nora, she looked like a heaven-sent second chance at love. Nora had her designer clothing, her house on the beach, and her name on a couple of buildings in LA and San Francisco. At this time in her life, maybe she could think about finally having it all.

Except for the whole killing-Esme's-dreams thing standing in her way. Nora groaned and slumped back into her seat, watching as Esme let herself into the Lounge and disappeared from sight. Once again, she was faced with making a life-altering choice, reminded that she couldn't have it both ways. In fifteen years, it seemed that balance

still escaped her.

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Gathering her trash together, Nora stuffed it into a bin and walked off to call her driver. Maybe life would be less complicated if she just confined herself to fantasies and sex toys, after all.

8

“Not again,” Sasha snarled, slamming Ruby’s Green Goddess Smoked Tofu Panini down by the writer’s laptop so hard that a few of the homemade fried sweet potato chips Sasha only ever made for Ruby tumbled off the edge of the plate and onto the tiled bar top. Ruby jumped, eyes wide, and spun on her barstool to follow Sasha’s angry gaze. Esme, equally as startled at Sasha’s outburst, also looked up from where she was checking on the bar’s supply of cold beers and ciders. When her inquisitive eyes landed on the Lounge door, she immediately understood what had ignited Sasha’s fury.

And she blushed up to the roots of her hair because it was Nora. Esme knew she would have to encounter the woman again sometime, but four days after their Friday night tête-à-tête, in Esme’s eyes, seemed a little bit too soon. She swallowed hard. Oh, I don’t have the capacity to deal with... everything she represents. Not right now. Tuesday nights were a surprisingly big draw for the Indigo Lounge, because they had a Diversity Drag night each week. But tonight would be kicking off a month-long weekly diverse drag pageant, with kings and queens of all genders coming to compete for a crown. It had been in the works for months, lots of publicity had been put into it, and after the Chappell Roan Tribute Night last week, interest had only spiked. Esme remained up to her ears in phone calls and last-minute scheduling changes.

It was too much. She could not face Nora at this moment. Getting her out of here was

the only solution. Striding over to the entrance, Esme blocked Nora's path into the Lounge. "What are you doing here?"

To her surprise, Nora held her hands up. "Peace. I came for an early dinner."

"You came for dinner. Here." Esme scoffed and shook her head. "It is literally insane that you expect me to believe that."

"Okay, I also hoped we might be able to talk. Calmly." Nora kept her hands up. "I don't want to fight anymore, Es... Ms. Bloom."

"We don't have to fight." Esme tossed her hair back over her shoulder and smiled winningly. "All you have to do is give up your selfish quest to buy this building and throw me out." And go very far away so I don't have to think about what happened between us anymore...

"If I don't buy the Fairchild, someone else will," Nora snapped, dropping her hands. "And they may not be as inclined to help you successfully relocate as I am."

As painful as her actual words were, Esme was pleased that she'd gotten a rise out of the real estate tycoon. She was usually so calm and poised, it annoyed Esme no end. This kind of reaction was like catnip. She tilted her head and broadened her smile. "But those are my terms."

Nora looked down at her shoes and took a deep breath. Then another. Esme got the feeling that she was trying to keep her temper under control, and her delight increased. She also wondered what it might be like if Nora actually lost control of that temper. And if she dared to provoke her...

"It doesn't have to be like this." Nora's soft words interrupted Esme's wandering thoughts. "I feel like we don't have to be at odds all the time. It's the same argument

going in circles.” Her blue eyes were clear and steady when her gaze met Esme’s. “Can we talk? Try to get on some kind of less antagonistic footing?”

Her apparent sincerity and—dared Esme even think it—something akin to vulnerability softened the edges of her sharp, polished beauty. And in turn, this softened Esme’s protect and attack instincts. “I…”

“If you have time now, I’d like it if you can join me for dinner.” Nora looked around at the Lounge, at the parade of drag performers that was beginning to trickle through the door and past her. “We can eat here, or we can go somewhere.”

Esme shook her head. “I can’t. We have a big weekly event starting tonight. There’s no way I can leave. You see how people are already arriving, and it doesn’t start for another hour.”

Nora nodded. “I do see. But Esme…” Her voice dropped, and Esme couldn’t find it in her to protest the familiarity. “I think we do need to talk.”

Nervously, Esme glanced around. Sasha and Ruby were watching them closely, along with Cam who’d just arrived to help out at the bar for the night. They all looked curious but were too far away to have overheard Nora. Esme cleared her throat. “Can you come back around 4 AM? At the back entrance.”

Hesitation crossed Nora’s face, but after a moment, she nodded. “I can make that work.”

“Bring Chinese food. There’s an all-night takeout kitchen a couple blocks over.” Esme stuck her hands into the pockets of her long, dark red skirt. “I get hungry after big nights like this one’s going to be, and Sasha closes the kitchen at midnight. The takeout kitchen knows me. Tell them you want an Esme special.”

“An Esme special. Got it.” Nora smiled softly. “Well, I’ll go find myself something for dinner and get some work done. See you at 4 AM.”

“See you,” Esme replied as Nora left. She walked back over to the bar, chewing on her bottom lip.

“What was that about?” Sasha was almost belligerent, her chin up as Esme slid behind the bar. “What did she want?”

“Dinner and a chat.” Esme thought it best to leave things as simple as possible. She was still trying to process the last few minutes, and she didn’t want to outright lie if she didn’t have to.

Cam was frowning. “What could she want to talk about?”

“I’m not sure.” That much was true. “I didn’t give her a chance to tell me.” Also, technically, true.

“You two looked almost friendly,” Ruby noted sarcastically as she slid her laptop into her messenger bag. “Is that a good thing?”

Esme had tied her curls back into a low ponytail for the evening, and she pulled it over her shoulder now to fiddle with the end of it. “I don’t know. I really don’t know anything,” she admitted, and it was a statement that had never been truer in her life.

Sasha was still scowling. “Well, I don’t think you should get too friendly with her. Remember, E, she just wants to shut us down. Profits over sentiment, didn’t you say she said?”

“Something like that.” Esme felt her cheeks going pink again, because remembering the conversation on Friday evening only made her remember what else had happened

Friday evening. Which she was pretty sure Nora wanted to talk about more than anything else.

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And maybe do more than talk...

“I’ve got to go get payroll done,” Esme blurted, and scurried off to her office, trying to ignore the feeling of her friends’ stares on her back.

The takeout kitchen had indeed known what an “Esme special” was. And when they’d described the main dish of spicy garlic and green bean noodles to Nora, it had sounded so good, she ordered one for herself. Now she had a steamy plastic bag of Chinese food spreading delicious aromas all through her little Audi A3.

Nora didn’t often drive herself anywhere, but she didn’t want to involve any more people in her evening escapade than necessary. And it was good for her to keep her driving skills sharp, and to get the Audi out of her climate-controlled garage a couple of times a month. So, now here she was, driving up into the alleyway behind the Fairchild to park behind the Indigo Lounge and sneak in through the back door.

The back entrance was well lit, to her relief, and the back door had an intercom buzzer. Esme hadn’t given her instructions on whether to come right in or buzz. Nora jiggled the door handle experimentally—locked. Buzz it was. She pressed the red button.

“Hello?” Esme’s voice asked tinnily through the speaker box.

“It’s me.”

The door clicked and cracked open slightly. Nora let herself in, pulling the door firmly behind her. The back hallway of the Indigo Lounge was silent, dimly lit, and a

bit creepier than the rest of the place had been. She began to tiptoe quietly towards the warm pink light of the main area of Lounge she could see ahead.

This back hallway was crowded with stacks of extra chairs and electrical equipment for the stage. It also seemed longer than it ought to be, but Nora figured that was just her nerves and the much-too-silent silence in the air. She desperately wanted to be in the main part of the Lounge but had to be careful in the darkness.

Suddenly, Esme appeared in the open doorway just as Nora reached it. Nora nearly jumped out of her skin in fright, and she heard Esme shriek at the sight of her. Stumbling backwards, Nora tripped and, thankfully, fell into the seat of a chair. The bag of Chinese food slipped from her hand and thumped onto the floor.

“You scared me,” both women exclaimed at the same time. Esme had her hand over her heart, and Nora was clutching her suddenly churning stomach.

In the next instant, they both dissolved into faintly hysterical giggles. The adrenaline that had flooded Nora faded to a more normal level. She reached down and picked up the intact bag of food before she got to her feet. “You’re lucky they knot these things up so tight,” she said, holding up the hot bag of food for Esme to see. “Otherwise, neither of us were getting fed tonight, and I bet you get real mean when you’re hungry.”

“I neither confirm nor deny the accusation.” Esme tilted her chin into the air. “But I am glad it’s safe. Follow me.”

They walked onto the little dance floor and then Esme took a right towards another hallway. A hallway Nora recognized. She realized that they were going to Esme’s office. The scene of the crime, she thought.

The office really was hardly more than a very tall closet, Nora observed. It was easier

to look around it now that she wasn't distracted by Esme dolled up like a naughty silver Tinkerbell. Esme's paper-strewn desk was built into one wall, with three sturdy shelves full of binders and knickknacks secured into the wall above it. The chair Nora had sat in last Friday evening was a plain IKEA rolling one, plain black, with a colorful Indian sari silk pillow in the seat for extra cushioning. As working spaces went, it was functional but still with a bit of personality.

What was impressive about it was something she'd been too preoccupied to notice on Friday—the way every wall was almost tiled in neatly arranged framed, autographed photos of women, presumably ones who had performed at the Lounge. Since the room was far taller than it was wide, there were a lot of photos, stretching up the walls beyond Nora's ability to see who might be in the ones on the top rows.

Esme followed her gaze up. "Twenty years of Lounge history," she whispered, smiling with pride. "Cam and Sasha helped me put these up a few years ago. They left plenty of room for new photos, but it's almost filled up now." She pointed to a photo of a young woman with pink and black hair singing behind a keyboard. "I just added this one yesterday. Chloe was here last week, and I've had a couple of music industry people ask me for her contact info. I hope that leads to something good for her."

Nora looked at the array of photos again in awe. She knew this couldn't even be all of the people who had performed here over the years. These were the ones Esme wanted to remember above all, the memories that kept her going. And for Nora, it was another reminder of the impact the Indigo Lounge had. She was admittedly disconnected from the lesbian community, but even she knew who Melissa Etheridge and k.d. lang were. That even icons like these two had played the Lounge spoke loudly to its place in the sapphic zeitgeist. Nora swallowed hard.

Esme squeezed past her to stack some papers out of the way, then sat on the desk, pushing herself back and then reaching a hand out to Nora, wiggling her fingers.

“Give me. Give me, give me, give me.”

Nora handed the bag over and sat down in the desk chair. “They’re both the same thing. Take whichever one you want.”

Pulling at the stubborn knot made from the handles of the plastic bag, Esme looked at Nora and quirked up one dark eyebrow. “You got an Esme special?”

“It sounded good.” Nora accepted the chopsticks and cardboard container that Esme passed to her. “How long have you been going there that they named a dish after you?”

Esme looked up towards the ceiling, a thoughtful expression on her face as she tapped her chopsticks against her lips. “Let’s see... they opened about two years after I did. So that long.” She smiled and took a bite of her noodles. Swallowing, she went on. “I was broke back then. They were, too. But they always made sure to include extra rice for me when I could order from them, and I made sure to send everyone over to them when they got hungry after a long night of dancing here. We helped each other.”

“Ah.” Nora heard the explanation but didn’t really register it. On the desk, Esme was sitting with her legs crossed, and that made her long skirt ride up. It didn’t reveal nearly as much as the silver minidress had, but the glimpse of her bare calf distracted Nora all the same. Clearing her throat, she looked around the office. Next to Esme on the desk was another framed photo, but this one was smaller, and not autographed. It was Esme with a young blonde woman who had her curly hair and big brown eyes. Nora pointed with her chopsticks. “Is that your sister?”

Esme looked down at the photo. “No. My daughter. Holly.”

That revelation rocked Nora like a thunderbolt. “You have a daughter?”

Again, Esme raised an eyebrow. “Lesbians have children, you know.”

“I’m not that out of touch, thank you. I do know that.” She looked at the photo more closely. “She looks like you.”

“The resemblance ends there, I’m afraid.” Esme chuckled and bit off some more noodles. “She’s far braver and more adventurous than I am. That, she gets from her father.”

“You know who her father is?”

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“It was the late 90s. I didn’t have health insurance. I really had no choice but to know who her father was.” Another chuckle. “Keith was just a friend I met while he was doing his PhD at UCLA, and I was working in a coffee shop on campus. I wanted a kid, and after we talked about it a few times, he volunteered.”

Nora felt her eyebrows shoot up into her hairline. “That sounds risky as hell.”

“Well, it would have been, except we were not at all each other’s types.” Esme gave her a significant look. “We got tested, and we managed to make it work enough times to produce Holly. Keith went back to Australia after his doctorate was done and I got my girl all to myself.”

“So he’s not involved.” Nora was amazed at how forthcoming and even friendly Esme was being, and she couldn’t resist being nosy. “A faraway gay Australian PhD father sounds like the perfect setup.”

“It really was. But he did meet Holly later, when she was a teenager, and helped her get her Australian passport. She moved there to stay with him in Brisbane after she graduated high school.”

“You must miss her,” Nora ventured.

Esme shrugged, but there was a faraway look in her eyes. “I do, of course. But she’s a very talented surfer, and Australia has some of the best surfing in the world. So she’s following her dreams. I’d be a terrible parent if I didn’t encourage that.”

That made sense. And was an admirable stance. Nora felt certain that Esme hadn’t

told her daughter about her troubles, not wanting to make the girl feel like she had to come home and support her mother. But then, Esme had one hell of a support system here already. From her Lounge employees and her regulars, and even local businesses. Hell, even two of the Fairchilds were on her side.

Nora wondered what that kind of support felt like. She'd always had to claw her way through and up on her own. Her own family had been financially supportive up through college, but otherwise were a holidays-only kind of folks, so she rarely saw them. And they hadn't exactly been the warm and cuddly parent type anyway. She'd bet anything Esme had been a very attached mother.

Suddenly, it occurred to Nora to do some mental math. "You were a single lesbian mother when you opened up this place?"

"I wondered how long it would take you to get there." Esme smirked. "Yes. Holly was three when I started trying to figure out how to open up my dream sapphic community hub. I was visiting banks and landlords with a toddler clinging to my skirt hem. In the early 2000s, though, that was a surprising asset. They wanted to help a scrappy, young, marginalized mom with a can-do attitude. What a time to be alive that was."

Nora could picture it absolutely perfectly in her head. The neatly dressed plucky bohemian mother, less gray in her hair but no less steel in her spine. The tiny towheaded daughter in some kind of colorful romper, one hand clutching a wad of her mother's long skirt and her thumb firmly in her tiny mouth. Yes, that was a vision any California businessman would have been hard put to resist at that time. They could be dreadfully easy to manipulate, as Nora knew herself.

Easy to manipulate... She sat up straight and shook her head. Her personal interest and attraction to Esme had blinded her. "You're telling me all of this for a reason."

“You asked,” Esme pointed out, but there was something a little too frank about the look in her eyes.

“Yes, I did.” And she’d also been braced for some form of antagonism since she’d arrived. Esme had softened enough earlier to invite her here to eat and talk, but that didn’t mean Nora had to relax entirely. She wanted to be ready in case she said something to set Esme off. And she’d thought that eventually, Esme would get annoyed at her nosiness.

Yet, that hadn’t happened. Esme hadn’t told her to where to shove her questions. She’d answered them in full detail, friendly, forthright, and matter of fact. Nora frowned. “What are you playing at?”

“Uh, nothing. Weren’t you the one who said it might be good for us to find some kind of non-antagonistic ground?” Esme set down her container of noodles and leaned forward, her hands gripping the edge of the desk. “I am trying to meet you halfway here.”

Nora inhaled and held her breath for a moment while she thought. What she wanted to say would definitely start a fight, so she had to find a better way to put it. She breathed out and chose her words with care. “I feel like you have an agenda here, with what you’re telling me.”

Esme threw her hands in the air. “You asked me questions! I answered! What agenda could I possibly...” Her eyes went wide. “Oh, come on.”

“I just think—” Nora began, but stopped when Esme shook her head violently, her curls flying.

“You ‘just think’ that I’m naïve enough to believe that you could be swayed by the can-do story of a lesbian mommy and her baby girl just trying to make their way in a

cold, hard world.” Esme snorted. “Please! Give me some credit. I have been nothing but direct with you about my feelings and intentions. Why the hell would I resort to cheap, manipulative tactics like that now?”

I fucked up, Nora realized. Of course Esme wouldn’t consciously manipulate a situation. She, Nora, absolutely would. But Esme was not Nora. Esme was making a true effort to keep the peace that Nora herself had asked for, and now Nora had gone and blown it. What to do?

While she thought, Esme moved to push herself off of the desk. Nora guessed that her goal was to squeeze past and leave, but the office was just so small, and they were so close. Esme’s feet hit the floor, and Nora saw consternation flash across her face as she realized she’d landed standing between Nora’s thighs.

Nora seized her opportunity and grabbed Esme by the hips. “I’m sorry,” she breathed, crumpling the slippery, stretchy material of Esme’s skirt under her fingers. Their eyes met.

She expected Esme to push her away, to squeeze her way to the door and stomp out.

To have Esme reach her hand out and stroke it over Nora’s hair, down her cheek and along her jawline, then cup Nora’s chin and hold it with surprising firmness... that was a surprise.

Nora held her breath.

Esme didn’t know what had possessed her. Not at any point today, but especially not now.

She held Nora’s chin in her hand, her thumb stroking over Nora’s cheek. The energy between them tonight wasn’t as explosive as it had been Friday, but it was no less

undeniable. Esme knew she should still be angry at the vague accusation of manipulation Nora had leveled at her, but at this moment all she could do was stare into the clear blue depths of her eyes.

Esme had such a weakness for a strong woman who wasn't afraid to be a little subservient sometimes.

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Gently, she pulled upward on Nora's chin. Nora took the hint and stood up, while Esme pushed herself back onto her desk.

When their lips met, Esme sucked a harsh breath in through her nose at the way it set all her nerve endings alight. Entire flocks of butterflies felt like they were taking flight in her stomach. And between her legs, things were heating up in a hurry.

This time, she wasn't going to stop Nora. She knew deep down she should, that if she didn't, things were going to get very complicated very quickly. Yet as bad an idea as this very much was, she also knew they couldn't go on with the push-pull of attraction strung between them. So why not give in? Why not find something good in all the conflict?

Her hands slid over the soft fabric of Nora's loose white t-shirt, moved to pull the hem of it out of her blue jeans. Under Esme's palms, the skin of Nora's ribcage was velvety and warm.

She wasn't wearing a bra. As Esme's hands traveled upward and cupped her breasts, Nora's nipples pebbled tight under her thumbs. Esme pulled back and looked Nora in the eye.

"I don't wear bras after 10 PM," Nora informed her in a husky rasp that sent shivers through Esme, straight to her vulva. Before she could reply, her mouth was covered by Nora's again, and the more Esme stroked her thumbs over Nora's bare nipples, the harder she found herself being kissed.

Nora groaned into her mouth when Esme unbuttoned her jeans and worked a hand

into her panties. Slowly, Esme's fingers slid through the warm, wet softness she found there, and she let the pad of her middle finger rub softly on Nora's throbbing clit. "Fuck," she mumbled into Esme's mouth, her breath hot and ragged.

Esme kept one hand up Nora's shirt, plucking at her nipple, and with the other she continued her relentless, gentle friction in Nora's panties. She loved the soft sighs and whimpers Nora was making into her mouth, gulped them down like they were wine as she played with Nora. Slowly slipping her fingers gently in and out of her. Teasing through the wetness before rubbing her in strong, circular motions. Desperate to please.

Quicker than she would have thought, Nora's body went stiff, and she ripped her mouth from Esme's to let out a long, guttural moan. Head thrown back, eyes closed, teeth clenched tight, Nora was the hottest sight Esme had seen in a while. Her hands were pulled free from their sensual tasks as Nora fell back to sit down in the desk chair again.

"Sorry," Nora breathed, eyes still closed. "It's just that I've been dreaming of fucking you all weekend. I'm kinda embarrassed how quickly I came."

Before Esme could even begin to process that, Nora had yanked the chair close, pulled Esme's bottom to the edge of the desk, and had both of her hands up Esme's skirt. Making quick work of Esme's own black cotton bikini panties, Nora had the skirt rucked up around Esme's waist and before she could even gasp, Nora's hands were on her ass and Nora's eager mouth was on Esme's hot, wet folds.

Esme's head fell back, and she let her hand move again to Nora's head, her fingers combing through the sleek blonde locks as Nora ate her out with a skill Esme hadn't encountered in a long, long time. She took her time tasting Esme, letting her tongue trace through the wet heat of her vulva, spending just enough time sucking on Esme's clit to make her breath quicken before pulling away and starting the sweetly

agonizing journey all over again.

At last, Nora began to concentrate on licking and sucking on Esme's clit, and all of Esme's focus went there, pleasure washing through her as she pulled Nora's head closer. Her free hand reached up to grab the edge of one of the shelves overhead, and she gripped it like her life depended on it. Nora pushed two fingers deeply inside of Esme, as broad strokes with the flat of Nora's tongue continued to please her shaking body.

Esme's hand clenched in Nora's hair as she came so hard she couldn't make a sound beyond one desperate, deep gasp. If the shelf hadn't been so firmly bolted into the concrete wall, she might have pulled it down over the two of them with the intensity of her orgasm.

Shudders and aftershocks rocketed through her, and she was only vaguely aware of Nora pulling away and tugging her skirt back down. Of Nora resting her head in Esme's lap as Esme made the slow, sparkling journey back to reality.

Carefully, gently, slowly, Esme untangled her hands from their death grips on Nora's hair and on the shelf. Her breathing was uneven, her harsh exhalations the only sound in her tiny office. The smell of sex filled the room, warm and deliciously earthy, a scent Esme hadn't been aware she missed until it was surrounding her.

She looked down at Nora, who lifted her head and looked back up at Esme with a smirky little smile.

Oh, Esme thought. Oh, I am in trouble now.

Alexandra Fairchild's ratty little face was twisted into a scowl. "How can you

possibly need more time to make a decision here? We've conceded so much to you, we're practically paying you to take this crumbling wreck off our hands!" She glanced at her two brothers, both of whom, Nora was amused to see, were expressionless in the face of her petty fury. They didn't seem inclined to speak up and help her out, which only served to enrage her further. "Okay, fuck this, and fuck all of you useless fucks."

Nora didn't so much as raise an eyebrow at the graceless swearing. "We're nearing the end of the fiscal quarter, Ms. Fairchild. Surely you can understand my desire not to close a big deal just now." She kept her tone bland and conciliatory, in a way that she knew was just going to keep pissing Alexandra off.

Inside, she was still a roiling ocean of doubt and confusion. Sure, it was wise to make big transactions at the beginning of a quarter, not the end. But that was, when it came down to it, nothing more than an excuse Nora was making. She was actively putting off her decision on the Fairchild Building for as long as she could.

"Call us when you're actually ready to close this fucking deal," Alexandra spat as she got to her feet. "No more fucking meetings, or I'm going to start sending our attorney's bills to you to pay."

Matthew shrugged at Nora and hustled out after his sister. Oliver lingered. "Having second thoughts?" he asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

"No," Nora lied. "Just tying up some loose ends."

"Like the Lounge, I hope." He cocked an eyebrow at her. "It'd be good if you were figuring out how to keep it."

"If I were, that would be my business." Nora got to her feet and offered him a tight smile. "Let your sister know I'll call her when I'm ready."

It was a clear dismissal, and she was glad that Oliver took the hint and left, closing her office door behind him. Nora sat on the edge of her desk and rubbed at her aching temples. This meeting could have been a phone call, and it was her fault it wasn't. She'd called it, mostly for the purpose of pissing Alexandra Fairchild off.

It had been two weeks since she and Esme Bloom had begun fooling around with each other in the tiny office at the Indigo Lounge. Two weeks of secretive slinks through the back hallway of the deserted hotspot, of furtive quick dinners followed by the hottest hookups Nora had ever experienced in her life.

She knew what Esme tasted like, how she felt coming around Nora's fingers. The way her breathing skipped and hitched the closer she came to her climax. Nora knew how Esme's thighs felt clenched around Nora's head, how her fingers felt combing through Nora's hair, how those same fingers felt deep inside of Nora as her own orgasm hit her like a freight train.

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Nora was elated, exhausted, and utterly conflicted by equal turns. She hadn't been able to go more than a couple of days at a time without seeing Esme again, but the late nights and scrambled sleep schedules were already starting to take their toll. Laurie was mystified by the number of rearrangements Nora was having her make to her daily schedule, all the late morning starts and early evening departures. She was a good enough assistant to not push Nora on why all the changes were happening, but Nora could feel her confusion every time.

The Fairchild wasn't Nora's only major deal in the works, of course, but it was the only one she'd ever gotten so close to the end of and began to balk on. She knew it was puzzling everyone, from Laurie and her own legal team to the Fairchilds and their legal team. But Nora simply didn't know what to do. This was something she'd never encountered before in her career.

She certainly couldn't discuss it with Esme. It weighed heavy between them every time they met, but by some silent mutual agreement, they weren't talking about it even though it was always the elephant in the room. When they were together, all Nora wanted was to touch and taste Esme, to keep chasing that euphoric high, feel the energy that crackled between them. Talking about the building acquisition and the fate of the Indigo Lounge would ruin it, and neither of them seemed inclined to go there.

Yet.

It was going to have to happen eventually. Neither she nor Esme were naïve enough to believe it wouldn't. For now, though, Nora dealt with her pent-up confusion and worry by poking at angry little bears like Alexandra Fairchild.

And by visiting the gym a lot more. Nora was relieved that once she and Esme had given in to the sexual tension between them, she no longer risked embarrassing herself staring at pretty women working out. So when she wasn't irking heiresses and confusing her assistant, Nora was on the elliptical, running like it could solve all her problems.

She checked her phone clock. 4:30 PM. A little earlier than she usually went home, but tonight was an Esme night. She could go take in a high-intensity fitness class of some kind, grab dinner, and get in a good nap before she headed for the Indigo Lounge. Eagerness put a spring in her step as she got up and grabbed her purse and blazer from the coat hooks on the wall.

Laurie looked up in surprise as Nora passed her, but Nora just tossed a cheery, "See you tomorrow!" over her shoulder as she hustled herself onto the elevator and hit the button for the ground floor.

Nora knew this couldn't go on, but God, she hadn't been so happy in such a long, long time.

The last two weeks had made Esme happier than she had been in years, but God, she hadn't seen these levels of stress since she was first opening up the Indigo Lounge.

Hell, possibly since she was a teenager exploring her newfound sexuality and trying desperately to hide it from her stern, conservative parents. Leaning on the rail of the mezzanine overlooking the dance floor, Esme stared downwards, where a parade of drag performers twinkled under the shifting rainbow lights, and saw nothing. She stuck her thumb up to her mouth and began to nibble at the skin by the nail.

Almost immediately, a hand clad in a striped fingerless mitt swatted at her. "Fingers aren't food," Ruby admonished, taking Esme's hand in both of hers.

Esme sighed. “I know. I know.”

“It’s been forever since I’ve seen you do that.” Ruby leaned on the railing as well, still holding Esme’s hand. “Is everything okay?”

“As it can be.” Esme had never been a good liar, but she could manage fudging the truth from time to time. “You know, it’s all, a lot.”

That was entirely truthful. If Ruby took her to mean that she was only referring to the impending potential eviction of the Lounge, well, so be it. And if she didn’t follow up with clarifying questions, that was hardly Esme’s fault. Esme held her breath waiting to see what direction Ruby would take the conversation in.

To her relief, Ruby elected to take the distraction route. “Did Sasha tell you about the vegan chocolate cake and vanilla bean ice cream sundae she’s been working on? It’s almost perfect. Soooooo divine, too. Each test she lets me try is better than the last.”

Esme smiled as Ruby chattered on. She wondered if Ruby would ever catch on to the fact that Sasha was head over heels for her. Had been since the day Ruby first crept through the door of the Indigo Lounge, hands wrapped around the strap of her enamel-pin festooned messenger bag, looking for somewhere to write her steamy sapphic romance novels. That was five years ago, and ever since, Ruby had been an enthusiastic taste testing focus group of one, never knowing how much of her heart and soul Sasha was putting into each dish. The entirety of the Lounge’s menu for the last five years was actually a love letter to Ruby that Sasha was too shy to read aloud in plain English.

“...anyway, I was just on my way home. It’s time to feed Winston and take him for walkies.” Winston was Ruby’s elderly Scottie dog, upon whom she doted. When she made her occasional family trips, Winston stayed with Sasha, who was allergic to dogs but, Esme knew, secretly took Claritin when she tended to him. Another little

love letter to Ruby. Esme smiled wistfully as Ruby gave her a sweet smacking kiss on the cheek—she'd have to wipe off the ruby-red lip print later—and bounded off.

What might it be like to have someone love her the way Sasha loved Ruby? Instead of the torrid, clandestine affair she'd embarked on with Nora? Esme tucked her thumbs into her fists and considered it. Sasha's love was quiet yet immense, steadily enduring.

This thing Esme had with Nora was a burning fire, confusing, intense, worrisome, addictive. Esme had known many types of love in her life, from the protective maternal affection of the lesbian couple who took her in after her parents had thrown her out, to the familial bonds she'd established with her friends and regulars. She loved her daughter desperately and missed her badly. And in her fifty years, she'd felt romantic love towards a number of beautiful women, none of which had lasted but all of which had ended amicably, because Esme did not believe in bitter endings.

And yet how could her affair with Nora end any way but bitterly? No matter how they talked about their personal lives and hobbies—Esme now knew that Nora was from the Valley, that they'd both started out middle-class and had had to claw their way towards their dreams, that they'd both understood their sexuality from a young age—before they got down to the most consistently mind-blowing sex that Esme had experienced, there was one thing they never talked about, and it was what was absolutely going to blow them up at some point.

It was a bad, bad road she was riding down, but Esme couldn't bring herself to get off it. This was nothing like she'd experienced before—and hadn't been since the first moment Nora walked through the door of the Lounge. Nora Hartley represented the destruction of Esme's life-work, her Ikegai, her purpose. But she also represented excitement on a level that Esme had never before experienced. That was a heady high Esme was hard pressed to turn her back on.

The best she could do for herself was keep these assignations to a strict schedule. Esme only allowed Nora to come by every two or three days.

She pulled her phone out of her bra and checked the time. 7:30 PM. Hours to go before she let Nora in through the back door of the Lounge again. Between her thighs, she felt herself growing warm and full just at the thought of what would happen tonight.

Trouble, trouble, trouble. Her life right now was nothing but pure trouble.

Nora's head fell back against the shelves behind Esme's desk. Her vision was dotted with sparkling little stars and her toes ached from how hard they'd curled up when Esme made her come. "Jesus Christ," she breathed. She flattened a hand out over her racing heart, willing it to slow down.

Esme, sitting in the desk chair, eased Nora's legs gently down off her shoulders and rolled back. She seemed to be looking around on the floor for something. "Where'd you throw my top?"

Blinking, Nora tried to look around the office. "It can't have gone too far. You basically work out of a closet." As her vision cleared, she spotted a crumpled wad of blue fabric piled on top of the lone filing cabinet shoved into the back corner of the little room. "Is that it, the blue thing over there?"

Esme stood up and pulled her pink-flowered bikini panties up. Pushing her hair back from her face, she squinted towards the filing cabinet. "Ah. Yes. Thank you."

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As she slid down off of Esme's desk in search of her own black thong and jeans, Nora winced. As hot as their escapades were, the fact that they were taking place in a broom closet was, quite literally, becoming painful. It simply wasn't comfortable fucking in an IKEA desk chair or on top of a wooden desktop. To say nothing of getting dressed again afterwards! Esme had it relatively easy with her loose tops, flowing skirts, and slip-on sandals or Mary Janes. Nora was as dressed down as she ever got in her button-fly Levis, loose t-shirts, and sneakers. It was better than if she'd been showing up in her designer suits, but still not easy to get into when you were one of two women getting dressed in what was basically a furnished Target dressing room.

Nora wriggled her feet into her blue Tory Burch sneakers and grimaced as her left heel crumpled the back lip of the shoe. \$300, and shoes never recovered from the heel being stepped on like that. Damn it. "We've got to find a better place to meet," she announced, taking better care with getting the second shoe on.

Esme's head popped through the neck of her top, and she looked at Nora wide-eyed. "What?"

"We can't go on like this. Your office is charming, but very, very tiny." Nora gestured around. "I'm taking ibuprofen every day for the aches and pains. I just wrecked my shoe. And I noticed you haven't replaced the glass for that photo of Janelle Monáe you cracked with your head last week."

Blushing, Esme stuffed her feet into her black pleather slides. "I've been busy."

Nora chuckled. "Okay. But how have you explained it to anyone who asked?"

“Not many people come back here besides the staff,” Esme replied, her cheeks still pink. “Only Sasha noticed. I said it had fallen down, and she seemed to buy it.” She paused while tying her hair back into a low ponytail. “Wait. You know Janelle Monáe?”

“I didn’t know she was into women, but now that I think about it, that’s somehow not surprising,” Nora mused, grabbing her Lululemon jacket up from the back corner of Esme’s desk. “No, I met her at a Meta party a couple of years ago. She played here?”

“Mm, yes, about ten years ago? She was still kind of breaking into the wider public consciousness, did a set here, everyone loved it. She’s lovely and her music is so good.” Esme handed Nora her Hermès Kelly bag. “I’ll get the glass replaced this weekend.”

“I can pay for it,” Nora offered.

“No. You pay for all our dinners already and won’t take money from me.” Esme shook her head. “Glass isn’t all that expensive. It’s fine.”

Setting her bag down, Nora reached for the afflicted photo and pulled it off the wall. She carefully ran a finger over the unbroken parts of the glass. “You know, it might be less dangerous if we just met elsewhere.” She looked at Esme, wondering how she’d react to her next words. “You could come to my house in Pacific Palisades.” Somehow, she was more nervous suggesting this than she ever had been closing a multi-billion-dollar deal. “My bed is very comfortable. I don’t even know how high the thread count on my sheets goes.”

But Esme only stared at her, mouth slightly open. “W...what?” she eventually asked.

“Come... to my house?” Her nerves began to jangle a bit more. “I just think it will be more comfortable. We can relax. Spread out.”

Esme blinked, then let out a short laugh. “Ah, no. Thank you, but no. What we have here, between us,” she gestured back and forth. “This is fun, but this is not on a me-sleeping-over-at-your-place level.”

“I mean, you don’t have to sleep over if you don’t want to, I just thought it might be nicer to have space, cushioning.” She felt like she was being straightforward here. This wasn’t complicated; she just wanted to move all their great sex over to somewhere a little cozier, that was all.

“No. No.” Esme shook her head. “Going to your house changes things, and I can’t believe you don’t see that it does.”

Nora had expected some resistance, they’d only been hooking up for two weeks, but thought there might be a playful air to any objections Esme raised. Instead, Esme actually seemed almost horrified by the thought. “Okay, would you prefer we go to yours?”

“No! No, for God’s sake. I don’t want to change things from whatever they are now.” This time when Esme shook her head, her hair came loose from its ponytail, she was so vehement. “They’re complicated enough without getting comfortable. We shouldn’t get comfortable. We really shouldn’t even be doing this at all.”

“We are, though,” Nora pointed out. “And I was pretty sure we were both enjoying it. What’s wrong with enjoying it more?”

“I can’t...” Esme waved her hands around. “No. First, it’s fucking in your bed. Then you suggest we have dinner out somewhere for some reason, maybe just because you know somewhere you think I’d like, or you think we shouldn’t spend so much time sleeping together. The goalposts would keep moving.” Reaching over, she wrenched the office door open. “I go to your house, or you come to mine, the game changes. If you’re not happy with the way things are now, then maybe we should cool off.”

This was unbelievable. “I was suggesting comfort. Literal physical comfort. Not a relationship.”

“I’m not taking any chances. I have no need to allow further trouble into my life. And you’ve been trouble from day one. I need a break.” Esme swallowed hard. “You, me, this thing here, this is enough of a problem. Can you go now?” She pointed out the door.

Not knowing what else to do, Nora rolled her eyes and left. She still didn’t know what she’d done wrong, but it looked like she was about to have a whole lot of time on her hands to think about it

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“Oh, damn it.” Esme lifted her knitting needles and squinted at the blob of fabric that dangled off of them. “I think I dropped a stitch.”

A peal of laughter rolled out from her laptop speakers. “That’s the fifth one today, Mom,” Holly chortled, with the slight Brisbane twang she’d picked up from her years in Australia and her sun-bleached blonde curls bouncing. She held up her own project, a crocheted bralette top in rainbow pastels that Esme was annoyed to see was already over halfway done after only two hours. “You sure you don’t want me to teach you how to crochet instead?”

“That’s never worked, any time you’ve tried, remember?” Esme peered more closely at the thing she was knitting, which was allegedly a “dishcloth” but which she was privately convinced was a demon sent straight from hell to torment her. “I should have taken up those diamond puzzle things.”

Holly threw her head back and barked out a belly laugh. “Sure, then you get to wrap pantyhose around a vacuum cleaner tube so you can suck up the stones after you drop

a container of them all over the floor.” She winked and wrinkled her freckle-dappled nose. “Just stick to trying to knit. I know you’ll get it.”

“I wish I had your faith in me.” Esme ripped back the cotton triangle for the fifth time and wound the ball of yarn back up. Then, before she even knew what she was doing, she’d flung the yarn across her living room, knocked over a plastic IKEA fern, and burst into tears. She could feel her daughter staring in shock as she buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

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It had been two weeks since she'd seen or heard from Nora. And she knew that she'd asked for it, that she had needed the break from the intense funfair ride that was sleeping with the enemy. The surprise was how much she missed Nora.

There hadn't even been so much as a text, not that Esme could really be shocked by that. She'd been so up and down with Nora, it amazed her that the woman hadn't gone directly back to her office, finalized the purchase of the Fairchild Building, and thrown Esme and the Lounge out posthaste. Just to be done with what Esme had been putting her through.

It was a heavy burden, made worse by not knowing what was happening with the sale. Esme almost wished Nora would go ahead and drop the guillotine. Then she'd be forced to do something. As it was, she'd spent the last two weeks vaguely poking through retail space listings, trying to find somewhere she could take the Lounge if they really had to go. The whole process was far more overwhelming than it had been twenty years ago, though, so her halfhearted efforts went nowhere.

No info on the sale. No Nora. No sex, either. Esme hadn't even touched herself since she'd asked Nora to leave. As frustrated as she was, with her newly reawakened libido wreaking daily havoc, she just didn't feel like she deserved the luxury of an orgasm.

Altogether, everything had left her irritable and short-tempered with everyone in her life, hurting feelings left and right. She'd snapped at Sasha over being asked to approve a new menu, at Ruby for asking for a liquor substitution in a drink, at Cam for calling in sick with literal strep throat. None of them were talking much to her at the moment, either, and Esme knew perfectly well that she deserved it.

“Mom?” Holly’s voice was cautious and worried. “Hey, Mom, come on. Look at me?”

“No.” Esme shook her head so her curls fell around her face and obscured her from Holly’s sight.

A heavy sigh came from the laptop. “Mom. I love you, but I didn’t get up at 8 AM to sit and watch you cry on Facetime. We were having fun, we were making things, what happened? What’s going on?”

Esme lifted her head and let out her own sigh. She grabbed a tissue from a box on her end table and dabbed away her tears. “It’s complicated, Hols.”

“I can see that. Usually takes a lot to make you cry, let alone start throwing things.” Setting aside her crocheting, Holly leaned in closer to her laptop camera, and Esme’s heart ached at how far Brisbane was from Los Angeles. She missed Holly so much, more now than ever. At this moment, all Esme wanted was a hug from her baby girl.

A good long talk was just going to have to suffice. Esme scrubbed the tears off her cheeks with the heel of her hand. “You know that someone’s trying to buy the Fairchild, and that they intend to evict the Lounge.”

“Yeah.” Holly’s sunny face clouded over and she frowned. “I remember you telling me about that bitch on wheels, what’s her name, Nell? Nina?”

“Nora.” Esme cleared her throat. “And I didn’t raise you to use that word like that, Holly Bernadette Bloom.”

Holly rolled her eyes. “I feel like we can make an exception for the woman who is literally trying to ruin your life. Anyway. So that’s still happening? What’s going on there?”

Esme squirmed. Maybe she'd undersold her situation when she'd used the word complicated. "I've been sort of seeing someone."

Holly frowned again. "What does that have to do with..." Her eyes widened. "Mom. You're kidding, right?"

"I just had to raise a smart kid." Esme cast her gaze up towards heaven and sighed. Her cheeks were hot, and she knew her entire face was bright pink as she brought her focus back down and met her daughter's incredulous eyes. "Yes, what you're thinking is correct."

"And insane. Mom, I can't believe this. You're not seriously sleeping with that woman!"

"Well, I mean, I'm not now. But yeah, okay, I was, for a little bit. Sue me." She threw her hands up. "I'm human, Hols. I'm a woman, I like women, she's good-looking, interesting, there was something there..."

"I can't believe any of that was enough to override your good sense, but sure, Mom." Holly was rubbing her temples. "I'm guessing since you said was that you sent her packing, but how come you're so upset about it? It should be good to not be involved with some ruthless tycoon in designer heels, especially one that's trying to, like, bust up your entire legacy."

"It should be, but oh, how the universe likes to laugh," Esme muttered, slumping against into the comfort of her overstuffed, secondhand couch. "I miss her."

Silence from Brisbane. A long, incredulous silence, long enough that Esme counted at least five different expressions of disbelief making their way across Holly's face. When her daughter finally spoke, her words were preceded with an actual, literal sputter. "You what?"

“I miss her, Holly. She...” The words didn’t want to come. Esme twisted her hands in her lap. “She’s strong. Smart. So driven. But there’s a romance at her core, and a level of patience I didn’t know to expect from someone so powerful and successful.” She blinked up at her living room ceiling as the tears threatened to make a reappearance. “I’ve never known anyone like her before. She’s put up with a lot from me the last few weeks.”

“She’s put up with a lot? Mom! Hello!” Holly leaned into the laptop camera again and snapped her fingers. “She wants to drive you out of the Lounge! You were telling me about your dreams for the place when I was still in a playpen. You dragged me all over LA on the bus looking for the perfect location for it, and Uncle Leonard practically gave you the spot in his building and helped you so much...” Holly shook her head in disappointment. “What would he think if he were still here?”

“I wouldn’t be in this situation if he was,” Esme pointed out. “So it’s moot.”

Holly lapsed into silence with a wordless grumble. She picked up her bralette again and resumed work on it. Esme took advantage of the silence to go retrieve her own yarn. When she came back to sit on the couch again, she watched her daughter angrily crochet for a long moment before finally saying, “I don’t expect you to understand. For anyone to understand.”

“Good, because I don’t.” Holly’s hands stilled, and she gripped her project tightly. Then she sighed. “But I don’t have to. I can see you’re miserable without her. How long has it been?”

“Two weeks.” Esme played with the ball of yarn in her lap, rolling it back and forth in her hands. “I threw her out of my office for suggesting we take our, um, activities to a more comfortable place.”

Holly’s face was a picture. “You were screwing around in that broom closet you call

an office? Jesus, I'm surprised she didn't dump you first."

"I told you, she's patient beyond reason." And I don't deserve it.

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“Clearly.” Holly sounded impressed, and Esme was sure it was against her will. “Mom, you’ve gotten yourself into a real mess. I should be telling you to keep not seeing her. But I hate to see you upset. Why did you get so mad about her suggestion, anyway?”

“I didn’t want it to lead us to some kind of slippery slope of getting more involved...” She knew even before Holly’s face contorted into a comical expression of consternation that it sounded stupid. “Don’t.”

“Oh, but I have to. That’s dumb as hell.” Holly laughed. “Mom! You’re already on the slippery slope. So the way I see it, you have two choices. Either stay away like you should do or just freakin’ text her already.” She held up her crocheting. “And can we get back to our crafting now?”

Esme glanced at her end table, where her phone was sitting on a wireless charger. She leaned over and picked it up. “Yeah. Give me a minute.”

Next to Nora’s desk, Laurie was a virtual statue, standing with her mouth open and her tablet held forgotten in her hands. Nora sighed. “Earth to Laurie.”

Laurie snapped her mouth shut and set the tablet carefully on Nora’s desk. She pinched the bridge of her nose between her fingers and closed her eyes. “Explain this to me again. Slowly.”

“I don’t know how slow I need to go. It’s pretty simple.” Nora shrugged. “I’ve been involved with Esme Bloom.”

“Simple!” Laurie nearly choked out the words. “Do you know what kind of ethical quagmire you’ve gotten yourself into? Fucking the tenant of a building that you’re in active negotiations to buy? A tenant you intend to evict? Simple is the last thing this is!”

“Yes, I am aware there are some ethical issues here,” Nora admitted. “I’m not stupid.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Nora stood up. “Okay, I normally don’t pull rank on you, but you’ve crossed the line into disrespectful territory, Laurie.”

Laurie stepped back and closed her eyes again, breathing in slowly through her nose, and out through her mouth. After a few beats, she opened her eyes again and met Nora’s gaze. “I’m sorry, Boss.”

“Apology accepted.” Nora sat back down at her desk and propped her chin in her hand. “I repeat. I am aware of the issues. I’ve just been...ignoring them.”

“This is unlike you.” Laurie’s sleek red ponytail bounced as she shook her head. “Is this why you’ve been stalling on completing the purchase? Why you’ve been nitpicking the building inspection results, making Legal go over the contracts with a fine-tooth comb? You know they’ve been tearing their hair out, right?”

“I know, I know.” Guilt, still something of a stranger to Nora, twisted her stomach.

Laurie rubbed her temples. “What’s the draw here? Why this woman? All the time I’ve known you, you have essentially lived for the work you do. What could Esme Bloom have done to eclipse that?”

“She...” Nora couldn’t stop a goofy smile from spreading across her face. “She’s beautiful, inside and out. Passionate in her convictions. Absolutely infuriating, too, never met anyone with such a hairpin trigger on their temper...”

“Only for you would something like that be appealing.” It really looked like poor Laurie was getting a headache, and Nora felt a little bad that she found any humor in how she was obviously tormenting her assistant. After the last two weeks of silent pining for Esme, though, she was glad for any little mood-lift she could get.

Laurie was, of course, not nearly as amused. She leaned forward, bracing her hands on Nora’s desk. There was a steely glint in her narrowed gray eyes. “You do intend to purchase this building? And you still plan to evict the Indigo Lounge?”

“Yes to the building purchase. And I would like to try to help relocate the Lounge if at all possible. For what this building is going to cost to upgrade and renovate, I need strongly profitable businesses in all of the spaces from the get-go. I don’t see how we can keep the Lounge there.” Sitting back in her desk chair, Nora lifted her hands in a helpless half-shrug. “I know it’s messy.”

“First time I’ve ever heard you undersell anything,” Laurie muttered. She moved over to the leather chairs in front of Nora’s desk and dropped down into one with a thump. Crossing one slender leg over the other, she eyeballed Nora and shook her head once again. “Again, ethically, this is a major, major problem, Boss. I’m pretty sure someone can come after us for it legally if it gets out, although I’m not sure if it’s the Fairchilds or Ms. Bloom who’s got the case.”

“No one has to know; I wouldn’t even have told you if you hadn’t...” Nora’s face went hot.

“If I hadn’t come in here and caught you dancing around in glee, yes, I know.” Laurie cocked her head. “What’s up with that, anyway?”

“Um, we had another argument, one of many because you know, her temper, and then she didn’t contact me for two weeks, but she reached out this weekend and today she actually asked me to come by the Indigo Lounge,” Nora recited in a rush, tucking her hair behind her ears in an unaccustomed self-conscious gesture.

“When?”

“Tonight.” Nora looked directly at her assistant, daring her to say anything more.

Laurie certainly looked like she had a lot to say, but she simply pursed her lips and stood up. “Your calendar is clear this afternoon. If you’d like to go home. I’m sure this will be another late night.”

“Didn’t take you long to put two and two together,” Nora remarked.

“There’s a reason I’m your assistant, and nobody else. I’ve known something was going on. It’s finding out who it was with that shocked me.” Laurie turned to go but hesitated in the doorway. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Boss.”

She kept walking, so she didn’t hear Nora whispering in a breath, “I don’t.”

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Pulling into her parking spot behind the Indigo Lounge felt new all over again. Had it only been a month or so ago that she'd done it for the first time? Nora pulled the emergency brake and got out, keeping herself from sprinting to the big steel door with an effort.

Casual, casual, casual...

She wanted to see Esme again. She was afraid to let any hint of her eager anticipation show. Nora stuck her hands into her jeans pockets and forced herself to stroll up to the door. Swallowing hard, she hit the buzzer.

"Hi."

The simple little word made Nora's heart race. She cleared her throat. "Hi there."

The intercom speaker went silent, and Nora waited, both hands back in her pockets. Her mouth was dry, her nerves electric.

The door swung open. Esme was in a long, white, eyelet lace sundress, her chestnut and silver curls cascading around her shoulders and down her back. She looked tired after a long night of work, but still beautiful. Her smile at the sight of Nora lit up her eyes. "Why, hello, stranger."

"Hello to you too." Nora gestured into the Lounge. "May I come in?"

"Lead the way." Esme stood back to let her in.

Nora made her way down the long, dark hallway with Esme's gentle sandaled footsteps following behind her. As she arrived onto the dance floor and turned towards the hallway leading to Esme's office, a soft hand touched her elbow and guided her in the other direction. She glanced back, startled. "What's this?"

Esme's mouth turned up into an adorable half-smile. "A surprise. Follow me." She slipped past Nora and grabbed her hand, tugging her after her up the staircase that led to the mezzanine that overlooked the dance floor. In her few visits here, Nora had never been up to the second floor, and had no idea what to expect.

To her shock and delight, what was up there was a picnic. A large, comfortable-looking lounging couch was tucked into a dimly lit nook in a back corner, covered with some kind of tie-dyed flowery tapestry, and in front of the couch was another tapestry, spread out on the floor with an entire vegetarian Chinese takeout feast laid out ready for them to dine on. Nora looked at Esme. "What are we doing?"

"Getting comfortable," Esme replied, leading Nora to the couch and sitting down. "Is this enough space?" She patted the couch cushion next to her.

Nora grinned. "I don't know. I think we're going to have to test it out." She slid in close to Esme and nudged her so that she scooted up to press her back against the wide arm of the couch. Shifting, she slotted her hips over Esme's and carefully lay herself along the length of her warm body. She couldn't help but smile down at Esme. "So far, so good."

As she lowered her head to catch Esme's mouth in a gentle kiss, a hand came up to stop her. "But dinner?" Esme asked.

"Forget it, we've got a test to conduct." And Nora batted Esme's hand aside, going in for the interrupted kiss with all thoughts of gentleness gone.

Having Esme's body arching beneath her was so much more delicious than she'd imagined. The contortions they'd had to bend themselves into in the office were fun, but never resulted in full, sensual contact like this. Nora held herself up with one arm and let her free hand reach down to pull one of the thin straps of Esme's dress down off her shoulder. Her fingers trailed down to work their way past the neckline and down to cup one of Esme's full breasts in her hand. To her delight, Esme wasn't wearing a bra.

Their gazes met as Nora pulled back from the kiss, and Esme's eyes were dancing with mirth. "I decided to adopt your philosophy. A bra wouldn't have gone with this dress anyway."

"I like it," Nora said, her voice husky with desire as she dragged her thumb over Esme's peaking nipple. She bent her head down to suck at it through the cotton lace, reveling in Esme's moans of pleasure, in the way her fingers raked through Nora's hair and pulled her head down tight against her chest.

Nora took her time, leisurely lingering on Esme's breasts, scooping them out of the elastic neckline so she had free access to lick and suck each one into a stiff peak. Whichever nipple she wasn't teasing with her tongue was kept plucked and taut by her fingers, and the way Esme was squirming beneath her let Nora know that she was enjoying the attention.

She let her hand slide down Esme's waist, over her hip, and down to her knee, where she gathered up a handful of skirt and started to pull it up. Esme's breath began to hitch as Nora slid up to cover her mouth with her own, just as she slid her hand into Esme's panties.

It was no surprise to find Esme was plump and wet, and Nora's fingers slipped easily and hungrily over her swollen clit. Esme spilled a moan into Nora's mouth as Nora began to slowly stroke the warm, slick little folds, moving in small circles at first,

then longer, firmer presses.

Her middle two fingers slipped into Esme. Deeply filling her as she divulged in her quickened breaths.

“You want me to fuck you harder, don’t you?” Nora teased.

Esme’s eye contact told her everything she needed to know. Nora’s pushed another finger inside, stretching Esme further. Fucking her harder and deeper, Esme gushed around her. Moaning. Squirming. Enjoying everything about it.

The fucking became faster but still just as deep. Nora slowed the pace as she felt Esme tightening around her, desperate to make the climax last as long as possible.

When her orgasm hit, it was unmistakable and swift. She clenched hard around Nora’s fingers, and her short fingernails dug into the soft skin on Nora’s upper arms. Her head was thrown back over the couch arm, hair trailing down to the floor as she let out a toe-curling moan, rich and deep with satisfaction.

Slowly, slowly, Nora eased her hand free and lifted her head to look at Esme, whose face was bright with ecstasy. She was breathing in short pants, her cheeks flushed pink, and, to Nora, she looked more beautiful than she ever had. Impulsively, Nora leaned down to kiss her again, slowly, more sweetly than she ever had before. Then she brushed Esme’s hair back from her face and their eyes connected. Something old and new began to stir in Nora, a contentment and affection she hadn’t felt in so, so long. She also loved just how quickly she could make Esme cum.

But just as Nora opened her mouth to try and express any little part of it, a voice barked out from the staircase, echoing around the Indigo Lounge.

“What the absolute fuck is going on here?”

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Esme was floating. The bubble surrounding her and Nora was warm and happy, a pink haze of bliss. After all their time apart, despite the uncertainty of the future, this moment was a perfect one. She smiled up into Nora's beautiful blue eyes, tilted her mouth up for a sweet kiss. Nora's body covering hers, her warm hand resting on Esme's waist...Esme had never felt closer to another person in her entire life.

Nora smiled, a lovely, warm smile that Esme adored seeing, because it softened all the sharpness of her face, made her seem like an entirely different person than the designer-clad, serious-minded real estate tycoon Esme had first met.

They lay together, smiling, in silence. Nora reached up a hand and brushed hair away from Esme's face, a tender gesture that touched Esme's heart with a quick finger of light. Then she opened her mouth and looked like she wanted to say something?—

“What the absolute fuck is going on here?”

Sasha's harsh shout ringing from the mezzanine stairs shocked Esme out of her reverie, shattering the warm pink bubble of bliss. She pushed herself up and out from under Nora, trying frantically to pull her dress down, tidy her hair up, pull herself together. Of course, she knew it was hopeless as she did it all. Her face was flushed, her hair impossibly tumbled about, her lips swollen. What they'd been doing was stamped on her and Nora as unmistakably as a fresh tattoo.

Sasha stalked over from the stairwell, more furious than Esme could ever remember seeing her in their years of friendship. Even the day they opened the Lounge and discovered that the walk-in freezer had malfunctioned overnight and everything had to be thrown out—Sasha had been on a near-murderous rampage that day, and even

that paled in comparison to this moment now.

It seemed more alarming thanks to the silence that radiated from her as she walked forward. Esme couldn't help herself from shrinking back into the couch, pulling her legs up and her long dress over them. Vaguely, she felt Nora wrapping a protective arm around her. "Sasha," she began.

"Save it, E. Whatever excuses you're about to make, just don't." Sasha shook her head, lip curled in disgust. Her furious dark gaze slid over towards Nora for a split second, and she snorted. "I knew something was up the last few weeks, but I just thought you were worried about the building sale."

"I was... am..." Esme didn't know how to get any words out.

"So worried that you've been fucking this one?" Sasha gestured towards Nora, even that movement laced with contempt. "She's going to shut us down, she doesn't give a shit about us or the Lounge, and you sleep with her? Her? Of all people, Esme, how could you?"

Nora's arm tightened around Esme's shoulders. "Back off, okay? Stop lecturing her for a minute, let her think."

Sasha scoffed. "Oh, I don't even want to hear from you."

"Leave her alone, Sasha," Esme managed to get out. She swallowed hard. "Why are you here?"

"Not that I should be the one answering questions here, but I forgot my AirPods in my apron pocket." She held up a tiny red case. "Got halfway home, stopped for gas, realized I didn't have them when I looked in my bag for my wallet. And I wanted them; they need to be charged. So I came back." Sasha's lips pulled back into an

almost feral expression. “There. A full and complete answer. Your turn. What the fuck were you thinking, Esme?”

Esme took in a deep breath and stood up, feeling Nora’s arm drop away from her shoulders as she did. “I am an adult, Sasha. I can make my own choices, good or bad.”

“There’s good, there’s bad, and there’s fucking disastrous, Esme!” Sasha gestured around to take in the Lounge. “This is our space, our safe space that you built, and this greedy asshole is going to throw us out on the street. And you’re fucking her! In the space she wants to destroy! Are you dumb? I never thought of you as dumb.”

“Enough!” Esme squeezed her eyes shut and held up her hands. “Enough! Stop it. It’s nothing! It’s just sex! That’s it! I’m allowed to fuck who I want, Sasha!”

“Yeah, it didn’t look like just sex when I got up here. It looked romantic. Intimate. You made a goddamn picnic, Esme.” Looking down, Sasha waved at the blankets and the rapidly cooling Chinese food. “This looks like it was a date. The eye contact you two were making looked like even more than that.”

“Well, you’re reading too much into it. And I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to keep talking about this now. Emotions are high.”

Shaking her head, Sasha let out a bitter laugh. “Sure. Fine. Whatever, Esme. Looks like you made a huge mistake betting on the Nora Hartley horse, though. She can’t even stand by you at a time like this.”

“What?” Esme spun around and looked at the couch. Nora was gone. In the distance, she heard the heavy back door of the Lounge clang shut.

Nora hit the back door of the Lounge at a near sprint and dashed for her car, blinking

back furious tears. In what felt like seconds, she had the door to her Audi unlocked, wrenched open, and she all but fell into the driver's seat, gasping for breath. She knew she shouldn't drive upset, but she needed to get far away from here, quickly.

She peeled out of the back-alley parking lot in a screech of tires and zoomed up the street towards the 110 that would take her home. With some effort, she got herself to slow down within a couple of blocks. The last thing she needed was LAPD pulling her over. Nora didn't think she could maintain her cool through a confrontation with cops and getting arrested for slapping one wasn't exactly on her bucket list.

As she made her way back to Pacific Palisades, Nora couldn't stop herself from replaying the night in her head. Especially that moment.

It's nothing! It's just sex!

With what they'd shared that night, Nora had thought she and Esme were on the same page at last. That the push and pull would stop, that there would be no more uncertain snappish moments that left Nora reeling. She'd always understood why Esme's emotions were so mercurial, of course she'd be conflicted and anxious all the time.

But this. This, she hadn't expected. Perhaps she should have, but... she just hadn't. To Nora, it was clear that Esme's anxious, biting responses came down to an emotional conflict within herself. That meant that she had some kind of positive feeling about Nora that came into direct opposition to her anger over the building sale. Something was there. Not nothing.

Except, Nora guessed, it might have been nothing after all. Thank God she hadn't managed to take off any clothing before she pounced on Esme. When Esme had been dismissing their relationship as nothing, Nora had been able to slide off the couch and take the stairs down two at a time, gripping the railing to keep herself from tripping through a blinding haze of tears.

Even splitting up with Leah hadn't hurt like this, this uncontrollable wrenching pain in her chest. No one had ever made her feel like this, like she was nothing, worthless. She'd never granted anyone the access to do so, hadn't intended to give it to Esme. And yet here, she reflected, wiping tears away as she steered towards the highway, here she was. Hurt beyond measure, tears streaming down her face, driving home in the middle of an LA night, alone.

What a huge mistake she'd made, getting involved with Esme Bloom. But there was one good thing to come out of this awful night—she was going to quit stalling on the Fairchild deal and wrap it up as soon as possible. And just to be the bigger person, she was still going to provide Esme with a list of relocation options and even give her six months to move out.

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But right at this moment, she never wanted to set foot in the Indigo Lounge again.

11

Esme had never felt so alone in her own bar.

In the three days since Sasha had caught her with Nora, they hadn't spoken. Sasha refused to talk to her. She hadn't told anyone else about what she'd seen as far as Esme could tell, but she hadn't been willing to sit down with Esme and have a talk. It was starting to get awkward; Ruby and Cam were noticing the frigid chill coming from Sasha, and Esme felt the weight of Sasha's disapproval more heavily by the moment.

She was probably going to have to explain things to Ruby and Cam, whether she liked it or not. Ruby, writer that she was, would probably have some level of sorrowful understanding of the situation. Feckless Cam with her string of conquests would also get it on some level. But overall, they, too, would probably be at least a little bit dismayed that Esme had gotten involved with the woman whose primary current goal was to crush all of their dreams.

The crazy thing was that Esme had sat with herself for two long nights trying to find the shame and regret that Sasha seemed to think she should be feeling. All she could find was an ache of longing for Nora, and sorrow that she'd inadvertently hurt her feelings with her panicked words.

It's nothing! It's just sex!

Of course it wasn't. It never had been, and Esme could fully, openly acknowledge that to herself now. It was why she had always found an excuse to snap at Nora and push her away whenever something happened that got Esme a little too close to making herself aware of the deep truth of it all. It had never once been nothing, never only been sex. Their connection the first time they met had been immediate and strong. It was just amazing that Nora hadn't run away when Esme had been so entirely unpredictable, time and again.

Until now. The nothing comment, made in a moment of fright when Esme just wanted to defuse Sasha's anger, had apparently been Nora's last straw. Esme couldn't blame her for that.

She did wish, however, that Nora would give her a chance to apologize. For three days now she'd tried to text and to call, begging for a minute of time. Just a chance to explain how sorry she was. She was fairly certain she hadn't been blocked, but she wasn't being answered. Which meant that Nora was seeing her attempts at outreach and was actively deciding to not respond. She was making a conscious choice.

That hurt, but Esme knew she deserved it and more. So, she'd been sitting with the pain, letting herself feel it completely, a bit masochistically.

It was harder to sit with Sasha's disapproval. But she didn't know how to explain things to Sasha in a way that would make her understand. Mostly because she herself didn't understand. Acknowledging the depth of her attraction to Nora didn't magically make her able to understand it. Sasha was right, Nora wanted to take away the most important thing in Esme's life. So how could Esme still miss her so badly, want her so much? She should be furious with Nora, she thought. Or even happy that Nora seemed to be done with her and would no longer be emotionally complicating her life. Because ever since Esme had met that impossible, gorgeous, magnetic woman, her life had been upended. She was going to lose the one thing she'd ever believed in with a deep and abiding passion, the thing to which she had devoted half

her life, because of this woman. So why was she almost just as sad about Nora ignoring her as she was about losing the Lounge?

The long and short of it was that Esme just didn't know. Which meant she couldn't talk to Sasha about it. That, she just had to deal with. Esme was coping by making sure she was always at the opposite end of the bar from Sasha, or avoiding the kitchen, or holing herself up in her office, as she was now. The time alone was giving her a lot of room to think about whether or not she could figure out a way to save the Lounge.

At this point, there was no way Nora wouldn't kick her out. Esme was sure of that. She was either going to have to find a new space somewhere else or... hell. Buy the Fairchild. Esme lifted her head up to look at the photos on her office walls. It felt like they were all staring back at her, their smiles mocking. Buy the Fairchild? You? You barely have a dollar in change in your wallet.

No. That was impossible. Esme rested her chin in her hand and sighed.

There was a tap at her office door. Surprised, Esme turned in her chair and opened the door. It further surprised her to see Oliver Fairchild standing there, an anxious expression on his face. "Esme?"

"Ollie. Long time no see." The Fairchilds she did like seemed to have been avoiding her since the sale news broke, when usually they were in at least once every couple of weeks to have lunch. But she was glad to see Oliver despite everything. "What's up?"

"I'm uncomfortable even bringing this up," Oliver said, and he looked it. "But we haven't heard from Nora Hartley in a few days. Since the building sale affects you, I was wondering if... maybe she'd talked to you lately?"

Esme looked at him. Is he for real? "Me? You really think she'd talk to me?"

He actually squirmed. “One of the last meetings we had with her, I spotted some notes on her desk. Listings for spaces that would be appropriate for a place like the Indigo Lounge. I thought she might be working with you on relocating.”

Esme felt her eyebrows nearly hit her hairline. “That’s interesting news, Oliver. But no, I haven’t been working with her on that; I’ve been working on my own to see what options I might have.” She looked at her desk and started to fidget with some of the paperwork there, unsure what to make of the info she’d just been given. She breathed in deep. “I haven’t heard from her.”

“Ah. Okay.” Oliver still stood in the doorway, and when Esme turned to focus on him again, he didn’t seem to know what to do. Finally, he just said, “Well, if you do hear from her, let her know we’re looking for her. Alexandra is actually furious... if she wants to just reach out to me directly, that’s okay.”

“Sure, Ollie. Okay. It was nice seeing you.” She sat in her desk chair and smiled until he went away. When his footsteps faded into the general noise of the Lounge and she couldn’t pick them out anymore, Esme grabbed her tote bag from under her desk and hustled out of her little office, taking swift steps to get to the bar.

Sasha glared at her, but Cam, in today to wait tables, looked her over with interest. “Where are you going, E?”

“Just... out. Got a meeting.” She avoided meeting Sasha’s increasingly thunderous gaze. “I’ll be back.”

With that, Esme turned and headed for the back entrance to retrieve her car.

She’d never made an effort to visit the building Nora’s firm called home. That seemed a little too much like personal involvement, and of course that was something she had been fighting against.

Now, Esme stood outside of the glass-coated high rise and felt like a gawking tourist as she stared up at it. She felt very, very small. No wonder Nora had felt like she could come in and just crush the Lounge under her exquisitely-shod foot. Swallowing, Esme stepped into the revolving door before she could lose her nerve.

It was so strange to be here. This building was only a mile away from the Fairchild, but the worlds couldn't be more different. No ornate wrought iron here, no cascading plants. Here it was all glass and granite and chrome, carefully cultivated slender trees in pots, tasteful abstract watercolor art. It somehow was and wasn't what she expected of Nora.

Twisting the raffia handles of her tote bag, Esme stepped over to the reception desk. Her mouth was dry and she rued leaving her water bottle behind. "I'd like," she began, but had to pause and swallow. "I'd like to see Nora Hartley, please."

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The forbidding-looking receptionist, a young man with perfectly sculpted auburn hair, skin that spoke to an expensive nightly routine, and a sharply cut suit, raised an eyebrow. “You don’t have an appointment? People don’t just ‘see’ Ms. Hartley.”

“I’m aware.” This was starting to feel like a mistake. But she hadn’t gotten this far in life by backing down. “Please let her know that Esme Bloom is here to see her about the Fairchild Building.”

The young man didn’t roll his eyes at her, but Esme certainly got the feeling that he wanted to. Still, he picked up the receiver of a shiny black phone and pressed a button. “A Ms. Bloom is here to see Ms. Hartley. She says it’s about the Fairchild Building.” He paused, and then his eyes widened. “Really? I mean... yes, Ms. McIntire.”

Esme waited as he hung up. Looking like he thought this was all a bad idea, the receptionist shook his head and met her gaze. “Right. Well, you can go up. Not those elevators,” he said just as Esme was about to head to the bank of six elevators in the center of the atrium. He pointed to a far corner of the large room, to a trio of small, glass-enclosed elevators. “The express cars go to the private floors. Take the middle one and use this key card.” Passing her a heavy, metallic old-gold card with a simple script H engraved on it, he waved her off. “Return that when you come back down,” he called after her.

It felt like forever crossing the huge atrium over to the express elevator bank. And she was sure people were staring at her, the way she didn’t look like them, how she was in a long tank dress compared to their designer power suits, carrying a straw tote instead of a Birkin. Esme fought not to scurry onto the two-person elevator like some

sort of furtive criminal. She held her head high and swiped the key card.

The ride up to the top floor was smooth, the music piping into the small space pleasant. Esme kept twisting the handles of her bag, the raffia rough against her palms.

Finally, the elevator glided to a stop and the mirrored brass doors slid open with a soft chiming bell. Esme stepped out into a bright and warm space, so well-lit from the sunlight streaming in through the large, tinted windows that there wasn't a single overhead light turned on. The office was elegant and minimalist, in a way that reminded Esme of Nora herself.

It was an open sort of area, with a polished wood desk to her right, and a few wide doorways leading into different rooms; the one to her left was clearly a printer room, with a huge Xerox machine gleaming in the corner. To her right, she thought she saw a small kitchenette, with a very expensive-looking, professional-grade espresso maker near the door.

The center doorway wasn't fully opened. Esme was fairly certain Nora wouldn't be sitting at the nearby desk in this big open area, so this central doorway surely had to lead to her office. Was she in there now? Esme strained to see if she could hear anything, any typing or talking or even a chair wheeling over the pale wooden floors.

Silence.

She inched forward, extending her hand out to push the door open.

"She's not there."

Esme whirled around. A stunning redhead leaned in the doorway of the kitchenette, her arms crossed over her cream linen shirtwaist dress, a cup of yogurt in one hand.

“Sorry,” she said, her red lips curving into a friendly smile. “I didn’t mean to startle you; I was just getting myself a snack.” She held up the yogurt.

“Oh,” Esme said.

“I’m Laurie McIntire, Nora’s assistant.” The woman stepped forward, hand extended. Esme took it, still a bit bemused. But after a moment, something occurred to her.

“I know that name,” Esme said, still holding Laurie’s hand. “You’ve been ordering from us like crazy for weeks.”

“Have I?” Laurie grinned as she tugged her hand free and walked over to sit on the edge of the nearby desk.

Esme thought, then nodded. “Nora has.”

“She thinks your chef doesn’t like her very much. It seemed safer to order under a different name.”

“Fair enough.” Esme chuckled. “She is correct, Sasha doesn’t like her at all. But she’d never tamper with anyone’s food, I promise.”

“Well, it was just a precaution. And I got a lot of excellent free lunches for my trouble.” Laurie pushed herself further back on the desktop and leaned back on her hands. Her crossed ankles swung back and forth as she observed Esme with a keen eye.

Esme looked around. “So... you said Nora isn’t here?”

“No. She’s out scouting out some properties, having a business dinner. I was just waiting for the cleaning staff to come do their thing so I could lock up and leave.”

She cocked her head. “But I wanted to meet you, so I cleared you to come up.”

“Me?” Esme felt her hands go back to twisting up her bag handles.

“You,” Laurie confirmed. “You’re the first person I’ve ever seen rattle the Big Boss Lady. And when I was doing my research into the Indigo Lounge, you impressed me. So yes, I wanted to meet you.”

Esme let go of her bag and held her arms out wide. “Well, here I am. What you see is what you get.”

“You know, I believe that, I really do. And what I see, I like. What I’ve found out, I like.” But suddenly, her bright smile faded into something more serious, and her gray eyes narrowed. “I don’t like how you’ve upset my boss, though. Especially after she’s really compromised herself ethically over you.”

That got Esme to lift her chin high. “I never asked her to. I never asked her for any of this.”

“Didn’t exactly discourage it with your full chest though, eh?” Laurie waved a dismissive hand. “But it doesn’t matter. I know what an irresistible attraction feels like. The trouble it can cause.” Once again, she locked eyes with Esme. “I didn’t ask you up here to give you more grief. From what I know of this whole situation, you have enough on your plate. I just...” She inhaled and sat up straight, drawing her shoulders back. “I have a deep respect and even affection for my employer. Not like what you’re probably thinking. I’m married.” A quicksilver smile. “My spouse is amazing. As amazing as Ms. Hartley, and I know I’m lucky to be married to them, so in my opinion, it follows that anyone who connects with Ms. Hartley should be aware of just how lucky they are to have her.”

Esme raised an eyebrow. “I don’t exactly have her.”

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“Oh, but you could. Even now, when she’s clearly hurt by whatever went wrong the other night—I sent her off to you happy, she came back the next day silent as the grave—even now, you could be with her, if you wanted. And you would be lucky.” Laurie’s gaze was challenging.

Once more, Esme’s bag handles had to bear the brunt of her nerves. “To be honest, Ms. McIntire, I really only came here to relay a message. I’m not comfortable continuing on with this conversation. It’s a bit personal.”

Laurie nodded. “I understand. Absolutely. The message?”

“Oliver Fairchild came to see me and said he’d been having trouble reaching Nora. They hadn’t heard from her in a few days.” Her mouth was dry. “I can only assume they want to finalize the building sale.”

Now Laurie’s eyes softened and there was something like... admiration? “You really are one hell of a woman. I know what this building sale means for you. Yet you came anyway.”

Esme hesitated. “Well. I did also hope to see Nora. She’s been ignoring me. Not that I blame her.”

“Even so.” Pushing herself off the desk, Laurie walked around to the chair and opened a drawer. She pulled out a cell phone and tapped a message into it, then looked up at Esme with a smile. “Message conveyed.”

It was a clear dismissal. But at least Nora surely knew now how far Esme was willing

to go to get in touch with her. Maybe that would mean something. She ducked her head in a nod and stepped towards the elevator. “Thanks.”

“I’ll see you around, Ms. Bloom.” Laurie waved as Esme watched her through the closing elevator doors. She hadn’t gotten to apologize to Nora, but her spunky assistant had certainly given her a lot of food for thought in that brief conversation.

“No, no, no. I don’t think this will work. It’s hardly bigger than the space being vacated.” Nora’s footsteps echoed through the empty retail space, and she tapped thoughtfully on her bottom lip. “To say nothing of the kitchen. It’s miniscule, it would cost too much to overhaul it to a more suitable size.” She shook her head at the owner of the restaurant property. “Sorry. This isn’t going to work.”

She’d hit the ground running after that last disastrous night at the Indigo Lounge. Laurie had compiled a list of available stand-alone restaurant spaces for rent in various parts of LA, and Nora had visited each one personally.

Unfortunately, the hunt was not going well, because each one had fallen dramatically short.

Some were too big. Too small. The rent was higher than she estimated Esme would be able to afford. The number of repairs or renovations needed was too large. The location didn’t feel right. She’d been all over the city the last three days, her feet hurt, and her driver was on the verge of quitting, but she couldn’t stop.

If she’d had anyone close in her life, they’d call her insane for wanting to find a good landing space for the woman who had hurt her more times than she could count. Hell, Nora was calling herself crazy. She, who had put her career before anything else for more than a decade, who had closed deals and evicted tenants countless times without a second thought... for her, this was softness. Vulnerability.

But was it? Was it really? Nora lifted her head and shook her hair back from her face while the property owner babbled on about the better features of the abandoned Italian bistro. She wanted to be done with this entire emotional rollercoaster, that was all. To not have to deal with Esme or the Indigo Lounge again. Finding a place for the Lounge to go once she closed on the Fairchild and closed down the hangout spot was just the most logical way to guarantee the outcome she wanted.

And if I buy that, Nora thought ruefully as she paced back and forth, I have a bridge to sell myself.

Not very deep down, she knew that for the first time in her career, she was allowing herself to fully realize the consequences of the many evictions she'd been the instrument of in her business dealings. They'd all resulted in the dismantling of someone else's dreams in the pursuit of her own. Falling for Esme had finally put a human face on the cost of her ruthlessness and efficiency.

This wasn't actually about getting Esme out of her life. This was about mitigating the damage she'd caused, for once. Because she'd fallen in love, and that hadn't made her soft, it had reminded her that she was a human being, and the choices she made affected other humans.

Nora stopped in her tracks and blinked. Love?

Oh, hell.

Before she could begin to process that, her phone buzzed in her suit pocket. With a brisk nod, she gestured to the building owner that she was stepping out to check her messages.

The LA sunshine made her blink as she hit the sidewalk, and she had to squint a bit to make out the message on her phone's screen. It was from Laurie.

Esme came by. She had a message for you from the Fairchilds...

Nora groaned. She'd been dodging their outreach efforts even harder than she'd been dodging Esme's.

...but I don't think that was her main reason for coming to the office. I like her, Boss Lady. Consider giving her one more chance? At least hear her out, whatever she has to say.

Oh, unfair. Laurie knew full well that Nora was already struggling with sticking to her guns. She couldn't know, of course, that Nora was also now struggling with feelings.

Actually, she probably did. Laurie was astute like that. Nora scowled at her phone. She didn't really want to keep putting Esme off, but she couldn't face Esme without a plan. Why couldn't she find the right home for the Lounge?

"Ms. Hartley?" The building owner had emerged from the battered old hulk of a restaurant and was standing near her on the sidewalk. "Did you need to see the building again?"

"No. Thank you, but no. It's just not quite right." Nora shook her head. She had too much on her mind and needed time and space to gather her thoughts together. Spotting a park across the street, Nora passed her phone to her driver through the car window, and then took off at a trot.

Under the shade of a large oak tree, she found a bench that, miraculously, no one else was occupying at the moment. She smoothed her skirt and sat down to get her thoughts in order for.

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One: She was in love with Esme Bloom. Even though Esme drove her nuts and had hurt her badly, even though she'd long ago decided to put her future over her feelings, here she was.

Two: She was at the point of no return on the Fairchild Building purchase. She had to finish the deal and buy the building.

Three: Buying the building meant evicting all the existing tenants, because they were all either not profitable or dancing on a razor's edge, and Nora wanted a fresh, profitable start.

Four: Since Esme Bloom was one of those tenants, how she felt about Esme was going to be moot as soon as she terminated Esme's contract. Esme, very understandably, had been emotionally divided all through their affair, but this would absolutely drive her away from Nora for good.

Five: She wanted to find a space for Esme to go, so that there was a chance for Esme's dream to live on. Nora was under no illusions that this would sway Esme back into her arms. She just wanted to do what she thought would be the right thing.

Nora picked at her cuticles. What would really be great, she thought wistfully, was a perfect solution. Like she'd find the perfect new home for the Lounge, one where it would thrive and Esme's future would be secured. The conflict between them would be resolved as a result, and they could waltz off into the sunset together.

Ha. Nora snorted out loud, startling a squirrel on the trunk of the tree she was sitting under. She watched the fuzzy-tailed creature disappear up into the canopy and sighed.

Even the wildlife didn't want to be around her.

The fairytale sunset ending was so unlikely to happen... but as she thought about it, the more Nora wanted it. The more she desperately wanted to find the magical unicorn of a retail space that would be ideal for a café with a huge kitchen for Esme's cranky genius chef, a wide central bar with space for any drink you could think of, a stage that could fit an entire band and a dance floor for half of LA to get down on.

Gears began to turn in her brain. Basically, what they needed was the Lounge, but... bigger. Right? Everything she'd been able to gather about the Lounge from her own observations and the data from the Fairchild file was that it was hugely popular, which was why it always at least broke even. It was just too small to be as profitable as its popularity indicated it should be.

Why hadn't Esme ever expanded? There were four retail spaces on the ground floor, and only one other was taken up, the space across the way with the ailing accessories boutique. There should have been plenty of space for Esme to rent and expand into. Nora frowned. Esme wasn't dumb, she would have known expansion would help her.

That meant that it had to be a Fairchild cockblock. How stupid of them! A larger, more profitable Indigo Lounge would have put more money into the Fairchilds' pockets. But if Nora had learned anything about the three siblings over the last couple of months, it was that Alexandra was petty to the point of short-sightedness, and her brothers had licorice whips for spines.

What if... she tapped her chin and sank more deeply into thought. What if the Lounge could stay where it was, and she allowed it to expand? Without that roadblock, Esme and the Indigo Lounge could thrive. She wouldn't have to move and worry that too much of her clientele wouldn't follow her to the new location. The chef would get the kitchen of her gourmet dreams, actual full bands could come play shows and they'd have a backstage area to rest in, the increased action on the dance floor would be

capable of triggering an earthquake. And Esme could have a nice big office, perfect for kissing and... and more than kissing. Nora blushed and shook her naughty thoughts away.

Esme's dreams could live on, if she could expand the Lounge. Could the ideal solution really have been in front of Nora all along?

There was the matter of funding, of course. But... Nora stood up and began to head back towards her car. She had some ideas, they were coming in hand over fist, but she needed her phone immediately.

Because she was going to save the Indigo Lounge.

12

Esme had been putting this team meeting off for the last two months, but it was time. She sat on the landing of the mezzanine stairs, a clipboard clutched in her hands, and stared sadly down at her employees.

Natalie, the best barista Downtown LA had ever seen. Cam, an amazing pinch-hitter who could fill almost any position in the Lounge. Gina, Charlotte, Steph, and Nichole, some of the most loyal wait staff in the entire city. Kaylee and Regina the bartenders, true mistresses of their craft who created delicious magical elixirs. Claire, Sophie, and Rebecca, the kitchen staff that helped keep things ticking over in the back. Shawna and Mel, the bouncers that kept them all safe.

Gathered together at the bottom of the stairs, they were all watching her, apprehension in their eyes and worry creasing their brows. All with their livelihoods in her hands, a heavy responsibility to bear.

And then there was Sasha, still angry, arms crossed over her chest, still not speaking

to Esme unless she had to. Esme couldn't even meet her challenging gaze.

For efficiency's sake, she'd also invited Ruby, Mia, and Harper to this meeting, even though they didn't work for her. They were dear friends, and regulars, and they deserved to hear this news directly from her. Esme took a deep breath. "Thank you all for coming today. I know everyone usually has plans on Sundays, so I appreciate you rearranging things for me."

The room seemed to be one enormous held breath. Esme's hands wrapped even more tightly around the clipboard, which she was really only holding to have something to do with her hands. The edges bit into her fingers. She didn't even know where to begin.

"Esme?" Ruby asked, softly, her brow furrowed with concern.

Just dive in. Esme sat up straighter. "There's no easy way to say this. I know most of you know that the Fairchild Building is being purchased by a major corporate real estate firm. And that they want to evict us. We've all been working flat out the last few weeks to get more people in, we've held fundraisers, we've done all we can to increase our profitability." When she looked down at her clipboard, she was surprised to see teardrops falling onto it. "It hasn't been enough, and I wanted to tell you that I've decided to let the eviction happen."

Gasps and cries of shock echoed through the Lounge, followed by an immediate and increasingly loud wave of murmurings. Esme watched them talk amongst themselves, keeping an especially close eye on Sasha as Ruby tugged at her arm. Sasha's gaze was still locked onto Esme, still angry. Esme was fairly certain that Sasha wouldn't have some sort of revealing outburst, but the intensity of the staring made her squirm.

She cleared her throat to get everyone's attention and went on. "Obviously, I don't want to close down. You all know how important the Indigo Lounge is to me, and I

know how important it is to you, too. I've been hoping a better solution to stay would present itself, but no luck so far. I don't even know where to begin with relocating... or if I should."

More mutters and mumblings filled the room. Harper waved to catch Esme's attention. "You should have told us more, kept us updated," she admonished. "You know Deb and I would have been willing to help you with an investment, financing."

"That felt like too much to ask of you. If we were more financially healthy..." Esme brushed her hair back from her face and breathed in deep. "We've been on the razor's edge for years. Honestly, this is all my fault. I knew we needed to expand, and I should have moved us years ago when it became clear the Fairchilds weren't going to let me rent the space next door and expand into it."

Mia had been holding Harper's hand, but she let go and pushed her way forward to climb the stairs and sit next to Esme. She wrapped a warm arm around Esme's shoulders. "Profitability doesn't matter, mija, we would have helped... but I understand. And I know it couldn't have been easy to even think about leaving here." She looked around the room, and Esme lifted her head to follow her gaze, knowing they were both seeing the ghosts of performers and guests past leaning against railings and sitting at the bar. "All these memories. Half your life, sí? No, no one can blame you for that."

Esme smiled ruefully. "Well, you can blame me for getting involved with Nora Hartley."

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Total silence reigned. Mia's arm fell away from her shoulder and she leaned back to look at her with incredulity written all over her face. "Say what, girl?"

Well, that cat was well and truly out of the bag now. "Normally, I wouldn't involve you all in my personal life, but this..." Casting her gaze heavenward, Esme blew a big clump of her bangs off of her forehead. "I don't regret it, although it was crazy?—"

"An understatement, honey," Harper chimed in. "You two were at loggerheads that one time I saw her come in and ask to talk to you. Sleeping together? How'd that even happen?"

"Yeah, Esme, how'd it happen?" Sasha asked with narrowed eyes.

Surveying the array of her employees and friends all focused on her, awaiting her response, Esme squirmed again. "It just did. And it didn't end well, as you'd expect, since she wanted to close this place down and I didn't... but I went too far, said one thing wrong one too many times. So even if we had a chance to stay in the Lounge, I don't think she'd be interested in hearing me out after the way I've acted." She picked at her cuticles. "Anyway. I think we have to close. I haven't decided what to do next. I'm sorry, so sorry that I've caused all of this, that I don't have any answers for you. But you did deserve to know about the mess I've dropped you in, and I promise I'll try to figure things out so that?—"

A noisy pounding at the Lounge door interrupted her. Everyone craned their necks to see who it was. Esme stood and leaned over the stairway railing to catch a glimpse, and she gasped.

Nora.

Nora, and she wasn't alone. Oliver and Matthew Fairchild were standing behind her, and all three of them looked excited. "Please, Esme. Let us in."

Sasha had begun to walk to the door when Esme leaped down the stairs and pushed past her. Fumbling with the locks, she eventually got them all unlatched and yanked the door open. For a moment, she just stood there in the doorway, staring at Nora, and she knew she had a big dopey grin on her face.

Oliver waved a hand, peering over Nora's shoulder. "Are you going to let us in?"

"Oh! Um. Yes. Sorry." Esme stood back and gestured for them to come in. But as Nora passed, she grabbed her hand and held her in place. Their eyes met, and it made Esme's heart hurt to see the shuttered, closed-off indifference in Nora's. "I'm so sorry, Nora," she said in a whisper, hoping Nora could see the sincerity in her face.

Perhaps she did. Nora's face softened just a bit, and she squeezed Esme's hand. "We can talk later." She looked at everyone gathered there. "I've got something more important to discuss now. It'll affect you all."

"Jesus, not more," Cam muttered, running a hand through her hair. "Esme's already told us we're gonna have to shut down, are you here to rub salt in that wound?"

Nora looked at Esme, startled. "You're shutting down?"

"I'm not fighting you on the eviction, I won't try to convince you to let us stay open." Esme clarified. "And I told them about us."

"Oh." Nora blinked. Then she shook her head. "We'll talk about the second half of that later, too. For now, let's talk about not closing the Lounge."

Chatter and babble erupted around them, but Esme just kept staring up at Nora, frowning in confusion. “We’re not profitable enough to stay here. You’ve said that. For you, it makes better business sense not to have a struggling café in this building.”

“I also said I didn’t think said café was a good fit for what this neighborhood is growing into.” Nora raised an eyebrow. “I’ve said a lot of surprisingly ill-thought-out things over the last couple of months.”

Esme’s jaw dropped. “You didn’t say that to me!”

“She said it to me.” Oliver stepped forward. “Esme, I want to apologize for telling you there was no hope or future for the Lounge. I’ve thought hard about it for the last few weeks.”

“I’ve been giving him hell about it myself,” Matt volunteered as he leaned against a wall, arms crossed over his chest. “Asshole thing to say. The Lounge belongs here.”

Now Esme was more confused than ever. She looked at each of them, swiveling her head as she sought understanding. “Ollie, you said even expanding wouldn’t help us. And Nora, what even is this about us not fitting in?”

“I’m glad you put those two thoughts together.” Nora tugged her through the crowd of employees and friends and up the staircase to the mezzanine. Dropping Esme’s hand, she clapped for attention, three quick sharp rifle reports echoing through the nearly-empty cavern of a dance hall. “Folks, I’ve got some ideas to save the Indigo Lounge.”

Nora reveled in the shock, cautious delight, and hopeful confusion on the faces around her. It wasn’t a series of reactions she’d had reason to cause before, and she rather liked it.

She didn't revel for long. There was no time to. For her plans to work, they all had to hit the ground running tomorrow morning when the banks opened for the day. Nora clasped her hands and addressed the group, aware the whole time of Esme's trembling presence beside her. "All right. I've been doing some research the last few days, trying to find a place for the Lounge to relocate to." At the start of disgruntled mumbling, she held up a hand. "Hey, I don't normally get involved with the post-eviction life of the businesses that were in my buildings. I did this time because of Esme."

At the sound of a tiny gasp from Esme, Nora turned her head and smiled. "Your spirit and the clear love you have for the Lounge, the love everyone here has for it and for you... that got to me. You got to me in a way no one has in a long time, Esme. Even though you really have done a number on me emotionally these last few weeks." She grinned at Esme's blush, then turned back to the crowd. "It's become clear to me that the Lounge really does belong here, where it is. It was founded on hopes and dreams and sheer good fortune thanks to Leonard Fairchild. Moving it to any other location would just... kill all of that. I don't think it would recover. It certainly wouldn't be the same."

Next to her, Esme let out a tiny whimper before asking, "But how can we survive here?"

"You can't, the way you are. But I think I need to take a leaf out of Leonard's book. I remember the story you told me, Esme, about how he took a chance on you. It's stuck with me."

"Go on," Esme breathed.

"I would like you to expand into the empty space next door. Oliver says you've been trying to get them to rent it to you for years. Take and make a new Indigo Lounge. Same heart and soul but bigger. Room for more clientele, a stage that can fit a

goddamn symphony orchestra.” Nora nodded at the chef, who was glowering at the two of them. “The gourmet kitchen of your Michelin star dreams, Chef.”

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Esme's mouth was hanging open. "Oh, I... I can't afford to expand and do a full overhaul at that level—I was going to DIY the new spaces."

"That's where we come in," Matt volunteered. "We want to invest in the Lounge, Esme."

It was gratifying to see Esme's face in that moment, the blend of hope and shock. "Matty, no, I can't..."

"Dad would want it if he were still here." Matt pushed off of the wall and came to lean on the staircase railing. He stared up at Esme, his face earnest. "He believed in you. We're going to carry on that legacy."

"With one catch." Oliver strolled up, hands in his jeans pockets and a grin on his face. "We want to dedicate Dad's usual bar stool and spot at the bar to him. Get some plaques and everything to commemorate the way he came in here once a week to order one dirty gin martini and a basket of fries. The whole nine."

Tears had begun to stream down Esme's face. Nora reached for her hand and squeezed it in support. "How's that sound to you, Esme? Can you make that deal?"

"I can," Esme gasped between sobs. "I can. Oh, Matty, Ollie..."

A gorgeous, statuesque black woman bustled up, determination in her golden eyes. "I'm in, too, Esme. I wouldn't have met Mia if it weren't for this place." She cast a brilliant smile back at her girlfriend, who was watching her with hearts in her big brown eyes. "She wouldn't have her career if it weren't for you. We want to help give

the next generation of iconic queer women artists their big chance.”

“Harper,” Esme squeaked out, but fell silent as the woman waved a graceful hand.

“Deb’ll want to get involved, too,” Harper said. “You know she’s been wanting to do a documentary on this place for years? What a story you have to tell, and WebFlix is an amazing platform for it. More people will know about the incredible, inclusive sapphic space you’ve built here.”

“Wait,” Nora interjected. “Deb Morgan?” She’d thought she’d seen someone who resembled the CEO of one of the world’s biggest streaming services here a few weeks ago during that first non-starter of a meeting she’d had with Esme. But she had dismissed it as preposterous. Apparently, she’d been wrong. Nora shook her head in wonder.

And in admiration. Esme had clearly had no idea of the complete force of her impact on the sapphic community of Los Angeles, on the Fairchild brothers, on some of the most powerful women in the entertainment industry—Nora now realized that “Harper” was record-company owner and hotshot producer Harper Nightingale—but it was becoming more obvious by the second that she was bigger than she’d ever known.

Nora was so glad she’d been able to pull herself away from the edge of one of the biggest mistakes of her life and career.

Everyone swarmed Esme and began talking all at once, excitement and joy bubbling up and filling the air. Nora got hustled out of the way and found herself standing by the one person who didn’t seem carried away with happiness: the Lounge chef.

“So what’s this? Some new angle for you to fuck us over? And hurt Esme?” The woman’s arms were crossed firmly over her chest, and her stubborn chin was lifted in the air.

“No. No angles. This is...” Nora hesitated. “Sorry. I don’t know your name?”

“Sasha.”

“Sasha.” Nora nodded. “No, this is all real, Sasha. I’m buying this building, and I’m going to help Esme keep the Lounge in it.” She paused to collect her thoughts. “You don’t have to believe me or trust me. But I hope you’ll stay on even if you don’t like me. I meant it when I said we’d get you that big, new kitchen.”

“I can’t be bought,” Sasha scoffed.

“Wouldn’t dream of trying. Just making sure you’re fully informed.” She smiled. “Please excuse me. I’ll leave you to think about it. For the record, I’m sorry that my buying the building and getting involved with Esme caused so much tension. I hope you two can make up.”

With that, she made her way through the crowd to reach Esme and grabbed her hand. “Come with me,” she whispered, and pulled her down from the stairs. Esme’s happy laughter trailed behind them as Nora led her to her tiny, tiny office.

“This is definitely going to have to be included in the renovations,” Nora said, closing the door behind them. She scooped Esme up and deposited her on top of a scattered pile of paperwork on the desk, then dropped into the desk chair. With a couple of scoots, she was sitting between Esme’s knees, her arms crossed to make a bridge she could prop her chin on and stare happily up into the lovely brown eyes she adored so much.

Esme’s hands stroked over Nora’s hair, and the smile on her face matched how Nora felt. “I like my office,” she objected mildly. “It’s cozy.”

“It’s impossible,” Nora corrected, but she let it go. There’d be time to talk about the office later. She had still more important things to talk to Esme about. “Esme, I’m

sorry I ran out the other night, that I ignored your calls and texts.”

“No. Shh.” Esme’s hands fluttered over her hair. “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry, Nora. For being so difficult and prickly, for saying that what we had was nothing... it was so much. It wasn’t nothing.”

“Thank you. Apology accepted.” Nora hesitated, gathering her thoughts. “Esme, can we start over? I want to try again. Do things right. I want to take you to dinner, have proper dates, go on bike rides together.”

“I want all that, too.” One delicate hand cupped Nora’s chin and lifted her to sit up taller. “I want to show you how you’re everything to me.”

Nora’s breath caught in her throat. “Oh.”

“I’ve been crazy and all kinds of up and down with you, but I care, Nora. I’ve missed you. And I hate that I hurt you. So yes. I want to start over and get things right from the beginning.”

Thrilled, Nora lunged up and took Esme’s face in her hands. In an instant, she was kissing the breath out of her, tasting coffee and chocolate, feeling electricity crackle down her spine as Esme kissed her back.

They were a wild, unlikely match, but nothing had ever made Nora feel more alive in her life. Her breath moved harshly through her nose as they kissed, and when Esme finally let her go, Nora dropped back into the desk chair like a lead weight. She grinned up at the impish pixie who had turned her life upside down.

“I do want you to know,” she said, “that I love you.”

Esme’s eyes went round. “That’s not exactly starting back at the beginning.”

“I feel like we can skip a few steps here and there.” Nora beamed.

Esme thought about it, then nodded, and when Esme spoke again, Nora had never been happier in her life.

“I love you, too,” she said. And in that instant, Nora felt a page in the book of her life turn, and the next chapter was ready to begin.