



The Dom

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Description: Nate: I'm a firm believer in one-night stands and weekend flings. I get what I want—when I want. I lay out the ground rules before committing to anything. If they don't like it? Fine. There's a dozen waiting to take what I'm willing to give. Despite all of that, I find myself wanting someone I shouldn't. All my instincts tell me to stay far away, but I can't let her go.

Ashlee: I make plans and follow through. I don't take risks, not like this. But he distracts me in ways I never thought possible. I know the danger, but I dare to hope that he'll change...for me.

Manhattan Records' employee Ashlee Webb knows it's a bad idea to sleep with the company's founder, Nate Lexington, but she's helpless to stop. However, when Nate's past comes to light, will it be the wake-up call she needs to break away, or can their turbulent fling survive?

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One

Nate

Waking up next to someone wasn't a personal habit, not even when that bed was in a hotel room. In Virginia Beach. After busting into a mother-daughter getaway.

I looked at the woman beside me.

Most of the time, I left my partners once the sex was through and my sub was cared for. I held high standards for being a Dominant, which included knowing what sort of aftercare each sub needed. I never got involved with anyone who required more than I was willing to give. That was how things worked. Straightforward. Simple. Uncomplicated.

The warm body in my arms was anything but simple and uncomplicated.

I opened my eyes slowly, trying to keep from waking her. I wanted a few moments of silence, a few moments where I could just look at her and not have to think about anything but the soft spill of that long, henna red hair across my chest and over my arm. The way her curves felt pressed against my side. How perfectly our bodies fit together.

Part of me was tempted to stay here, touch her silky skin until I coaxed her awake. Slip inside her and bring her to complete wakefulness as she came. Or maybe explore her body with my mouth. Taste those pretty nipples of hers. Suck on them until they were tight and hard. Dip my tongue into her bellybutton to tease her, make her

squirm. Then down to that hot wet place between her legs. Make her scream my name.

I'd woken up with an erection – not an uncommon occurrence – and my thoughts weren't doing anything to get rid of it. If anything, I was harder than ever. Contrary to what most people thought, my dick didn't do my thinking for me.

I needed to shower and get something to eat. Last night had been make-up sex. This morning, it was back to the real world, and to deal with that, I needed to be clean and fed.

It took some maneuvering to get out of bed without waking Ashlee, but once I managed it, I headed out to the main room. Keeping my voice low, I called for room service, then headed for the shower.

I wouldn't take long. It would be too tempting to fantasize about her and give myself a little relief. As appealing as that was, I didn't want her to wake up to an empty bed and someone knocking at the door with a tray of food she needed to manage. She needed to feel taken care of, not brushed aside.

After my shower, I pulled on a pair of flannel pants but didn't bother with a shirt when I went to answer the door. I was in the processes of checking my order when I heard movement from the bedroom.

"Bathroom's free," I called. "I've got breakfast out here when you're ready."

"Thanks."

Her voice was still thick with sleep, and I felt a jolt of satisfaction that no other man had ever gotten to hear her like that. No one else could accurately picture what she would look like, walking from the bedroom to the bathroom without a stitch on.

Another man might fantasize about what that body was like under her clothes, but only I knew.

By the time she joined me in the main room, I had our breakfast set out and had grabbed a shirt. The slightly sadistic part of me wanted to stay bare-chested just to see if I could get her to blush when she saw the scratches she'd left on my shoulders, but as much as I enjoyed using sex to distract us both from the real world, if things between Ashlee and I were ever going to progress, we had to move beyond just sex.

That particular sentiment became even more difficult to accept when Ashlee came waltzing out in one of my shirts. And nothing else.

"Fuck," I growled as I stalked toward her.

All my good intentions went right out the window as I buried one hand in her wet hair and grabbed a palmful of ass in the other. I caught a moment of pleased surprise on her face just before my mouth was on hers. Teeth and tongues clashed, fought, conveyed all the things that neither of us could bring ourselves to say.

Kisses could say so many things. They could be simple and sweet. They could mean friendship or romance.

This one was possessive, greedy.

She was mine, and I'd be damned if I let her walk out of here not knowing that...but I didn't know how to put any of that into words. I said it with everything else though, and by the time we broke apart, both of us were flushed and panting.

"That...that was...wow." Ashlee's turquoise eyes were wide. "Good morning to you too."

I smiled at her and brushed back her hair. “How about some breakfast?”

“That sounds good.”

Neither one of us spoke as we filled our plates and sat down. We ate in silence, both of us apparently hungrier than we’d realized. At least, that’s what I thought the reason was. I hadn’t considered anything else until Ashlee finally spoke.

“I know there are a lot of things we should talk about, and we could start anywhere, but I kinda want to start with the ‘boy, did we almost mess up.’”

It took me a moment to understand what she was talking about, and when I did, the memory wasn’t unpleasant at all. Being inside her without anything between us, my cock slipping against slick skin...damn if I wasn’t still craving it.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized even though a part of me wasn’t really sorry. Well, I was sorry for the fact that we hadn’t talked about it, and it hadn’t been a conscious decision made by both of us. I wasn’t that much of an asshole.

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“I understand,” she said. “We got caught up in the moment. Neither of us was thinking clearly. It happens.”

I almost snorted. “Not to me. I can honestly say that I’ve never done that before. Not even when I was drunk.”

Her eyebrows went up. “I’m not sure how I’m supposed to feel about that.”

I laughed and reached across the table to cover her hand with mine. “Let’s just say you’re the only one who’s made me forget myself like that.”

She blushed, and I wondered what it had been like for her, to feel me without anything between us.

“I might not be experienced, but I know there are some things we should have talked about before we slept together. We did this thing backwards.”

All I could think about was how I wanted to tear that shirt off and take her right here on this table, and here she was talking calmly about birth control. My gaze fell onto her hands, and she twisted her fingers together, the gesture telling me she wasn’t as cool about this as she seemed.

“Since I’ve never had any other partners, I don’t have any STDs,” she continued. “No drug use either.”

“I was tested after I ended things with Roma,” I said, trying to match her attitude. “I’m clean.”

“Good.” She let out a breath. “That’s good.”

I wasn’t sure if I should’ve been insulted by that or not. Was she relieved because she’d thought I might have given her something? I gritted my teeth, but I had to admit that she had a reason to be concerned. I had fucked a lot of women, and she had no way of knowing how careful I always was.

“I just started birth control,” she said, her eyes darting up to my face. “It’s not effective right away—”

“Ashlee.” I stood and walked over to her. I cupped her chin and tipped her head back. “Look at me, le soleil.” I waited until she did as I said. “I will keep you safe.” I kissed her forehead. “I promise.”

I meant the words I said to her, but I made the vow to myself as well. I was supposed to protect her, and I’d screwed up. I wouldn’t do it again.

Two

Ashlee

So...this was what a ‘morning after’ conversation was like.

I had to admit, when I’d first woken up this morning and found myself alone in bed, I’d almost thought I’d imagined the whole thing. Some strange erotic dream brought about by romantic notions that Nate would go to all the effort of tracking me down and surprising me.

Then I’d felt the ache between my legs and smelled Nate’s familiar scent on the sheets, and I knew I hadn’t made it up. He’d come to find me. Okay, our reunion had started off rocky because of some stupid misunderstandings, but it had ended with a

bang.

Two bangs for me.

I couldn't help but smile at the memory. In only a couple weeks, I'd gone from being a virgin to having sex against a door. I might not have planned any of this, but I'd sure picked a good person to be my first. Sure, he had issues, but who didn't. At least we were both on the same page.

Maybe.

Probably another thing we should talk about.

"Is that a good smile?" Nate's voice cut into my thoughts. "Or more like you're imagining the ways your mom is going to cut my balls off for having had my way with her daughter?"

Startled, I looked up to see him laughing, dark eyes dancing with a humor I hadn't seen before. Wicked smiles and laughter, yes, but this, not so much. I'd never imagined he could go from protective and sweet to this sort of teasing. My heart twisted at the sight of him like this.

Smiling. Happy. With me.

I'd never met anyone who could tie me up in knots like this. If I wasn't careful, I was going to go too far, care too much, and when he inevitably tired of me, I'd lose more than just him. I didn't want to close myself off from him, but I'd seen firsthand what happened when one person was more invested than the other.

I wasn't going to let that happen to me.

“There’s no way to ask this without sounding like one of those girls,” I said, hating that I was about to bring down the mood, “so I guess I’ll just come right out with it. What does this mean?”

He sat back down, a strange expression on his face, one that I couldn’t quite read. ““This?”” he echoed.

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I gestured between the two of us. “This. I’m not asking with a specific answer in mind. I want nothing more than clarification. I want to know what to expect.”

He was silent for several seconds, but I could see him thinking and didn’t rush him. I wanted a real answer, not something he felt obligated to say because he hadn’t had time to consider every possibility.

“I suppose the answer to that depends on you,” he finally said.

“Me?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I’m not a complete asshole, contrary to what rumors might say. What happens next isn’t a decision for me to make on my own. What do you want?”

Shit. I should’ve known this was going to come back to bite me in the ass.

He leaned forward and took my hand, applying gentle pressure to my fingers until I met his eyes. “I want the truth. Always the truth.” He raised my hand and brushed his lips across my knuckles. “You’re safe with me.”

I wanted that to be true, and in some ways, it was. I trusted him with my body. I just wasn’t so sure I could trust him with my heart.

“I don’t want this to be an end,” I said honestly. “But I also want to see if what we are can be more than just sex.” I kept going without pausing for a reply. “If sex is all you want, I’m okay with that too. I just want to know so I can...prepare.”

One side of his mouth tipped up in a half-smile. “Prepare makes it sound like you need to find armor or a fall-out shelter.”

I laughed, and the knot in my stomach eased. The last thing I wanted to do was freak him out with all the serious talk, but we had so much going against us already that going in blind would be another strike against us from the start. If he could see my questions for what they truly were, then I had hope.

“To be as honest as you’re being,” he continued, “I don’t usually do things in this order. Generally, when I’m ready for something other than a single encounter with someone, I already have in my mind what I want before I approach them, whether a woman will be just a sub or a girlfriend or both.”

His statement wasn’t surprising in the least. Control was important to him. I’d known that before we’d slept together the first time.

“And me?”

He shook his head and chuckled, that low rumble that made things inside me flip. “I didn’t see you coming, and even if I had, I doubted I could’ve planned for any of this.”

I was glad I wasn’t the only one who’d been blind-sided. It made me feel like the two of us were on more even footing than I usually did. I had a clear picture of just how unmatched we were, and it was one of my biggest worries.

He was gorgeous, rich, successful, and experienced. I didn’t have some distorted image of myself where I thought I was ugly, but Nate could’ve stepped onto any runway in the world and fit right in. Money-wise, I didn’t even come close to comparing. I was far from poor, but his tax bracket was so far above mine that I couldn’t see it. He was at the top of his field, and I’d never known what I really

wanted to do with my life. Experience...we were as far apart in that area as we were financially.

“I want a relationship with you,” he said, pulling his chair closer until his knees bracketed mine. “I don’t know what that means, exactly. Not yet, anyway. But it has to be your choice because, if we do this, you need to understand what it means. All of what it means.”

I took a deep breath that did little to settle the butterflies that had suddenly taken up residence in my stomach. If my voice so much as wavered, he’d hear it, and it might make him back away. I wasn’t ready for this to be over yet.

“Like what?”

He ran the tip of his index finger in circles over my knee, a hypnotic sensation that made his words even more sensual. “Like all the ways a good little sub can please her Dom. How close the line is between pain and pleasure. What it means to truly want to be punished. The limits I’ll push until you aren’t certain if you want me to stop...or if you never want me to stop.”

Fuck.

“I’ll introduce you to things you never knew you wanted. Teach you to find pleasure in ways you can’t even imagine.”

I let out a shuddering breath.

“You’ll learn a whole new vocabulary. A new way of thinking, of being. You’ll crave the things I can do for you. To you. You’ll beg for me to do things to that beautiful body of yours, consumed by what only I can give you.”

I was beginning to think that he could make me come just from the mental images his words painted. If I'd been wearing panties, they'd already be soaked.

“I suppose that means I should get in research mode.”

His eyes darkened, and he stood up, towering over me even more than usual.

Shit. Not the right thing to say, apparently.

But, fuck, was that hot.

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He reached for me, never taking his gaze off mine. Without him saying another word, I understood that he was giving me time to think, to decide if I wanted to know what would happen next.

I did.

With paced, deliberate movements, he tangled his hand in my hair, increasing the pressure bit by bit until it transitioned from uncomfortable into pain. Nothing that would make me cry or even cause my eyes to water, but it held that edge that tightened things low in my belly.

It excited me, I realized with a start, to know that he had the ability to harm me, the power necessary to cause true hurt, but that he held himself in check.

With a sharp yank, he jerked my head back, and I gasped, more from surprise than the extra jolt that went through my scalp.

“I’m your teacher from this point on. Understood?”

I tried to nod, wincing as the movement pulled my hair again. “Yes, Mr. Lexington.”

Three

Nate

Damn, that was hot. I didn’t even need to remind her what to call me. I had a feeling I was going to need to change what I had my employees call me. While I doubted

hearing my name from just anyone would make me hard, it would be extremely embarrassing if it accidentally happened in the middle of important business. A loss of self-control in any situation wasn't a good thing, but I prided myself on my self-control when it came to sex.

And now I knew what I wanted to do. Immediately.

“Are you planning to go see your mom right now?” I asked as I released her hair.

Her eyes flicked down to her clothes. “I was at least going to get some more clothes on first. I don't think anyone wants to see me go from here to there wearing only this.”

My eyes narrowed, and I couldn't stop the growl that came from inside me. “No one gets to see you like this except me.”

Her lips twitched, and the glint in her eyes told me she was amused. I kept my face expressionless, waiting to see how I should react to whatever came next.

“What about my mom? Can she see me like this?”

I knelt in front of her and put my hands on her knees. The moment my fingers slid up her thighs, the laughter on her face died.

“Making light of an order.” I brushed my thumbs along the insides of her thighs. “I think that deserves a special kind of punishment, don't you?”

Her eyes went wide, but the heat in them increased. If I put my fingers on her pulse, I didn't doubt I'd feel it racing. My own was beating faster than normal at just the thought of what I wanted to do to her.

“In your previous research, did you happen to take a look at something called orgasm denial?”

Her cheeks flooded with color. “No, but I can guess what it entails.”

“After this morning, you won’t have to guess anymore.” I pushed her t-shirt higher on her hips. “I’m going to take you to the edge so many times...” I pushed her legs farther apart and pressed a kiss to her skin. “You’re going to beg me to let you come, and eventually, I’ll allow it...maybe.”

She made a soft sound halfway between a moan and a whimper, but I didn’t know if it was because of my touch or my words. Either way, I intended to hear a lot more of those noises soon.

I gripped her hips and pulled her to the edge of her seat, getting a surprised yelp out of her. I let myself have a moment to smile before getting down to business. The tip of my tongue teased between her red curls, then between her folds. She shivered as I moved my tongue over her sensitive skin, the taste of her exploding across my taste buds.

I rubbed the flat of my tongue over her clit until I felt it swelling. She tried to squirm, but I tightened my grip, flicking my tongue back and forth across that little bundle of nerves until her muscles bunched under my hands.

I rocked back on my heels but kept my eyes on her face. I wanted to see what happened when she realized I’d stopped. Her eyes went wide, then narrowed.

“Let’s move this back to the bed.” I stood and held out my hand.

Less than a minute later, I had her naked and stretched out on the still rumpled covers. I settled between her legs again, sliding a finger inside her as the thumb of my

free hand moved over her clit. She twisted, and I nipped at her leg, hard enough to get her attention, but not enough to leave a mark. I was all for using a little teeth, but too much pain at once could spoil things.

“Hold still,” I instructed her. “Or I’m going to need to...get creative.”

She nodded, hands curling in the comforter. “I’ll be good.” When I raised an eyebrow, she added, “Mr. Lexington.”

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“Good girl.” I gave her a long, languid lick, smiling when her entire body shuddered. She was so responsive.

Two fingers slipped inside her, and I curled them, searching for that spot that would electrify her. Her body jerked as I made contact and I kept that pleasure coursing through her body until the way she gasped told me that she was close to coming. She let out a little sob as I withdrew my fingers and waited for her to relax again.

“Please, Mr. Lexington.”

I blew on her slick skin and ignored her plea. I’d only refused her twice. We were barely getting started.

Six, I thought with satisfaction as I pushed myself up from the bed. Ashlee’s eyes were closed, but she wasn’t sleeping. A thin sheen of sweat coated her skin despite the air-conditioning, and her limbs twitched as her body struggled to process yet another build-up and loss. I’d gotten her close to orgasm six times and had stopped her from finishing each time. She’d cursed me more than once, but she’d never spoken her safe word.

She might not understand the importance of the trust she put in me to make all of this worth the end result, but I did, and I vowed that I would never abuse that trust, in here at least. I couldn’t promise that I’d never do something asinine or say something I shouldn’t, but I could at least care for her body, bring her all the pleasure my experience could offer.

I retrieved another condom and rolled it over my throbbing erection. I almost winced

as my hand moved over the latex sheath. I didn't think I'd ever been this hard after something like this. Denying her, punishing her, turned me on, but this tightness in my gut, this was something new.

I was going to go off the moment I was inside her. Of that, I had no doubt. But she would have her pleasure first. And I didn't think it'd take much to get her there either. Her entire body had to be buzzing.

"I'm going to let you come now," I said as I climbed back on the bed. "And then I'm going to fuck you." I knelt between her legs, then paused long enough to admit, "It's going to be over fast."

Her eyes opened and locked with mine. "About damn time."

I laughed but didn't lose my focus. Two light strokes across her clit with one hand and a pinch to one of her nipples with the other, and she tipped over the edge. Her back arched, mouth opening in a silent scream that gained its voice the moment I buried myself in her with one smooth stroke.

Her pussy pulsed around me, tightening even as I kept moving. Three, four thrusts and then I was coming too, our bodies fused together in that moment, two parts of a single being, and I'd never felt closer to anyone than I did right now.

Four

Ashlee

As much as I'd enjoyed my night and morning with Nate, my body was in dire need of rest. I felt as if every inch of me had been pulled apart and put back together again. Like my muscles were made of rubber. Rubber that ached in yet again another new way. It wasn't a bad thing, but it wasn't only my brain that needed time to process

everything.

A part of me wished I could've processed faster so that I would've had a better handle on things before meeting my mom for lunch. She'd approved of me going off with Nate yesterday, but I still wasn't sure how she'd feel when I told her that we planned to give this thing between us a real shot.

She was already in one of the beach side restaurants when I arrived, waiting at a table near a massive window, clearly enjoying the sunlight and blue sky and water of a beautiful spring day. I allowed myself a moment to appreciate how fortunate I was that Mom was here for another spring. Even though the doctors had caught the cancer early, I'd met far too many people whose loved ones hadn't been so fortunate. I never wanted to take her for granted.

As if she knew I was thinking about her, she turned her head toward me and smiled. Nothing in the world could make me feel as loved as I did when she smiled like that at me. I'd had a far better childhood than a lot of other kids, but better hadn't always meant easier. No matter how hard it had gotten, I'd always known Mom had my back.

"Have you been waiting long?" I asked as I slid into the seat across from her.

She shrugged and picked up her coffee. "It's a beautiful view, and I'm in no rush to do anything specific."

"I'm sorry for going off with Nate yesterday," I apologized. "This was supposed to be a vacation for the two of us."

I stopped talking when she put her hand on mine.

"Do you honestly think I wouldn't have told you if I didn't want you to go with

him?” She squeezed my hand.

“I know,” I said, “but I still feel bad.”

The waitress came over to take my drink order, interrupting a conversation that most likely would have continued back and forth for another ten minutes with the two of us reassuring and apologizing even though neither of us had done anything wrong. It was our way.

“Actually, I’m a little surprised your...friend didn’t come with you. Considering how far he’d come to talk to you, I assumed he wouldn’t want to let you out of his sight.”

I flushed. Her remark was innocent enough, but it prompted the memory of how possessive Nate had been just a short time ago. His hand in my hair, pulling my head back until I was right at the edge of too much. His declaration that he was the only teacher I needed. Despite all that, I didn’t believe he was the sort of possessive who would take over my life, tell me who I was allowed to speak to or what I could wear. If he did become like that, I’d end things without hesitation.

Still, Mom wasn’t the only one surprised that he hadn’t demanded to stay at my side.

“Nate went back to New York,” I said, accepting my chai tea with a smile. I took a sip and continued, “He asked me to apologize on his behalf for interrupting our vacation.”

I could see questions forming, but she waited until we’d both ordered our lunches before asking any of them. As the waitress walked away, I braced myself for what was coming.

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“I want the full story. Yesterday, things were crazy and emotional. You and Nate needed to talk to each other, work out whatever the mess was between you. I meant what I said before about how he’d come down here for you, but I know there’s more going on than that. You’ve been hiding some bits for some reason, and I think you need to let them out.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. She was right. I’d given her the general story of how Nate and I had met and how we’d broken up. She knew I’d been fired but hadn’t known the exact reason until Nate had shown up here. I’d explained some things to her, but held back other bits, not wanting her to think less of me.

“Nate can act like an ass sometimes.”

“In my experience, most people manage that particular trait at one point or another in their lives,” Mom said wryly. “Your man seems to have it in spades, but it doesn’t necessarily mean he’s a bad guy. Granted, I don’t know much about him...”

I held up a hand. “I know. That’s on me. I’ll tell you everything. Most of it you already know, but I gave a lot of it in pieces.”

“I can handle it, Ashlee.” She gave me a small smile. “You don’t have to protect me from the world, let alone from your boyfriend.”

Boyfriend.

I let out a rush of air. I didn’t know if that word could apply to someone like Nate, not even if we were dating. Boyfriend was someone I could take home to meet my

mom. Though, technically, he had met her.

“He’s my boss,” I began, “and when he overheard Flora talking about him, he was furious. But he didn’t suspend me like he did her. I like to believe it was because I hadn’t done anything wrong, but a part of me can’t help thinking it was because he was attracted to me.”

I hadn’t let myself acknowledge that suspicion until now, but it had always been there. Lurking in the back, always there to sow a little doubt.

“He’s not the most open of men.” I kept going. “But he was honest with me from the start about the fact that he didn’t want a relationship. Not like anything that we’d understand as a relationship anyway.”

“And that’s what you want?” Mom asked when I paused.

“If you’ve taught me anything, it’s that relationships don’t have to be ‘traditional’ to be genuine.”

I leaned back as the waitress set my plate in front of me, then took a moment to stab a tomato and pop it into my mouth. By the time I was finished chewing, the waitress had left, and Mom was poking at her sandwich.

“Would it be? With Nate, I mean,” she asked. “Is what he’s offering you genuine?”

I had to think about that one. After nearly half a minute, I finally answered, “It is. He’s very straight-forward about things.”

“That’s good,” Mom said. “But it looks like there’s some miscommunication going on with you two.”

I nodded. “There are things in Nate’s background that’ve made it hard for him to open up, and they’ve made him much more suspicious of people, especially women. We haven’t talked about any of that stuff, but I know it’s there. I can see it and hear it when he talks about the women in his past.”

A concerned look settled on my mom’s face, and I hurried to better explain.

“He’s not abusive. Intense, yes. Possessive, definitely, and dominant too.” Heat rushed to my face as I chose the last word. It was appropriate and descriptive. But it also meant more, and I needed to fill my mom in on that too.

“Now, I’m wondering if he fired you because you defied him,” Mom said. “A man who would use work—”

“He’s not like that,” I interrupted. “He fired me because...wait, let me back up a second. Last week, Nate showed up at my house, and we had sex. Afterward, he was wandering around my place and found some clippings I had about Manhattan Records, including one of him and Finley. He thought I’d been doing research on him so I could take advantage of him.”

She looked incredulous. “You take advantage of him?”

“Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction too. I kicked him out and when I got to work on Monday, he fired me for lying on my resumé when I answered the question about what I knew about the company.”

The incredulous expression hadn’t faded away. “He fired you for having research on his company?”

I’d told her that I’d been fired but had glossed over the reasons. Now that I was explaining everything, I was glad she hadn’t known all this before. Sure, she’d been

angry on my behalf, but as soon as Nate had shown up, she'd seen romantic intentions. If she'd known all of this, she might never have told me to go with him yesterday, and none of this would be happening.

"He has trust issues," I said.

"Why'd he come down here then? To apologize and hire you back?"

"No, not exactly." I finished off my tea. "At work, we're supposed to back things up on flash drives. I did, but he couldn't find it. He thought I took it with me. That's why he came to find me."

Mom raised an eyebrow. "That's not the reason. I might not be quite as enthusiastic about him as I was yesterday, but he came all this way for you."

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I couldn't stop my smile. "Mostly, that's true."

"What does this mean for work?" She tapped a finger on her lower lip. "You can't have a termination on your resumé and definitely not one that's about you lying and stealing."

"Nate knows that I didn't do either of those things," I said. "I won't have any problem getting a good reference."

"You can't have a reference from a guy you're sleeping with."

That was an excellent point, but I had a solution to that at least. "He's not technically my direct boss. Mr. Hancock will give me a good reference."

"That means you're going to be looking for another job when we get back?" She made it a question rather than a statement.

A question for which I had no answer.

"When I get back to New York, I'll talk to Nate. We'll work something out." I hoped that I sounded more confident than I was. I didn't doubt for a minute that Nate would help me work out what I wanted to do. I just wasn't sure what that was going to be.

Now that I'd explained to him my real reason for coming to work at Manhattan Records, I didn't actually need the cover to get to know Finley. Which meant I didn't actually need this specific job...unless I wanted it.

That was the real question, wasn't it?

What did I want now?

Five

Nate

Spending the rest of the weekend alone wouldn't have been my first choice but leaving Ashlee and her mom in Virginia Beach had been the right thing to do. They'd gone down there for a vacation, to get away from New York. To get away from me, honestly.

Since Ashlee and I had patched things up enough to wait to talk over where things were going from here, it wouldn't hurt anything for me to go home. Well, nothing but my dick and balls. Those protested the entire flight home and had been tormenting me ever since.

Case in point, I was currently trying to get my hard-on to go away before anyone happened to notice it. Thankfully, one of the heads of my A&R department was more interested in what I was proposing than he was in my current state.

Stu Hancock was a good guy. Hard-working, creative, great with people. He understood his job as well as the ways he and his co-VP, Suzie Lamas, each had their own roles to play.

"I'm on board with all of this," Stu said. "Do you want me to talk to her about it?"

I shook my head and tried not to show how eager I was to see Ashlee. It had been too long since I'd seen her, touched her. It was going to be extremely difficult to keep my hands to myself.

I was accustomed to self-control, but not under these particular circumstances. I wanted to be the one setting the terms, deciding who did what when and where. Giving up that aspect of control was new for me, and I didn't like it. But I'd deal with it because I wanted her more than I wanted everything to be the exact same as every other relationship I'd ever had.

Now, there was a word I didn't want to think about too much. In the past, when it came to interactions with the opposite sex, I used relationship to distinguish between the women with whom I only had a sexual arrangement. We didn't go out together, and I never referred to them as girlfriends. I wanted Ashlee as my girlfriend, but I was still figuring out how that was going to work.

Step one had been talking to Stu. Step two was to pitch my idea to Ashlee. Her answer would determine where things went after that.

Stu cleared his throat, and I suddenly remembered that he was still here.

"Thanks," I said, straightening things on my desk that didn't need to be straightened.

I could feel Stu's eyes on me but didn't raise my head, concentrating instead on looking nonchalant. I hadn't really given him a reason why I wanted his opinion...or a reason for why Ashlee was coming back. If he asked, I didn't know what I'd tell him. I didn't plan on hiding my relationship with Ashlee, but I wasn't going to spread it around either, especially when things were still new between us.

"Does this mean you want me to reassign her to the projects she was working on before?" he asked.

"That seems like the best course of action, but it's up to you." I opened one of my desk drawers and rummaged through it like I was looking for something. I wasn't.

“And the flash drive?”

Now, I did glance up. “She left it in her desk.”

Stu frowned. “But it’s not there.”

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“I know.” I sighed and leaned back in my chair. “I haven’t forgotten about it, but you shouldn’t count on getting it back in time to use any of the information on it.”

His expression said he was just as annoyed by the loss as I was, but he didn’t comment on it. We both knew that if I hadn’t fired Ashlee in the first place, the missing flash drive wouldn’t matter much because she would have the information on her computer. Hell, if I’d just held off on having her computer wiped or had talked to Stu before I’d done it, we wouldn’t be in this situation. Talking about it wouldn’t do any good, though. It was done and over with. Now, we just had to deal with it as it was.

After a pause, he added, “I’m glad she’s coming back. She’s a great worker and an even better person.”

Didn’t I know it?

I agreed with what he was saying, and I also heard what he wasn’t saying. That I had a lot to lose if I screwed this up. Another thing I agreed with him about.

I kept my answer simple. “Yes, she is.”

He didn’t say anything else as he left, and I let out a breath of relief. One step down. Now, I just had to wait for Ashlee to arrive. I’d told her not to come in early because I hadn’t wanted to rush things with Stu, but since I’d known Ashlee wouldn’t want to walk past everyone, I’d told her to come during the already-scheduled meeting Finley was holding in a few minutes.

Every couple months or so, he liked to gather everyone and get an idea of how things were going within the company. Fortunately for me, that was today, and it wasn't unusual for me not to attend.

I turned my attention to my email and listened to the hum of noise from the floor as my employees arrived. An hour passed, and everyone moved to the big conference room on the floor below. My ability to focus dissolved as my attention kept wandering to the time. She'd be here soon.

By the time she knocked on my door, my nerves were stretched thin, and I kept tapping my finger on the desk. The moment I heard her, I was out of my chair and crossing the short distance between us.

I crushed her against me as my mouth descended on hers. She clutched at me, and I groaned, needing her closer, needing more of her. I forgot where we were, why she was actually here. All that mattered was that I had her in my arms, the taste of her in my mouth.

Then she pushed at my chest, and I immediately took a step back. Awareness rushed over me like a cold wave. Shit. I needed to use my head where she was concerned. The last thing I needed was someone seeing us and coming to all sorts of conclusions, wrong or right. Still, it had felt damn good to kiss her again.

"Sorry about that." I surprised myself with an apology. "I'm glad to see you, that's all."

"I'm glad too," she said shyly. Her gaze dropped to the floor.

"But it's probably not a good idea to do that again here." I stepped even farther back and forced myself to switch to business mode. We had personal things we needed to talk about, but work had to come first. "Have a seat."

Once we were on opposite sides of the desk, it became easier to focus. After we got this stuff out of the way, the awkwardness that still stretched between us would go away, and the best way to do that was to dive right in and get to it.

“I checked your desk this morning when I first came in, but the flash drive wasn’t there.” I winced at how harsh that sounded. I quickly clarified, “I don’t think you’re lying about it being there. It’s just not there anymore.”

Her eyes widened. “Do you think someone took it?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “It’s possible. I’m hoping one of the IT guys picked it up when they were wiping your computer.”

“And if they don’t have it?”

“Let me worry about that,” I said. “You did everything you were supposed to. I was the one who fucked up. If I’d followed the protocols I’d put into place, I would have the drive, and nothing on the computer would’ve been erased in the first place.”

I didn’t add that if I’d had the drive, I probably wouldn’t have gone after her in the first place, and I’d be here, with the information, but without her. Even though I knew the reason I’d gone after her had been more personal than business, I’d needed the business side of it to give me a kick in the ass. Without it, I would’ve given myself every excuse to stay away.

“It’s a strange situation all the way around,” she said.

“That’s one word for it.” I picked up the papers I’d had Stu look over a short time ago. “And to keep with the strange theme, I have an idea about how to make things work with us.”

I slid the papers over to her, but she didn't take them. Instead, she said, "Please tell me this isn't some sort of Dom / sub contract."

I chuckled. "No. This is purely business."

She held up a hand. "I don't know if it's a good idea for me to work here now that we're involved."

"That's exactly the point of this." I gestured to the papers. "You won't need to look for another job, but you won't be working under me either."

I tried to ignore the little thrill that went through me at the phrase under me, but it was impossible not to remember what it had felt like to have her stretched out, body arching up to meet mine, pussy tightening around me. Dammit. This was why we needed a line between work and pleasure.

"I want you to work as a freelance contractor hired by Stu for the A&R department. I imagine most of your duties will remain the same, but Stu won't just be your direct supervisor. He'll be your boss, the only one you'll be answering to. I won't have any authority over you at all."

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“But you’ll still be my boss’s boss.”

“Yes...” I tapped the papers, “but it’s written into the contract that I’m not allowed to address anything about you. I have no say in hiring or firing. Nothing about your workload or pay. I’ve cleared it with Stu, our in-house counsel, and HR.”

She picked up the papers and started looking through them. I kept quiet as she read. I’d told her what to expect. Now, she needed to see it for herself. Process it in a matter-of-fact way, separate from the connection between the two of us.

After a few minutes, she raised her head. “It says in here that the contract is indefinite.”

“It is,” I said. “Either you or Stu can choose to end it at any time, but we will require you to train any replacement.”

She nodded. “That seems fair enough. And Stu is all right with this?”

“I think he’s actually relieved with this arrangement.” One side of my mouth curved. “He wants to protect you.”

“From you?” She sounded surprised.

“From the rich boss who could force you to do things by threatening to terminate your employment. As if I would do something like that.”

She laughed, her eyes sparkling. “You did tell me I had to go to that event with you.

And you did fire me.”

“Points taken.”

Our gazes held for several long seconds, and then she spoke again. “All I have to do is sign?”

I nodded. “Sign it, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

“And what about the non-work stuff?” she asked.

“I’d like us to have dinner tonight to discuss all of that.”

She held out a hand. “Give me a pen.”

Six

Ashlee

I’d been pleasantly surprised at how easy the transition was at work. I’d anticipated more stares and whispers. People speculating about where I’d been and why I was back. I’d even anticipated Mr. Hancock and Ms. Lamas treating me differently because they knew about my contract, and I was fairly certain that at least Mr. Hancock knew why Nate had wanted me hired as a freelancer.

Except no one had even looked at me twice, and Mr. Hancock had given me a better desk. I wondered what the official story had been about my absence, but I preferred not knowing if the alternative was to ask about it.

I’d spent most of the day trying to reconstruct what had been lost. It had been a lot of information, but fortunately, I had a good memory. Once I’d tugged on the right

thread, I'd taken myself down the same path I'd been on before. It was going to take me a while to get everything back, but I was making good progress.

Still, all the progress in the world wasn't going to keep me from being nervous about my date tonight. It was going to be the first time the two of us would be out in public at a non-work function. No one who saw us tonight would think we were doing anything but going on a date. If we did this – when we did this – there'd be no going back.

Tonight was also step one in us separating work from our personal life. We could have left straight from work together, but we'd both decided that it'd be better if he picked me up at my place. Which was why I was currently standing next to my couch, wondering if my nerves would let me sit down and try to relax.

Somehow, I doubted it.

I'd worn the nicest thing I owned for the party I'd gone to with him before, but I had a couple things that would work for dinner. I loved my little black dresses, especially the one I was wearing tonight. Clingy material that hugged my curves almost too much. A hem that stopped two inches above my knees. A halter top that showed almost all of my back and quite a bit of cleavage too, but not tacky. It was easily one of the most revealing dresses I had, and I only wore it when I felt comfortable in my own skin.

I was beginning to doubt tonight was going to be one of those nights.

Then someone knocked on the door, and I was out of time. A look through the peephole confirmed it was Nate and another swarm of butterflies took off in my stomach. He was in a black suit that had been perfectly tailored for him and a silver tie I was fairly sure cost more than my dress.

I opened the door and gestured for him to come inside. He did, giving me a leisurely once over from my head to my feet and then back up again, a look that had enough weight to it that it felt almost as real as his hands would have.

“You look amazing, le soleil.” He pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead.

“So do you.” I fingered his lapel, enjoying the fine texture of his jacket before reaching up to put my hand on his cheek. Scruff chafed against my skin and sent a shiver down my spine. “You didn’t shave.”

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He turned his face to kiss my palm. “Is that a problem?”

There was no mistaking the low warning in his question, or the heat in his eyes.

“No, Mr. Lexington.” The flare of desire I felt was matched by what I saw on his face. “I like it.”

He crowded into my space, but I didn’t move back. I liked him here. Like the spicy scent that seemed to surround him. The heat that radiated off him. The craving for him that hit me was stronger than anything I’d ever felt before.

“Do you now?” He captured my chin. “Can you imagine what it would feel like against the rest of your body? Against the insides of your thighs?”

I swallowed hard and pressed my legs together. Damn.

“Your lips are trembling.” He ran his thumb along my bottom lip. “Are you nervous?” When I didn’t immediately answer, he warned, “Don’t lie to me.”

“A little,” I admitted.

“Let’s see what I can do about that.”

He turned me until my back was against the door, and I experienced a sense of déjà vu as I remembered the feel of his fingers on me for the first time. Then he went to his knees in front of me, and I realized he had something else in mind.

“Look at me.”

My eyes met his and locked there. His hands slid up my legs, under my dress, and pulled down the satin panties I rarely wore. Without breaking his gaze from mine, he held me steady and helped me step out of my underwear. I opened my mouth to ask him where he was going to put them, but a slight shake of his head had my jaw snapping shut again.

He raised my dress until it was bunched around my waist and then coaxed my legs apart, each move deliberate enough that it made me wonder if he would've done this even if I hadn't been nervous. Either way, I planned to enjoy every minute of it.

Strong fingers curved around my hips, holding me in place as his mouth covered me. There was no easing me into it, no introductory touches, soft licks. This was as thorough and passionate a kiss as I'd ever had.

Sensation flooded me all at once, overwhelming my senses. I cursed, head falling back to thud against my door. My hands found his shoulders, and I curled my fingers into his jacket, desperate to have something ground me as his tongue explored.

Up around my clit. Quick, rough passes across it. Down between my lips to my entrance. Plunging inside, wider than a finger but not as long. Flexible but strong and relentless. Never giving a moment to absorb or process.

My climax came out of nowhere, crashing into me and robbing me of breath. Muscles trembled, and spots danced behind my eyelids. My jaw clenched, and my teeth ground together, every nerve alive with electric pleasure.

By the time I came back to myself, Nate was on his feet again. He'd pulled down my dress, and one hand was still on my waist, helping me stay upright. My thighs were slick and my panties still wherever Nate had put them...but my nerves were calm

again. In fact, everything was calm and clear.

“Clean up quickly.” His voice was rough. “We have a reservation.”

“My underwear?”

“No.” He released me and took a step back. “I don’t want you wearing any tonight.”

My stomach twisted at the thought of all the things he could do to me without my panties. Not that a thin bit of satin would’ve stopped him from getting what he wanted. My safe word negated consent, and that was the only thing that would stop him.

“Go on,” he said. “I’ll use the kitchen sink. I don’t want to be late.”

I went.

Seven

Nate

I didn’t regret getting Ashlee off to help ease her nerves.

We were both New York natives, and from what I understood, had grown up in around the same income bracket. Aside from that, our worlds couldn’t be more different, and my world wasn’t something easily prepared for. It was completely understandable that she’d still be anxious about venturing into public with me. Anything I could do to make it easier on her, I would.

The erection currently pressing against my zipper, however, wasn’t making anything easy on me in return.

I'd been so tempted to say "fuck it" to the reservation, pick her up and take her to her bed, lose myself in her. It was all too easy to do with her. Forget about the world and my responsibilities.

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Forget about the phone call from my mom that I'd ignored.

Forget about the voicemail I hadn't listened to yet.

That alone should've been enough to will away my hard-on, but it wasn't. When it came to Ashlee, my cock had a mind of its own.

"Your wine, sir."

The sommelier held out the bottle I'd chosen, and I nodded. We went through the familiar motions of approval, had things at our table settled, and then he left, leaving Ashlee and me alone again.

"Please, continue." I smiled at Ashlee, but the gesture felt stiff, unnatural.

"You really want to hear about Mom and me visiting America's first lighthouse on our way back from Virginia Beach?"

"I do." I swallowed a mouthful of wine, barely tasting it despite the fact that it was one of the restaurant's finest vintages. My attention was focused on her.

"Haven't you been there?" she asked.

"I have not."

"Oh, well...um..." She twisted her fingers together, seemingly caught off guard by my abrupt statement. "It's called the Cape Henry Lighthouse, and it's near the

Chesapeake Bay District. In 1789, this guy named Jacob Wray went to Alexander Hamilton about a need to keep the waterways safe. By 1792, the lighthouse was functional.”

I picked up one of the pumpernickel croutons and popped it into my mouth. We had a bowl of Saint Germain split pea soup between us, and I had no doubt that it was as delicious as it was every other time I’d come to La Grenouille, but I just didn’t have it in me to eat with my usual enthusiasm. It should have been easy here. A private room here never failed to impress.

“Mom’s always been more interested in the history part of things,” she continued. “I’m more about the visual, like a picture in my head, but hearing about how old it was made me see it differently. Like I could almost see these two men walking along the shore, discussing the best place to put the lighthouse.”

I wasn’t actually interested in the history of a lighthouse, but I enjoyed the way Ashlee looked when she talked about it. She appreciated things I never would have paid any attention to or even thought to look twice at. I could have driven past that lighthouse a hundred times and not even considered stopping to appreciate the beauty or the history.

“Have you?”

I blinked, realizing I’d lost track of what she was saying. “I’m sorry. My mind wandered for a moment there.” I reached out and put my hand over hers. “I’ll pay better attention.”

“I was just asking if you’d seen Hamilton.” She smiled, as if somehow knowing that I needed that extra reassurance that she wasn’t upset about my slip in concentration.

I shook my head. “I don’t get to the theater much.”

“Oh.” The word fell flat between us.

“What about you?” I asked, trying to hold up my end of a conversation. “Have you and your mom gone to the theater often?”

“We’ve seen a couple things off-Broadway,” she said. “And we’ve done the lotteries for some of the shows but haven’t won any of them.”

I made a mental note to get tickets for them both. I’d probably enjoy taking Ashlee with just the two of us too, but if it was something she and her mom wanted to do, I’d make sure they got to do it.

“What about you?” Ashlee asked. “I feel like I’ve been doing all the talking.”

She had been, but only because I hadn’t really given her much choice in the matter. Someone had to fill the silence.

“Honestly, when you take work out of the equation, there isn’t really much more to me.” I didn’t mean to sound brusque, but I wasn’t in the headspace right now to soften my usual edge.

Ashlee’s expression sobered. “That’s not true.” This time, it was her hand reaching for me, offering encouragement. “You are more than that job.”

Part of me wished I could believe her, but my mind kept going back to the voicemail I hadn’t listened to. What sort of man was I if I couldn’t even talk to my mom when she called?

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said abruptly, “I need to step out for a minute.” I stood before she could ask me for details. “I’ll be right back.”

I didn't need to ask where I could go for some privacy. I'd frequented this establishment enough to know my way around. Once I was alone, I pulled my phone from my pocket and listened to the voicemail.

"Nate, sweetheart, it's Mom. I know it's been a while since we've talked, but I wanted to tell you that your brother's back."

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I shook my head. She couldn't be talking about...

"Joshua, I mean. He's moved back to New York, and he wants to see everyone. I need to know what date works for you. She paused, and I could almost see her twisting her fingers together. "Please, Nate. It'd be great to have the whole family together again. Another pause. I love you, Nate. Hope to hear from you soon."

I played the message again, even though I didn't need to hear it. Every word cut into me, reminding me of the type of person I truly was. A person Ashlee didn't know. One I didn't want her to know. Ever.

I deleted the message and put my phone back in my pocket. Now, I didn't need to wonder what the call had been about. I also didn't need to wonder what my answer was going to be because there was no way I was going to whatever family get together Mom was planning.

Besides, even if Joshua had said he wanted our whole family to be there, he didn't mean me. We'd both burned that bridge a long time ago.

By the time I made it back to my table, our entrees had arrived. I smiled at Ashlee as I took my seat again.

"Everything okay?" Concern was clearly written on her face.

I immediately felt a stab of guilt that I'd left her in an unfamiliar place. I'd been a shitty date tonight so far. Well, except for the orgasm earlier. That I always did well.

“It’s fine.” I gestured to her plate. “Let’s enjoy our meal.”

And we did. For a while, anyway. We ate and made small talk about the food we liked, the restaurants where we’d eaten. It was all simple stuff. Typical date topics. Considering we’d already talked safe words and kinks, it was nice to ease back from that.

Or, at least, it would have been if I could’ve stopped my mind from continuing to chew on my mom’s message. Why had Joshua come back now? Was he planning on staying? Why did he want to see the whole family? Did he actually want to see me too? Or had Mom just assumed he’d meant me too? Maybe wishful thinking on her part?

“Nate, are you sure you’re okay?”

I sighed. Apparently, I wasn’t doing as good of a job pretending as I’d thought I was. “I’m sorry, le soleil. This was supposed to be a date, and I just can’t get my head into it.”

“Did I—”

“No,” I cut her off before she could blame herself. “It’s not you. You’ve done nothing wrong. It’s on me.”

“Want to tell me about it?”

I shook my head. “You don’t need to worry about it.”

She pushed her plate aside and leaned toward me. “Nate, I want more than sex with you. This is a relationship, and that means we share things. We talk about what bothers us.”

I was surprised at how much I wanted to unload everything, share it with her, find out her thoughts, listen to her every word. It'd be nice not to have to do everything myself.

But if I told her about the voicemail, she'd want to know why meeting with my family was an issue. I could try to lie to her, but I didn't want to do that. A lie of omission was bad enough. A flat-out lie would come back to bite me in the ass.

But if I told her the truth, I'd lose her. I had no doubt about that. She'd looked past all of the shit she already knew. I couldn't ask her to see past that too.

"It's just some family stuff," I said. "I don't want to get into it."

I waited for her to argue, but she didn't. Instead, she leaned back in her seat. "I hope, one day, you'll be willing to share even that stuff with me."

A part of me hoped so too, but I didn't say it. I was supposed to take care of her. Not the other way around.

"In fact," she said, "maybe you could start by helping me with my own family issue."

Eight

Ashlee

I wished Nate felt comfortable enough with me to tell me what was bothering him, but if anyone understood wanting to keep some family issues close, it was me. Case in point, the former family secret thing I was bringing up now to change the subject.

"In fact, maybe you could start by helping me with my own family issue."

I hoped it came across more casually than it sounded in my head. I knew what a big ask this was. Nate didn't let people close, and I was asking him to do something that could possibly screw up his relationship with one of those people.

Shit.

“Never mind,” I said quickly. “I shouldn’t ask—”

“Finley.”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have even brought it up. You don’t need to get involved in this.”

“I’ve actually been wondering when you were going to bring him up.”

He didn’t sound annoyed, which was a good thing.

“It doesn’t have to be now,” I said. “And you can tell me that you don’t want to get involved. I don’t want to put you in an awkward position. I know Finley’s your friend.”

“And he’s your father.” His voice was soft, almost gentle. “It’s okay to want to know him.”

I twisted the cloth napkin on my lap. “I just don’t want to mess things up with you and him.”

“It won’t. Finley’s not like that.”

Hope flickered in my chest. “Do you think he’ll want to know me?”

Nate smiled, and it was a real one. I still saw shadows in his eyes, but he was present right now. “I think he’s going to love you.”

“Really?”

I didn’t actually doubt the veracity of Nate’s answer, but I needed the reassurance. I’d already had one parent walk out on me. It wasn’t unexpected for me to think another might too. Especially since Finley had been making an anonymous...donation. There was a difference between logically knowing that a child could result from it and an actual, real person claiming to be a result of a decision made more than twenty-four years ago.

Nate reached out and took my hand, lacing his fingers between mine. His expression was serious, and I was grateful that he wasn’t blowing off my concerns. It would be easy for him to want to consider the ways this thing could screw up his company dynamic, but he was completely focused on what I needed from him.

“I’ve known Finley for a long time,” Nate said. “He’s the best man I know. Hell, he’s the best person I know, second only to you.” He raised my hand and brushed a kiss across my knuckles.

“There’s a big difference between a man who’s a great business partner and a man who suddenly finds out that a woman who’s been working at his company for a few years is actually his daughter by way of a sperm bank.” My cheeks flushed as I said the last two words, eyes automatically darting around to see if anyone had come into the room in time to overhear something so personal.

This wasn’t exactly dinner date conversation.

“Finley and I met during a pretty dark time in my life.” Nate appeared to be choosing his words carefully. “He didn’t have to take a chance on me, either as a business

partner or as a friend, but he didn't even hesitate. He saw things in me that no one else ever had."

My stomach did an anxious flip. I'd known Nate and Finley were close, but I'd never heard him talk about anyone like this, not even his family. I didn't know if I could do this now. What if my telling Finley that I was his daughter drove a wedge between Finley and Nate? While Nate hadn't been keeping this secret from Finley as long as I had, the fact remained that it was a secret, and a big one at that.

"I shouldn't have told you," I blurted out. "Or at the very least, I shouldn't have expected you to keep this secret for me."

"I'm glad you told me." Nate tightened his grip on my fingers. "If you hadn't, I would still think you'd been stalking me, and we wouldn't be here right now."

He had a fair point. Still... "I just hate that you had to lie to your friend."

"It's fine," he insisted. "This is your secret to tell, not mine."

Unfortunately, that didn't make me feel any less guilty. I wasn't the sort of person who had tons of friends, but I at least had a great relationship with my mom. From what I could tell, Nate didn't have that.

Something had happened between him and his family that had broken things. He never talked about spending time with anyone else or talking to anyone. As far as I knew, Finley was it.

"Finley doesn't talk much about his personal life," Nate said. "He doesn't hide the fact that he's gay, but he doesn't exactly live out in the open either. Any relationships he has are always discreet, and he rarely takes dates out in public. But, on the rare occasions that our talks about the future of Manhattan Records has drifted into

personal territory, he's told me a few things. Like, how even with laws changing, he doesn't see himself getting married, and he definitely doesn't see himself raising a child."

I wasn't sure how that was supposed to help me, but I held my tongue. Nate always had a purpose for whatever he said or did.

"But he still wants a family."

When he didn't offer any further explanation, I asked, "How do you know that? If he doesn't want to get married or have a kid...I don't understand."

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“There was a news story a few years back where this old man had died in his house, and no one realized it for nearly two years because he didn’t have any family or friends, no one to realize that he was gone. If one of his automatic payments hadn’t been rejected due to lack of funds, who knows how long it would’ve been before someone would’ve noticed he was dead.” Nate released my hand and drained the last of his wine. “It hit Finley hard, the idea that this person had been so isolated, so alone, that his death hadn’t caused the slightest disturbance in the lives of others.”

I knew that feeling. Not the same circumstances, but that sudden realization that it was entirely possible for me to fall off the face of the earth and no one would care. It was what had driven me to find Finley in the first place, to have a connection to someone other than my mom.

“Trust me, Ashlee. Finley is going to be thrilled that you’re his daughter.”

Hope bloomed in my chest, and I quickly shut it down. “You don’t think it’s going to freak him out?”

One side of Nate’s mouth tipped up in a half-smile. “I think he’s going to be shocked, and I’d love to see the look on his face when it happens, but it’ll be a good surprise.”

The waiter returned to ask if we’d like dessert, and we both declined. The fact that neither of us really wanted to linger made me realize that neither of our heads were as much into this date as they should have been.

I still had one more question for Nate though.

“How do you think I should do it? I mean, should I just make an appointment, go into his office and announce ‘hey, remember that time you donated some DNA? Here I am?’ Or should I say it in a letter or card? I don’t think anyone makes those types of cards, do they?”

“Definitely face-to-face,” Nate said as he leaned back in his chair. “But other than that, I don’t know. Let me think on it.”

His gaze slid away from me but didn’t latch on to anything else. Nothing specific, anyway. He had this glazed sort of look in his eyes that told me I’d held as much of his attention as he could give for as long as he could manage.

I appreciated the fact that he’d helped me as much as he had, but I knew that even as he’d been listening to me and answering my questions, a good part of his mind had been elsewhere.

It hadn’t been a bad date, overall, but I’d have been lying to myself if I said I wasn’t at least a little disappointed that I hadn’t been able to distract him from his problems. Not out of a selfish desire where I wanted him entirely focused on me, but because he’d always managed to give my brain a break from my issues in one way or another, and I hadn’t been able to do that for him.

Maybe, no matter how much he wanted me, I would never be enough for him.

Nine

Nate

Most of the time when I felt like an ass, it didn’t bother me, but the fact that I’d only been half-present during last night’s first date annoyed the shit out of me. And it wasn’t like I’d done any of it intentionally either. I didn’t know if that made things

better or worse.

One thing I did know that was worse was that I had two issues fighting with each other for dominance, and no matter which one I chose, I was going to feel guilty over the other one.

I hadn't called my mom back about her voicemail, and I was tempted to continue to ignore it. If it'd been anyone else but her, I probably would have, but she was my mom. While she hadn't exactly been okay with the decisions I'd made over the years, she at least hadn't treated me like a complete pariah, and considering Joshua had always been her favorite, I knew what a big deal that was.

I put my elbows on my desk and pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. I'd had a headache since I'd gotten home last night, and the pills I'd been swallowing every few hours hadn't done much of anything to put a dent in it. I could've blamed the headache for my indecision about what I wanted to do, but that would've been a lie.

Then there was Ashlee. She'd worked yesterday, but it hadn't exactly been a normal day. And to make last night worse, we hadn't even gotten around to the real reason we'd gone out in the first place.

She and I needed to figure out what we were to each other. The longer we went with things undefined, the more we risked misunderstandings. The last thing I wanted was for us to get into some sort of argument because we didn't have an understanding. Communication was important, maybe now more than it was before.

I needed to take her out again, redo that mess of a date, and get the two of us on more solid footing. If I did it now, it'd give me one less thing to worry about too. She was right there, just down the hall. I swore I could almost feel her there. It was beyond tempting to reach out. I wouldn't even have to go to her. I could just call. It'd be the

easiest thing in the world to call her, tell her to come to me.

I remembered all too well how things had gone between the two of us here in my office. Not yesterday, of course, or when I'd fired her, but before that. My memories of her and me were the only ones I had of having sex in my office. I hadn't been with anyone else here.

Except, I knew if I called her, I wouldn't be able to resist having her again. We had to keep our work lives and our personal lives separate. I hadn't done a good job of that before, but I hadn't truly understood what I'd had with her then. I honestly wasn't sure I understood it any better now, but at least I knew that we wouldn't last if I kept mixing things up.

A thought struck me out of the blue. I was coming at this all wrong. Instead of bashing my head against the same hard wall over and over again, I should focus on something else that needed my attention.

Between all the good and bad that had happened over the last few days, I'd pushed aside the question of the missing flash drive. Even though Ashlee was back, I still needed to find out what'd happened to it. The drive didn't hold nuclear launch codes, but what it did possess wasn't anything I wanted available to just anyone.

I pulled up my email and sent a quick message off to Stu. I could've sent it directly to Ashlee, but it was better to go through Stu whenever possible. If anyone wanted to make an issue about Ashlee and me, we'd have a nice paper trail that went from me to Stu to her, with everything clearly documented. No hint of impropriety.

I supposed this was as good a test of our new normal as anything.

Speaking of normal...

I returned to sorting through my email, sending responses when necessary, moving others to specific folders. Deleting the junk that inevitably managed to make it through our firewalls no matter how often IT updated things.

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I'd just finished the last one when Stu's response popped up on my screen.

Ashlee says that she backed up the flash drive the Friday before she was terminated and put it in her desk. She remembers locking the drawer but didn't check the drawer on Monday morning. She left her key on her desk before she left.

If she'd had her key until Monday morning, the chances of someone having gotten into her desk between Friday afternoon and Monday morning was slim. It wasn't one hundred percent since she hadn't seen the drive that day, but it was more likely that between the time Ashlee left her key on her desk and when I sent IT down to wipe the computer, someone had used the key to steal the drive.

Though I supposed it could've been taken after the computer wipe, depending on when security had picked up Ashlee's key. I needed to narrow down the timeframe even more, but this was a phone call conversation instead of an email thing.

They answered on the second ring. "Manhattan Records Security. How may I help you?"

"This is Mr. Lexington," I said, ignoring the image of Ashlee that popped into my mind when I said my name. "I need to know when an employee's key was retrieved. This would've been a week ago yesterday. Employee Ashlee Webb."

"Of course, Mr. Lexington. One moment while I pull up the record."

"Thank you." I took my daily planner from my top drawer and opened it to today. I had electronic reminders on both my phone and computer, and they automatically

synced so that I didn't accidentally double-book, but I also kept a physical copy too. As I waited, I ran over my schedule for the day to confirm that I didn't have anything important planned.

"Mr. Lexington?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for holding, sir. Our records show that Miss Webb's key was retrieved from her desk at eleven forty and logged in here at eleven forty-five."

"Was the key taken out by anyone after that?"

A slight hesitation before he answered, "Yesterday morning, sir. Stu Hancock signed it out, saying that Miss Webb was working as a freelance contractor and he would be responsible for her key. Was that not supposed to happen?"

I hurried to reassure him. "It's all right. Miss Webb is working under Mr. Hancock as a freelance contractor, as he said."

I could almost hear his sigh of relief.

"Then no, sir, no one else took out the key until Mr. Hancock yesterday."

"Who signed the key in?"

"Chris Starr."

I could rule out some new security guy swiping the drive.

I knew not only the name but the person as well. Chris had been the first security hire

I'd made. He'd joined the army right out of high school, wanting to be a sniper. Three months before he had to decide if he was going to re-up, he was blinded in his left eye.

I met him at Club Privé where he'd been working for a couple months after returning to the States. I'd mentioned I was looking for security for Manhattan Records, and he asked if he'd be able to apply. The club was elite and screened their members well, but it was still too crowded and loud for Chris. He'd been working for me ever since.

"I need you to email me the security footage from the A&R department on Monday morning, starting when Miss Webb arrived until Chris picked up the key."

"Yes, sir. I'll do that right away."

"Thank you."

While I waited for the files, I went onto the main server and pulled up the log-in information for that Monday. I kept that information on the main server for any manager to access. My computer was also able to log into the security cameras, but only in real time. Past security footage was on a closed server, accessible only from the security office.

Four people had called off that Monday. One in the art department, two interns in sales, and one of the sound equipment managers. All of them had good track records, and they'd all come back to work the rest of the week. No one had called off Tuesday. Three people Wednesday, and one of them had been out the rest of the week, but there was a note from their manager confirming extenuating circumstances: emergency appendectomy.

Just because no one had disappeared along with the flash drive didn't mean no one had stolen it. It did, however, lessen the likelihood that whoever had taken it had done

so on a whim rather than any forethought on their part. Impulsive didn't necessarily mean unintelligent, though. They could have already set up a buyer and sold it but were smart enough to know that if they quit right away, they'd be at the top of any suspect list. Or they could not know where to go to find a buyer.

Then again, all of this assumed that the motive was money.

I frowned at the thought. Was it possible that someone hadn't taken the flash drive because they thought they could sell it? Was there even another possible reason? It wasn't the sort of thing a person could use for themselves, like stealing towels at a hotel.

Before I could go too far down that particular bunny trail, an alert let me know that the files I'd requested had arrived. I closed out of the attendance records and pulled up the video feed. If I didn't find anything here, I'd have to widen my search.

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Maybe Ashlee hadn't locked the drawer like she thought she had. If that was the case, the drive could've vanished at any point in time from the previous Friday afternoon until the day I'd realized it was gone. I could only hope I got lucky.

The clarity of the recording was such that I could see how haggard Ashlee looked. I hadn't even noticed it when I'd called her to my office. Or I hadn't let myself notice. I'd been all about how I'd thought I'd been wronged.

I pushed aside the guilt. Ashlee and I had moved past it. I wasn't going to let it distract me from getting to the truth. I focused even more firmly on the video.

She wasn't at her desk long, and though I didn't look away as she walked out of the camera's view, I cringed at the memory of what I'd been doing at that time.

On screen, Suzie Lamas arrived, walking past Ashlee's empty desk without a second glance. When Ashlee returned from, well, from being fired, I was relieved to see that her back was to the camera. Maybe I was a coward for not wanting to see her face, but I was still glad.

It hadn't taken her long to take what was hers, and I had a clear line of sight as she set her desk key next to the keyboard. I hadn't seen her unlock the desk, so as long as she'd locked it before she'd left on Friday, the flash drive was in the drawer when she left Monday morning.

For several minutes, nothing else happened on screen. Then, Stu came in, and behind him, I could see a few of the marketing department employees in the background. None of them were close enough to Ashlee's desk to warrant my attention, so I kept

watching. Nearly ten more minutes of virtually nothing passed before something notable happened.

A woman strolled over to the desk, casually looking around as if she didn't have anything specific she was supposed to be doing. Considering I rewarded employees for not dawdling, her nonchalant attitude was a red flag. She stepped around the corner of the desk and scooped up the key.

I leaned forward as she unlocked the desk drawer and felt around inside. She pulled out a few pens, a stapler, a couple USB cords...and the flash drive. Everything else she put back into the drawer. The drive she dropped down the front of her shirt, and I assumed, into her bra. After locking the drawer again, she returned the key to where she'd taken it from.

She was half a dozen steps away when the IT guy walked past her on his way to Ashlee's desk. Her face hadn't yet been at the right angle for me to get a definite ID, but when she turned nearly completely around to check out the IT guy, I was able to positively put a name to a face.

I closed the file, sent a thank you to security, and then pulled up a blank email. I wasn't required to tell anyone what I'd just found since it was more than enough proof to justify firing the thief, but I didn't want this coming back to bite me or Ashlee in the ass. I typed out a succinct explanation of what I'd seen and what I was going to do, then sent it to Stu, Suzie, Finley, and HR. Once that was done, I stood up. I wasn't going to wait another minute.

As I went to the elevator, I kept my face blank but polite, not doing any more than nodding to Ashlee the exact same way I nodded to everyone else I passed. I'd talk to her when I came back up, but only to let her know what'd happened.

The moment Clara Dayton saw me coming, the color drained from her face, leaving

her skin a grayish tone that made me wonder if she was going to pass out before I could confront her. She was on her feet by the time I reached her but had a hand on her desk as if she needed to steady herself.

“Mr. Lexington, how can I help you?”

“Do you still have the flash drive?”

She opened her mouth, then closed it without making a sound. She nodded, gaze falling as she picked up her purse. She rummaged through it and then pulled out the flash drive. She held it out with a shaking hand, dropping it into my outstretched palm as soon as it was close enough.

“You’re fired.”

I turned to walk away, stopping when she spoke. “Don’t you want to know why?”

I didn’t even bother to look at her. “It doesn’t matter why. You stole company property.”

“Flora’s my friend.”

I turned now, annoyance replacing the cool calm I’d been projecting.

“Ashlee should’ve gotten fired too.” Clara’s color had returned with a vengeance, staining her cheeks an ugly red. “I’m going to HR, and I’m going to file a complaint that you’re firing anyone who won’t—”

I held up a hand and she, thankfully, shut up. “I came down here myself to see if you would go graciously, knowing that you were lucky that I didn’t call the cops and report you for stealing. I’ll give you until I reach the elevator to leave. If you’re not

gone, I'll be having security detain you until the police arrive, and I'll go straight to the in-house counsel to find every single charge we can have filed against you."

By now, people were staring at her, and I hoped that would give her the incentive she needed to leave right away. She may have deserved to get arrested for stealing, but I just wanted this done and behind me. I wanted to be able to stop at Ashlee's desk and tell her what had happened.

And maybe ask if she knew anyone who'd make a good receptionist.

Ten

Ashlee

I could do this. Nate had thoroughly separated my job from his position, and there was even precedent for it. Manhattan Records contracted security on retainer and outside catering for events. Granted, my position was technically more involved than companies used only for specific times, but it wasn't like I was the only person hired this way. No special treatment for me.

I was still telling myself that when Nate stopped at my desk. I'd seen him pass by a few minutes ago, and he hadn't even looked at me. That had been good, the way things were supposed to be now. As little contact as possible while at work so we could be together outside without any conflicting interests. But he didn't walk past this time. He stopped.

"Good afternoon," I said politely, hoping I sounded professional and distant.

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“I have something of yours.” He held up a thumb drive.

Relief of different kinds flooded me. First, for the drive being recovered. Second, because Nate had a clear business reason to speak to me. He would’ve had to walk past me to get to Mr. Hancock’s office anyway, so it made sense he’d just stop and give it to me directly.

I reached out to take it, careful not to make any direct contact. I hadn’t yet learned how not to flush when we touched, and I honestly doubted I ever would. If someone happened to be watching and saw my physical response, it’d be impossible to keep the rumors from flying.

My curiosity, however, kept me from simply taking the drive and thanking him. “Can I ask where you found it?”

His smile flattened. “Let’s just say we need a new receptionist.”

“Oh.” Clara. “Are you sure she didn’t just find it?”

“I watched the security footage myself.” The muscle in his jaw pulsed. “She came up not long after you would’ve walked by her on your way out of the building. She used the key on your desk and rummaged through it for a minute or so before taking out the drive, then relocking the desk, leaving your key almost exactly where you’d left it.”

I was glad he’d found it because I hadn’t been entirely confident in my ability to recreate everything I’d already done, not without compromising on time or quality,

but I felt awful that he'd fired a second person because of me. Yes, Flora and Clara had both committed terminating actions, but neither one of those things would've happened if I hadn't been involved. Flora probably still would've gotten suspended for talking about Nate the way she had, but Nate's treatment of me was the reason she'd continued to spread rumors, and I had no doubt that it was Clara's loyalty to her friend that had prompted the theft.

"Don't." The order was sharp, startling me.

"Don't what?"

"Don't blame yourself for any of this." He started to reach out his hand, then pulled it back, putting both hands into his pockets, as if that was the only way he could keep himself from touching me. "None of this is your fault. They made their own decisions, and they deserve the consequences. If anything, Clara's lucky I didn't call the police."

He was right. I knew that in my head, but that didn't ease my guilt as much as it should have. I'd caused so much trouble for Nate, all because I'd been too scared to just walk up to Finley and tell him who I was. And it wasn't like I'd only been here for a few months either. I could've approached Finley after working here for a year and then quit, long before this thing with Nate and I had begun. But I'd stayed and stayed, hiding my real intentions, giving myself excuse after excuse as to why I needed to wait.

I didn't need to wait any longer. I shouldn't wait any longer. It was time for me to talk to Finley...and for me to leave Manhattan Records. I'd caused enough discord in this place. Me staying wasn't fair to anyone. All it was doing was hurting people. People I cared about.

I didn't say any of this, though. Nate would just argue against it, tell me that he'd

fixed any issues that could possibly come up. He'd say that this was his company and if anyone had a problem with me, they could leave. He'd protect me, no matter the damage it did to him personally or professionally. That was the kind of man he was.

It was my turn to protect him, even if he was pissed when he found out.

"I'm glad you found it," I said as I plugged it into my computer. "I could've replaced the information, but it wouldn't have been as polished as what I'd already done."

"That's good." He rocked back on his heels, then forward onto his toes.

This was awkward.

"Nate, there you are." Finley's voice preceded him, and I saw my own relief mirrored on Nate's face. "Hello, Miss Webb."

"Hi." I smiled at him, pressing my fingers together so he couldn't see them shaking. I needed to get past this.

Nate offered his reason for being here before Finley even asked it. "I found the flash drive that Miss Webb left in her desk."

"That's good," he said. "Stu told me how much information was on it."

"I fired Clara Dayton," Nate continued with his quick explanation. "She stole it."

Finley frowned. "The receptionist?"

"Her friend was fired previously for...unbecoming behavior. She blamed Ashlee and wanted to get her into trouble."

Something flickered in Finley's eyes, and I wondered if it was because Nate had referred to me by my first name. He knew that Nate and I had been together, but I didn't know if Nate had told him about our recent weekend.

"Stu also told me that you've made a...change to Miss Webb's position." Finley sounded like he was choosing his words carefully.

"I did." Nate gave a brief outline of my contract, and as he finished his explanation, he glanced at me, his eyes warm. "I wanted to be sure that there'd be nothing problematic about my girlfriend working here."

I didn't know who was more surprised by the word girlfriend, Finley or me. Nate was the only one who acted like it was no big deal.

"I guess that answers my next question," Finley said finally.

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“Good.” Nate’s hands were out of his pockets, and he once more looked like everything in the world was going according to his plan. “We’re having a dinner at my place on Friday evening. Ashlee and I would love for you to join us.”

We would? I stared at Nate, my eyes wide. He inclined his head ever so slightly, and I suddenly knew exactly what he was doing. He was giving me the perfect opportunity to tell Finley who I was. A place I felt comfortable, but not my own home. He’d be there so I wouldn’t be completely alone, but I also wouldn’t need to worry about anyone interrupting or overhearing.

“Thank you,” I mouthed the words at Nate, and the warmth in his eyes wrapped around me.

He was taking care of me again.

Eleven

Nate

It hadn’t been easy, but Ashlee and I had made it through the week maintaining a completely professional relationship at work. Granted, we hadn’t seen each other much, but keeping my distance from her had been difficult enough.

I wasn’t accustomed to denying myself like this, and it was harder than I’d imagined. Delayed gratification during an encounter or leading up to one was completely different than not taking the woman I wanted to a room and having my way with her, especially when she was only just down the hallway.

As much as I supported Ashlee talking to Finley tonight at dinner, I couldn't deny that I was more looking forward to what would be happening after dinner. My appetite for Ashlee was insatiable.

I was accustomed to a 'honeymoon period' whenever I found a new partner, a time where everything was new and exciting. It lasted different lengths with each woman, but something told me it was going to be different with Ashlee, like everything else was.

My doorbell rang, and I made my way over to it with a smile. She was early, which meant the two of us would have at least a little bit of time alone. Not long enough to do all the things I wanted to do to her, but I was happy just being with her.

The moment I opened the door, however, I knew that Ashlee and I weren't going to have a relaxing chat while I finished making the salad. Worry lined her face, and she was already wringing her hands. If I had to guess, she'd changed her clothes at least half a dozen times before deciding on a cute, springy dress that was neither too dressy or too casual.

"You look good," I said as she came inside. She nodded an absent thanks and went straight to the kitchen.

Yeah, this wasn't good.

I followed and found her leaning against the counter, playing with the lid to a bottle of water she'd gotten from the fridge.

"Are you all right?" I asked as I crossed to where I'd left the veggies for the salad. I didn't look directly at her as I started to put things together. "I mean, you seem like you're...tense."

“No shit,” she muttered as she opened the water and took a long drink.

“That’s some mouth,” I said, turning toward her, salad forgotten. “I think you need a reminder of how best to use it.”

Her lips parted, soft skin glistening. I held out my hand and waited to see if she’d accept her punishment or if she’d use her safe word. We hadn’t been together long enough for me to be able to predict what her choice would be with any sort of accuracy. Some subs easily slipped into the right mindset, making a punishment just as good a distraction from nerves as getting off. Ashlee was new enough that she might see my suggestion as out of place.

She put her hand into mine, and I led her from the kitchen to my bedroom. The tile in the kitchen would’ve been too hard on her knees. If this had been the beginning of a night to ourselves, I might’ve had her kneel right there despite the discomfort. If we’d been together longer, I might’ve had her do it because it would hurt. Not tonight, though. I was using punishment to get her out of her head, not to teach her a lesson.

I sat on the edge of the bed, my eyes on hers as I quickly opened my pants and pulled out my still-soft cock. Ashlee licked her lips, and my dick twitched. Damn. The things this woman could do to me.

“Down.” The single-word command came out rougher than I’d intended, but she didn’t seem to even notice it as she went to her knees in front of me.

She was wearing her hair back, giving me a clear view as she bent her head. Her tongue immediately began tracing patterns on my skin, though what I couldn’t tell. Blood rushed into my cock, making it grow, but before I was fully erect, she took all of me into her mouth.

“Fuck,” I groaned as I fought to keep my eyes open. I wanted to bury my hands in her

hair, hold her in place until she was taking me down her throat, but I knew messing up her hair would add to her stress, not take from it.

One hand snuck into my pants and cupped my balls. I cursed again, grateful I wasn't trying for stamina. Her mouth felt too good. And then she started sucking on it, and I had to grip the mattress to keep from grabbing her. She moved her head slowly, letting me inch out of her mouth until just the tip remained. Her tongue flicked across the head, then circled the crown before she went down again.

I moaned her name and felt her smile. Her tongue rubbed along the bottom of my shaft, pressing it against the roof of her mouth even as her fingers massaged my balls. She was a fast learner, immediately applying anything that received a positive response so that, in no time at all, she had me on the edge.

"You can finish me however you want." I was barely able to get the command out. "I'm close."

Her free hand closed around the base of my dick, pumping it as she increased suction. My entire body jerked in warning, but she kept going, working me until I exploded in her mouth. Without pulling back, she swallowed, lapping at my sensitive skin until it became too much, and I stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. I slipped out of her mouth, and my entire body shuddered at the sudden chill.

I cupped her chin and tipped her head back. I felt her surprise right before my mouth covered hers. My tongue danced with hers, and I tasted myself. Some men refused to kiss after a woman went down on them, but in my opinion, if they expected their woman to use their mouth, they could damn well thank her properly.

When I was satisfied, I stood and helped her to her feet. We went to the guest bathroom and cleaned up. I finished first and kissed the top of her head.

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“Finley should be here soon. Take your time. I’m going to get some drinks ready in the library. Join me when you’re ready.”

I was almost at the door when she spoke. “Thank you.”

My heart twisted in a new, unfamiliar way. “You never have to thank me for taking care of you.”

I left before I could change my mind about Finley coming over. Not that I honestly considered telling him that I didn’t want to share Ashlee’s attention. Tonight was about giving Ashlee the support she needed to tell Finley who she was. And if she decided she wanted to wait, that was okay too. I would do whatever she needed of me.

I’d just finished setting out the glasses and my best bottle of Bowmore Scotch Whisky – Finley’s favorite – when the doorbell rang. Ashlee was still in the bathroom, so I went to let my friend in. We exchanged pleasantries as we walked to the library, and I poured us both two fingers of the dark amber liquid.

Before he took a drink, Finley looked at the bottle and chuckled. “You do realize that bottle is older than your girlfriend, right?”

I nearly choked on my scotch. He was right. It was two years older than Ashlee. For the first time, I realized just how far apart we were in age.

“Don’t feel bad,” Finley said with a grin. “Between her being mature for her age and your immaturity, you probably even out at about the same age.”

I glared at him. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“I feel like I missed something,” Ashlee said as she came into the library. She crossed to me, automatically reaching for my hand.

“Finley’s just giving me a hard time,” I said.

A thought hit me. If Finley was already getting on me about Ashlee and my relationship, how bad was it going to be when he found out she was his daughter?

Shit.

“Here.” I handed her the glass I’d poured for her. Only a finger because she was a lightweight when it came to anything harder than wine or beer. She wanted to be relaxed, not drunk.

She thanked me and took a sip.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to check on dinner.” I kissed her temple and squeezed her hand to let her know that I was here for as much of this conversation as she wanted. She nodded at me, and I left, wondering exactly how my friend was going to handle this news. I could only hope I knew him as well as I thought I did, because if he was anything but sweet to Ashlee, our friendship was going to come to an ugly end.

Twelve

Ashlee

I almost told Nate not to go, but I didn't want dinner to be ruined because I was a big old scaredy-cat. It wasn't even like I hadn't talked to Finley before, or had this conversation in my head a hundred thousand times since I'd learned his name.

Nate was doing so much to make this easy on me too. He'd sit with me when he came back if that was what I wanted. Or if I decided I needed more time, I had no doubt he'd support that too.

But I wasn't going to wait past tonight. I'd put it off too long to begin with. Now, Mom knew, and I had her blessing. Nate knew, and I had his backing. This was the right time.

Still, I stalled.

I kept my drink in hand as I roamed the library, feigning interest in what books Nate owned. I'd already looked at them in the past, and at the moment, my brain didn't take in a single title. I sipped at the scotch, appreciating the fact that Nate hadn't given me a lot. I was anxious enough that I would've drunk whatever was in my glass, no matter how unwise it would've been. Because he'd only given me a little, I'd be able to take the edge off but not risk getting drunk.

"It surprises people when they find out how much Nate likes to read," Finley broke the silence. "And by what he reads too."

"He doesn't really seem like the type to be a big fantasy reader," I agreed.

"I'm enjoying Desi's Dream Harem."

I froze. What. The. Hell.

Finley chuckled, like he'd intentionally dropped that comment the way he had just to

see what I'd do. "Don't you remember telling me that you were reading it?"

Fuck me. Now I remembered. What had I been thinking? Even if he hadn't been my father, he was my boss – sort of, anyway – and telling him I'd been reading a reverse harem book was not the best thing to do. Heat flooded my face, and I wondered if it'd be too much to ask the floor to open up and swallow me.

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“No need to be embarrassed,” Finley said. “We all like to read something a little...naughty at times.”

He didn’t just say naughty. That couldn’t have just happened because, if it had, I was fairly certain that I would need to lock myself in a bathroom and not come out until I was dead.

“You know, that sounded funny in my head,” he said. “Like the sort of thing that could break a potentially awkward silence. But I was wrong. It just made it more awkward.”

Good to know I wasn’t the only one thinking that.

“So, how about we pretend I didn’t say any of that, and we move on to another topic?”

I nodded. “That would be good.”

Except the only other topic I could think of was one that made my stomach flip. It was going to come up tonight, but I wasn’t sure this was the best segue.

“I like Nate,” Finley said quietly, his voice suddenly serious. “But I know how he is with women. Are things between you two...legitimate?”

His question startled me. I’d assumed that his interest before had been out of a need to protect the company and Nate, but maybe he really did want to look out for me too.

“Not quite sure I’d ever refer to a relationship as legitimate,” I said. “But it’s real, if that’s what you’re asking.”

He came over to stand next to me. “He’s not pressuring you or coercing you?”

“Nate would never do that,” I said quickly. A little voice in the back of my head reminded me that, technically, he had done that to me the first time, but the more I got to know him, the more I believed he never would have fired me even if I’d refused to go along with his ‘date.’

“I’d hoped that was why he’d set up that freelance contract.”

“It is.” I turned to face him. “Can we sit down? I have something I want to talk to you about. It’s actually why Nate asked you to come tonight.”

He looked curious, but not worried, and when I moved to the pair of plush chairs a few feet away, he followed me. I waited until he was settled and then I laced my fingers together and prayed to not completely fuck this up.

“My mom wanted a baby, but she’s a lesbian.” I mentally smacked myself. That was the absolute most awkward thing in the world to have said, but I forged ahead, knowing that now that I’d said it, I had to explain or risk looking like a complete idiot. “I mean, she didn’t like guys, so pregnancy wasn’t going to go the normal route. She had artificial insemination.”

I forced myself to keep looking at his face, waiting to see when he’d finally make the connection. So far, he wore a slightly puzzled look, as if he couldn’t figure out why I was giving him this insanely personal information.

“Mom was always open about where I came from, and I never really wanted to know anything about my father...until my mom got sick. Her family had disowned her

when she came out, and her partner left when I was fourteen. We had a few friends, but most of the responsibility was on me. Mom hated it, but..." I shook my head. "It wasn't until then that I realized she was all I had. If she died, I wouldn't have anyone. No family at all. So, I decided to find my father."

Finley set down his glass, and I saw his hand shake as he rested it on his knee. He still didn't speak, but I knew he'd figured out where this story was going next.

"I kept going back to the clinic until I found a name. Your name." I gave him a small smile. "There aren't many Finley Kordells in this world, so you were easy to find."

"You knew who I was when you came to Manhattan Records," he said after a long moment. "That's why you came."

I nodded. "I couldn't figure out how to approach you. I didn't know the sort of man you were. My mom went into remission, so I wasn't scared anymore. I could take my time to figure out if I wanted to know you." I flushed. "I know that sounds awful, knowing what a good man you are, but I didn't know that when I first came to Manhattan Records."

I fell silent and waited for him to respond. It was a lot of information to process, I knew that, and it wasn't as if I'd given him much in the way of warning.

"When I was in college, my idiot roommate decided the best way to make money was to donate...well, you know." Finley flushed. "He didn't want to go alone, so I went with him. An impulsive decision that I haven't really thought about since."

"I expected as much." I hurried to reassure him. "I didn't come to find you because I wanted something from you."

He smiled. "No one who's spoken to you for more than two minutes could ever think

that about you.”

From anyone, that sort of compliment would’ve made me smile. From a boss, it would’ve been great. From my father...I beamed. I wasn’t naïve enough to think that this was going to be some sort of sitcom thing where we’d be going to father-daughter dances or anything like that, but maybe, just maybe we could have something.

“I’m sorry I came to the company with ulterior motives.” He hadn’t mentioned anything like that, but after how Nate had reacted, I wanted to get out in front of things. “Manhattan Records is a great place to work, but if you think it’s a conflict of interests to have me there or if you’d rather have someone who came with the business as their primary focus, I’ll quit.”

Silence bloomed between us, as we just stared at each other. It wasn’t awkward, exactly. It was actually nice. I breathed out a half sigh of relief.

“When I found out that you and Nate were involved, I took a look at your work history.” Finley’s tone reassured me as much as his smile. “You’re one of our best employees, and I think I can honestly say that without any bias. You work hard when you’re there, and you rarely take time off. You’re never late or ask to leave early. The quality of your work is exemplary.”

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The knots of tension that had still been twisting up my insides eased. He wasn't angry at me for keeping this from him for so long.

But even as my shoulders relaxed, his eyes narrowed. "Ashlee, why did Nate fire you?"

Shit. I hadn't even thought about that side of things.

I had to answer as honestly as I could without making Nate seem like a bad guy. Yes, he'd overreacted, but I refused to be one of those women who pulled other people into her relationship squabbles.

"He found some articles about the company, including a picture of the two of you together and some notes where I didn't refer to you by name, so he thought I'd come to Manhattan Records with the intention of seducing him."

Finley's eyebrows shot up. "He thought you did what?!"

"We've worked it out," I said, holding up a hand. "When he came to talk to me about the flash drive, I told him the truth, and we worked it out."

"Still..."

"I just want to move past it," I said, silently pleading with him with my eyes. "Please."

"All right," he agreed, but his face still held lines of concern. "Is it okay if I ask a

couple questions?”

“Of course. Anything you want to know.” I was almost as excited to tell him about my life as I was to hear about his. I hadn’t wanted to let my expectations get too high, but now that we were here together, talking, and he wasn’t pushing me away, my previously restrained hopes were soaring.

“Does your mom know you found me?”

“Yes, and I have Nate to thank for that. She was there when I told him.”

“And she’s okay with you meeting me? As much as I want to get to know you, I don’t want to come between you and her.”

Any hidden doubts I may have had about the sort of man Finley was disappeared with that declaration.

“She is,” I assured him. “She gave me her blessing.”

“Good.” Something like relief crossed his face. “Then I guess it’s up to us to figure out where things go from here.”

He was right, I realized suddenly. It was entirely up to us.

Thirteen

Nate

I hadn’t asked Ashlee if she wanted me to be there when she told Finley, and she hadn’t said anything either way. She was strong enough to do it without me, I didn’t doubt that for a minute, but she’d lose none of my respect if she wanted my support.

The more time I spent with her, the more I saw what an amazing woman I'd had working for me without me even knowing it.

I did need to check on dinner, which gave me the chance to let her and Finley have a few minutes to talk alone if that was what she wanted. After checking the salmon, I set the timer for a few more minutes before heading back to the library.

Before I reached the door, I heard Finley asked why I'd fired Ashlee, and I stopped. He sounded annoyed, and I knew my friend well enough to know that the emotion wasn't aimed at her. I could only think of one reason why he would ask that question in that manner.

She'd told him.

A rush of pride went through me, and I could honestly say I'd never felt anything like it before. It was more than just a basic admiration for someone. I'd had times where I'd expressed pride in a sub's restraint or obedience, but it had always been about sex, control, and the like. Not that there had ever been anything wrong with that, but I'd never felt this level of pride for something not in a sexual scene.

I continued to listen as Ashlee explained what had happened between us, ashamed at how she was protecting me by saying that I'd 'overreacted.' That was far too kind. And then she even credited me with her having told her mother about finding Finley.

At what felt like a pause in the conversation, I started moving again, stepping into the library before they could continue. My eyes automatically sought out Ashlee and found her looking paler than when I'd left, but she gave me a genuine smile, and I relaxed. She looked as if a weight had been lifted.

I crossed over to her and kissed the top of her head. "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes." I looked over at Finley. "Everything okay?"

“Apparently, I’m a father.”

It was only now that I could hear how completely shell-shocked he sounded. Understandable. It wasn’t every day that a college impulse became a twenty-three-year-old daughter.

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“And you knew.” He looked up at me.

“I did,” I admitted. “But it wasn’t my place to tell you.”

He nodded. “You’re right.” Finley stood. “But I think at some point, you and I are going to need to have a conversation about your intentions toward my...daughter.”

Fuck me.

I had a better suggestion. “Let’s have dinner first.”

Fourteen

Ashlee

My father had been an only child, and my grandmother had been a seamstress. She’d died a few years ago. I’d known all of that from my basic research, but when Finley said I had her laugh, it was new information.

He didn’t talk about his dad, and I’d never been able to find anything about him. Still, I didn’t ask. He’d only known about me for a couple hours. I could hardly expect to hear his entire life story over Nate’s deliciously prepared salmon.

Even though I hadn’t been able to find family in my research, a part of me had held on to a secret hope that he’d just been so private that extended family hadn’t made it into the media. It didn’t seem like there was much chance of that, but he was here, and that was enough.

The best part was, as the night wound down, was knowing that this wasn't the end. I'd see him again at work, and we'd make time outside of work to keep getting to know each other.

"Dinner was great," Finley said. "You never fail to surprise me with your culinary skills, Nate."

"Thanks." Nate held out his hand in what looked like one of the most awkward gestures ever. He'd been tense ever since Finley had made that comment about needing to have a fatherly talk, though I didn't think it was because he was concerned. Finley hadn't actually been serious. I suspected it was more that it'd really hit home for Nate that his best friend was my father.

"We're not going to make this weird," Finley said, rolling his eyes. "Well, weirder than it already is."

I grabbed Nate's outstretched hand and pulled it down to my side. "We'll both see you on Monday."

Finley reached out and squeezed my free hand. "It'll seem normal soon."

I hoped that was the case.

After Finley left, I let go of Nate's hand and turned to go to the kitchen. Before I could get more than a couple steps, he grabbed my wrist.

"Where are you going?"

I gestured with my free hand. "To the kitchen to wash the dishes."

"I have a dishwasher for a reason," he said.

“All right, but I need to put the pan to soak, or you’ll never get it clean.”

“I have actually done this before, you know.” He tugged on my hand, and I stumbled back into his chest. “And I already took care of it.”

I leaned into him, smiling. “So, what do you want to do before I head home?”

He slid his arms around me, hands settling at the base of my spine. His eyes gleamed with a familiar light. “You’re not going home.”

I tipped my head back. “I’m not?”

“No. You’re staying here tonight.” His voice deepened, hitting that Dominant note that sent a shiver down my spine.

“I am.” I made it a statement instead of a question because I knew he was actually giving me the option. If I said I wanted to go home, he’d let me. But I didn’t want to go home. Not if he was taking charge again.

“Good.” He bent his head and brushed his lips across mine. “The first thing we’re going to do is get us both out of our clothes and into a shower.”

I liked that idea. Bare skin. Wet bare skin. I could picture the drops of water sliding down those rock-hard pecs, clinging to one pebbled nipple, following that trail of golden hair down chiseled abs...

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Nate's index finger tapped my cheek. "Don't get lost in your head, le soleil. What I have planned is going to be better than what you're imagining."

I opened my mouth to say something, but he gently closed it. I didn't need him to tell me that he could come up with much better sexual fantasies than I ever could. My brain didn't work that way, but I was glad his did.

"While we're in the shower, you're going to help me with something. After we're done, I'm going to reward you for your courage tonight."

I didn't brush off his praise. I basked in it. Nate didn't give empty compliments.

He kissed me again, lingering a little longer this time. A little hungrier. Heat curled in my belly, and my fingers curled in his shirt. I went up on my toes, needing to be closer to him. It was never close enough.

We made our way to the guest bathroom, shedding clothes along the way so that we were both deliciously bare by the time Nate turned on the shower. While we waited for the water to heat, he took down my hair, running his fingers the whole long length.

"Such a beautiful color," he murmured as the strands slipped between his fingers.

Before I could figure out if I was supposed to thank him for the kind words, he was picking me up and moving us both into the shower. While I hadn't yet been in his bedroom or master bathroom, I could only imagine how large the shower in there must be since this one fit the two of us easily enough. If we'd tried to do this in my

shower, it would've been a disaster.

Neither of us spoke as Nate washed my hair, fingers massaging my scalp until I was practically purring. My eyes were closed, head tilted back, water the right temperature – I was in heaven. I lost track of time as he worked conditioner into my hair and let it do its magic while he washed my body. Nothing he did was specifically sexual, but it was all sensual. Each caress stoked the fire inside me, somehow managing to relax me and wind me up at the same time.

I'd nearly forgotten about him saying that I was going to help him with something, but it came rushing back to me when, after he'd finished cleaning me, he put my hand on his cock.

My fingers curled around the shaft instinctively, and I immediately opened my eyes to watch. He was thick and hard already, curving up toward his flat stomach. I moved my hand up until the tip disappeared into my fist, and then back down to the base where my fingers couldn't even touch.

When I started to go to my knees, he stopped me with a hand on my arm. "Just your hand," he said. "And I want you looking in my eyes while you do it."

I nodded mutely, raising my gaze to meet his. My hand moved over him with smooth, steady strokes, and I held his eyes, watching his irises darken to near-black. I tightened my grip, and he groaned, sending a rush of arousal straight through me. I wanted him to make that sound for me again. Up and down, my skin slipped across his as I alternated speed and pressure, observing the slightest changes to his breathing, to the noises he made.

"I'm going to come." The words ground out from between gritted teeth.

I squeezed as my fist went from the very bottom all the way to the tip, and the

moment my thumb swiped across the top, he came. His eyes closed, but I kept watching his face as I milked every last drop from his cock, releasing him only when his entire body shuddered, telling me that he was too sensitive for me to keep touching him.

I washed him then, careful not to handle him too roughly. By the time I was done, his breathing had returned to normal, and his eyes were open, intent on me as I moved. He didn't speak, though, until we were toweling off.

"Go lay on the bed. I'm going to get a few things together and then join you."

Curiosity piqued, I considered asking what he intended to do, but I trusted him to surprise me with something I'd enjoy. I was on the bed alone only for a few minutes before Nate came out of the bathroom, towel wrapped around his waist, his hands full of things I couldn't quite make out.

"Do you remember your safe word?"

I nodded. "Beagle." He raised an eyebrow, and I added, "Mr. Lexington."

"Good. Don't forget to use it if it's too much."

I honestly didn't know how to take that.

"I'm going to make you come. A lot." As he spoke, he laid out what he'd brought. A bullet vibrator. A smooth plastic cylinder that I assumed was another vibrator. A phallic-shaped dildo that wasn't quite as large as he was.

"Thank you, Mr. Lexington?" I made it a question, unsure why he'd feel like he needed to warn me if he was going to let me come.

“You’re going to thank me every time you climax,” he continued. “Until it’s too much and then you’re going to beg me to stop. That’s when I’ll finally fuck you, and you’re going to ride that line between pain and pleasure until your body can’t tell the difference.”

I caught my breath as it finally sunk in what he intended to do, as I imagined what it would feel like to have him still applying pressure and friction when my nerves were raw from too much stimulation.

What the fuck had I gotten myself into?

Fifteen

Nate

As I always seemed to do when I introduced something new to Ashlee, I waited to see if this would be the moment she’d finally decide it was too much. This was tricky, though. People didn’t always realize that too many orgasms could be harder to handle than being denied that release. From the way her eyes widened, I assumed she’d figured at least some of that out.

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Then she nodded, and I could breathe again.

“You’re allowed to move, but not away from me. If you try to get away, I’ll tie you up so you can’t.” I took one of her feet into my hands and pressed my thumbs against her sole, massaging the tight muscles there. “You have the power to stop me, but if you don’t use your safe word, I will assume that you’re continuing to consent to what we’re doing.”

This was the part of a good Dom / sub relationship that a lot of people didn’t understand. The sub truly had all of the power because they could end a scene with a single word or gesture. It was the sub’s choice to hand over control, and they could always take it back.

“I understand, Mr. Lexington.” Her tone was demure, but there was no mistaking the heat in her eyes. She wanted this as much as I did.

I switched to the other foot and repeated the brief massage. She moaned this time, and I wondered how I was going to make it through this scene without coming before I was ready. This would be an exercise in self-control and denial for me as much as it would be a lesson in painful pleasure for her.

“You’re going to start things,” I said as I took a step back from the foot of the bed. “Touch yourself. Show me how you get yourself off, but don’t take too long. I have a lot planned for you.”

“May I touch my breasts too?”

Damn if her question didn't turn me on. The expression on her face made it clear that she was asking because she wanted me to either give or deny permission. She wanted to give up that choice.

"Yes," I said, my voice hoarse. "Show me what you do when you need to get off fast. All of it. Don't hold anything back."

She flushed, the color creeping across her chest and down her breasts, but she didn't argue. One hand slid down her stomach to those fiery curls, and she let her legs fall apart to give me a full view of a single finger delving between her folds. Her other hand moved to her breast, fingers plucking at her nipple even as her lower finger stroked her clit.

Blood filled my cock, and I was tempted to jack off while I watched her, but that would make this about me, and this was supposed to be about her. One of the reasons I'd come in the shower had been to allow me to focus on her now. Not touching myself was my own practice in orgasm denial, and I was more than willing to do that for this woman.

A soft whimpering sound came from Ashlee, and she squirmed as her finger moved in rapid circles around her clit. The fingers on her nipple pinched and held the flesh tight. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip, and her eyes closed. I wanted to order her to open them, but I'd told her to do things like she did on her own, and if she closed her eyes then, she should close them now.

Suddenly, her entire body stiffened, all movement freezing as she came. Seconds ticked past and then she went limp, my name coming out in a breath so faint that I almost thought I imagined it, but as soon as she opened her eyes, I saw the tinge of embarrassment and knew she'd done it unconsciously, not registering it until this moment.

I walked around the side of the bed and leaned across to give her a kiss. Soft and deep, my tongue stroked inside her mouth, a silent promise of all the ways I planned to explore her body tonight. By the time I finished with her, she'd have come more times than she ever dreamed possible.

Ashlee was close again. I'd brought her to climax once each with the three toys I'd laid out, and then coaxed her up onto her knees so I could stretch out underneath her and put my tongue to good use. She'd barely finished coming when I started licking her, cleaning the excess moisture from her pink skin. Every pass of my tongue made her squeak and gasp, but she still obeyed when I used my hands on her hips to encourage her to move. When my lips closed around her swollen clit, she cried out, voice cracking.

I could feel her thigh muscles trembling as she grabbed the headboard above me. I sucked harder on her clit, and her climax slammed into her. This time, the strained little mews falling from her lips had a hint of pain. I stroked her hips and down her thighs as I shifted our positions to allow me to sit and hold her in my arms.

She was still shaking as she buried her face against my chest, the vibrations making my stiff cock ache as it pressed against her ass. I wanted so badly to be inside her, linked with her in the most intimate way possible. But I'd set the guidelines for this encounter, and I needed to stick with them, no matter how bad my case of blue balls got.

"Thank you, Mr. Lexington." She breathed the words against my skin, and I felt another burst of pride. She'd done as I'd told her, thanking me every time she came, but she had yet to beg me to stop.

I tipped her head up and kissed her, giving her a little bit more time to recover before we started again. I worked one hand free as our mouths moved together, reaching for the bullet vibrator again. I flicked it on, and the faint buzzing filled the otherwise

quiet room. She whimpered as I broke the kiss, her eyes meeting mine as I trailed the cool metal up the inside of her calf and then her thigh. A shudder ran through her, and I paused, waiting for her to say it.

She didn't.

I kept my gaze on her face as my fingers ventured once more into familiar territory. Her body jerked when it touched her clit, and she grabbed my arm, nails digging into my skin. The pain was sharp, but I pushed it to the back of my mind and kept my attention on her.

"Nate..." My name was barely a whisper. "Please..."

"Please what, le soleil?"

The metal was already warm and slick as I moved it from her clit down to her entrance. Her nails dug in deeper, her body tensing as the sensations threatened to overwhelm her. It wouldn't be long now.

"I don't know if I can do it." She writhed on my lap, and I could see her fighting not to pull away.

"Do what?"

"I don't know if I can come again," she admitted.

I kissed her forehead. "You can, le soleil. One more time. One more and then you can beg me to stop. One more, and I'll fuck you until I come, and then you can be done."

She nodded her head. "Okay. Okay. One more."

“Good girl, le soleil.” I passed it over her g-spot and she cried out, her back arching, nails scratching, legs jerking. She twitched and twisted, but I held her tight, rubbing until she screamed as she came.

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I moved quickly, knowing she was done. She might not even feel up to having me inside her, but as soon as I laid her back on the bed, I reached for a condom and rolled it on. Better to be prepared.

“Again?” I asked as I went to my knees in front of her. “You know what to do. Beg me to stop, and I’ll fuck you. Say your word, and I’ll take care of myself after I finish taking care of you.”

“Yes, please.” She raised her head enough to see me. “No more. Please. Fuck me. I can’t. I can’t. Fuck me and be done. Ple—”

The last word turned into a silent scream as I drove into her with one smooth thrust. I didn’t hesitate, didn’t wait, or even pause. This wasn’t about drawing things out, making her feel good. Going slow would actually feel worse for her right now, and with how badly my cock had been throbbing, I was grateful for it. I didn’t think I could last much more than two or three more strokes. She felt too good, and I was too far gone.

I made it to four before I came.

My legs were weak when I climbed out of bed, but I was still in better shape than Ashlee. By the time I returned to the bed, she’d already passed out. After I’d cleaned her up, I took her into my bedroom without a second thought.

It wasn’t until I climbed in next to her that I realized how much I was looking forward to this part of the night too. For the first time in my life, I wanted to fall asleep with a woman in my arms, and the realization freaked me out.

Fortunately, I was tired enough to push that aside and wrap my arms around Ashlee. I was asleep before anything else could occur to me.

Sixteen

Ashlee

This was not my bed.

That was the first thing I realized when I woke up. The second thing was that someone had their arm around me. A muscular arm attached to someone who smelled really good.

Everything came rushing back to me, and my eyes flew open. Nate was still asleep, his face only an inch or so from mine.

Right. I was at Nate's place. I'd talked to Finley. The three of us had eaten dinner. Nate and I'd had sex. But this didn't look like the same room where we'd been the last time I remembered being awake.

I was naked under the sheet and comforter, but I suspected Nate had cleaned me up before bringing me in here. He'd taken care of me, the way I'd known he would. As intense as last night had been, I'd never once felt like he didn't have me. I was always safe with him.

And it was because of how he made me feel that I'd wanted to please him. It was how I'd managed to endure that last, overwhelming, half-painful orgasm. The pleasure I'd felt had come as much from the pride I'd seen on Nate's face as it had from the physical aspect of things.

He hadn't said anything, but I knew he'd been as stressed about Finley learning the

truth as I had been. Still, he'd taken care of me and not himself. Now it was my turn to take care of him.

I eased my way out of his grip and headed for the bathroom. My entire body ached more than it ever had before, and that wasn't even counting the way everything between my legs was still throbbing. I was pretty sure that I didn't want anything coming into contact with my clitoris at any point in the near future.

Even the thought of washing made me frown.

When I got out of the shower, I braided my hair rather than drying it, then went back into Nate's bedroom, half-expecting him to already be awake, but he was still sleeping. In fact, he was now laying on his stomach, and the covers had shifted with him, leaving that gorgeous broad expanse of his well-muscled back bare for me to ogle for a minute before trying to decide what to wear.

I hadn't brought any clothes with me yesterday, so my choices were limited to what I'd been wearing last night and finding something in Nate's closet. It didn't take long for me to opt for the latter. I pulled a t-shirt from his top drawer and tugged it over my head. It hit me mid-thigh, which left plenty of skin bare, but I didn't mind.

I ambled into the kitchen, the tiles cool under my feet. I was hungry, and I knew Nate would be too when he woke up. The least I could do for him was make breakfast. I wasn't quite up to his culinary skill level, but I could put together some basics at least.

Toasted bagels with cream cheese. Two pears. And some cereal that surprised me with the cute cartoon character on the front. If I hadn't known that he didn't have kids, I might've thought he kept that stuff for his visitation weekends, but I'd already learned that Nate's personality had a couple aspects hidden to pretty much everyone.

The way his face lit up when he came out of the bedroom told me I was right. That cereal was one of his little things, something I was privileged to see, and it warmed me, knowing that I had a little piece of him that very few other people had.

“Thank you for making breakfast,” he said as he poured himself coffee from the pot that’d just finished brewing.

I watched to see how he took his drink, filing the information away for future use. I was surprised at how much I liked being able to take care of him. This entire dynamic between us was different than any sort of relationship I’d ever imagined, let alone what I would’ve pictured for a ‘nontraditional’ sort of thing.

Non-vanilla? I made a mental note to research some terminology and then remembered that Nate had told me that he was going to be my teacher. I needed to find out if that included general definitions, or I could end up getting punished again.

I blushed as I remembered how much I’d enjoyed my punishments so far, though that wasn’t a sentiment I would’ve felt comfortable sharing with just anyone. Before I’d gotten involved with Nate, I never would’ve understood the appeal of something that sounded humiliating, or worse, cruel. What we’d done hadn’t been either of those things. A little embarrassing, maybe, but that had been more because of the standards society had ingrained in me from a young age. What things were ‘acceptable’ and what weren’t. Even as open-minded as I’d been raised by my ‘different’ mothers, there’d still be certain things we hadn’t discussed.

“There’s a whole lot going on in that head of yours right now, isn’t there?” Nate asked before taking a bite of his bagel.

“There’s usually a lot going on in my head,” I admitted. “My mom always says I think too much about everything.” I took a sip of the coffee I’d poured but essentially ignored. It was still hot enough to be good.

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“What are you thinking now?” he asked, the interest in his eyes genuine. He wasn’t just making small talk because he felt like it was expected of him.

“A lot,” I admitted. He made a motion with his hand, wanting me to continue. “I was wondering if what this was between us would be considered non-traditional or not-vanilla, or if there was a better word for it. And that made me think that I needed to research...except you’d told me that you wanted to be the only one teaching me. That led me to punishments...” I let my voice trail off as I revealed the reason I’d blushed.

“I see,” he said thoughtfully. He finished off his bagel, brushed the crumbs from his fingers, and then reached for the cereal. “I don’t like calling sex ‘vanilla’ like that’s some sort of insult. I happen to like vanilla-flavored things.”

That wasn’t where I thought he’d take the conversation, but I was more than willing to follow him. “Do you think ‘non-traditional’ is better?”

He shrugged. “I generally use whatever terms are acceptable wherever I am or whoever I happen to be talking to, but I’ve never really thought about it other than the whole ‘vanilla’ thing. What do you think we should call it?”

I loved that he asked my opinion, but I had no idea.

Until I did.

“Maybe we can just say that it’s ours, and we don’t need a label. We’re together and what that means for that particular aspect of our relationship isn’t anyone’s business but ours.”

He reached over and lifted my hand to his mouth, brushing his lips across my knuckles in one of those tender gestures that didn't seem to exist anywhere outside of historical romances.

"It's ours. I like that." He squeezed my fingers before setting my hand back down again.

The phone he'd set next to his plate buzzed, breaking the moment. He gave me an apologetic smile as he glanced down at the screen, but I wasn't bothered by it. He was the CEO of a huge company, and this wasn't some planned getaway where he'd promised to leave work at the office. I was the one throwing his schedule off by being here.

His mouth flattened, and all of the humor left his face. Not just the humor either. Creases appeared at the corners of his mouth, and a shadow passed over his eyes. Despite how serious he now looked, he didn't tap his screen and instead flipped the phone over.

"A break from the real world sounds like a good plan for this morning." His smile was strained, and it didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I'm all for that," I said, reaching out for him this time. "But if you want to talk about what's going on, you can tell me anything. You told Finley I'm your girlfriend and being there whenever you need to talk is the sort of girlfriend / boyfriend thing I want us to have."

For nearly a minute, I waited in silence, certain he'd thank me but turn our conversation away from whatever was on his mind. When he spoke, however, I could hear the undercurrent of relief in his words.

"I have two brothers, one older, one younger."

Common enough information, but I didn't say so.

"A little more than ten years ago, my younger brother, Joshua, and I had a falling out, and he ended up moving to L.A. We haven't spoken since."

My heart broke for him. I knew all too well what it was like to lose a member of the family, not by death, but by choice.

"Now, he's back in New York, and he wants the family to get together."

He pulled his hand free from mine and poured milk over his cereal. It wasn't until he began to eat that I realized he wasn't going to add anything else. I finished off my pear before saying anything, not wanting to seem like I was pushing him.

"You don't talk about your family much."

"That's intentional."

His tone was terse, but the attempt he made to smile told me my question wasn't responsible for the tone.

"Has Stu said anything about you going to the Golden Words release party next week?"

The change of subject was intentional too, I had no doubt, but I wasn't going to call him on it. While it may have felt like the two of us had been together for a while considering the emotional rollercoaster we'd been on from moment one, it hadn't been long at all. Even shorter if we only counted the time from when we'd accepted that we were in a relationship. We'd eventually get to the point where sharing our pasts would be as natural as the physical part of our relationship was, but until then, I'd take each situation as it came.

“I’ve been working on the guest list, and I’m not on it, so I think it’s pretty safe to say Mr. Hancock isn’t considering it.”

“Good.” Nate grinned at my surprised expression, and I was relieved to see that his humor was creeping back. “If you’re not going as an employee, I can take you as my date, and there’s no conflict of interest.”

I wasn’t sure that was entirely true, but I wasn’t going to turn down being on Nate’s arm as something more than I had been before. Being with him was what made all the other shit worth it.

Seventeen

Nate

The expression on Finley's face when he knocked on my office door told me that this wasn't going to be a friendly chat. He had something on his mind, and it didn't take much imagination to figure out what it was even before he spoke. I doubted he'd been thinking about anything else this past weekend. I wouldn't have if I'd been in his shoes.

"Do you have a few minutes?" he asked. His tone was polite, but there was a steel to it that he'd never had with me before.

If I said no, he'd ask when we could talk, and it would only put off things. That wouldn't be good for either of us. Better to get everything out in the open as soon as possible.

"Sure." I turned my attention away from my computer and gave it all to him. I folded my hands in front of me and waited for him to sit. When he did, I gave him the opening to get the conversation going. "I'm assuming you're here about Ashlee."

"I am." He seemed to struggle to find the right words and finally sighed. "Look, Nate, I've known you for a long time, and I like to think that I know you better than most."

He paused, waiting for a response.

"Both true."

He continued, "I've watched you go through girlfriends and 'partners' the same way

every time.”

Also true, but I didn’t say it this time because I knew where he was going with this.

“You can’t treat Ashlee that way.”

I appreciated that he didn’t dance around it. “I don’t, and I won’t.”

“I value our friendship,” he said, “but I don’t know if it would survive if you mistreat her.” He held up a hand to stop the protest I was already forming. “I know you’d never abuse her. You’re not that kind of man. But you’re also not known for your kindness, especially when it comes to relationships. You treat them like business transactions, and I only ever speak up about it when it affects the company. But not with Ashlee. Even if she wasn’t working here, I’d have to tell you that you can’t fuck around with her heart.”

I was torn between wanting to tell him that I was grateful that he was looking out for the woman I cared about and flipping him off for acting like he had any right to tell me what I should or shouldn’t do.

What came out was neither.

“You don’t know Ashlee.” The words sounded harsher than I’d intended, and I took a second to soften the next statement. “For all we know, she might not be your daughter.”

His eyes narrowed. “I believe her.”

“I do too,” I agreed, then clarified, finally giving voice to the thought I’d had running through my head ever since she told me her story. “I believe that she believes. I don’t doubt that she went to that clinic and saw your name. I don’t doubt that she is certain

she didn't make a mistake."

"But you think she did."

I shrugged. "I think that there's a chance, and she hasn't let herself consider that. It was a quick look. Your name may have caught her eye for other reasons. The records could be wrong. There are some valid possibilities."

He was silent for nearly a full minute, and I didn't interrupt him. It was a lot to think about. Any other man would've demanded a paternity test right off the bat. Or at least after the shock had worn off.

Finley hadn't even blinked. He'd accepted her story without question. Well, he'd had questions, but none of them had been about the validity or accuracy of her story.

"You think I should dig a little deeper," he said at last. "You want me to take this lovely, sweet young woman and pick apart her story so I can know for certain that she shares my DNA?"

"I don't think a paternity test would be too much to ask," I admitted. "Do you both want to get involved in each other's lives as father and daughter only to find out at some point down the road that she was wrong?"

He stood up. "If Ashlee wants to talk to you about this, that's her choice, but unless she does, you need to stay out of it. How she and I handle things is between us. It's not your concern."

He walked out before I could tell him that it damn well was my concern. Anything to do with Ashlee was. She was part of my life, and I wasn't going to see her hurt by anyone.

Except my history warned that it would probably be me who'd hurt her in the end.

Eighteen

Ashlee

I was starting to believe that my relationship with Nate might work. Things had already gotten calmer now that Finley knew about me. Sure, it was bound to be a little awkward between him and Finley. One was my father, and I was sleeping with the other one, and they were friends. That sounded like the perfect recipe for awkwardness.

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But everything else was looking up, and I was sure that they'd get used to it.

The best thing about today, however, was the fact that it was sunny and warm. Considering it was still the first week of April, that was practically a miracle, and I intended to thoroughly enjoy my walk back to the Manhattan Records building after my lunch.

As I came inside, I waved at the temp manning the reception desk and got a smile back. Today was Wayne Ray's second day, but I was pretty sure he still felt intimidated by the sheer scope of his duties. Not that he let anyone see it. When I'd first walked over and introduced myself yesterday, I'd learned that I'd gone to school with his sister, Sandra. She and I had been more friendly than friends, but she'd been the one who'd helped me keep up with my classes the times I'd missed to take care of my mother. The very least I could do was help her brother.

And right now, it looked like he needed all the help he could get. An absolutely massive man, close to six and a half feet tall with broad shoulders, was walking toward the desk from where one of the security guards loomed, guarding access to the elevators.

As I got closer, I heard the stranger confirm my guess about what was going on. "Your guard over there said I need to talk to you if I want to get any farther than this lobby."

"Um, yes, sir," Wayne said, his fingers twisting together as he stared up at a man far larger and more intimidating than him. "Do you have an appointment with someone in the building?"

“I’m here to see Nathaniel Lexington. Manhattan Records.”

I stepped up next to the stranger, and he glanced down at me. Unruly strawberry blond hair and light blue eyes...and some familiar features. A suspicion nibbled at the back of my mind.

“I work there,” I said. “Maybe I can help you.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wayne breathe a sigh of relief. I didn’t blame him. I wouldn’t have wanted to tell someone who looked like this guy that he couldn’t see Nate without an appointment.

“Hi.”

The guy smiled, and I knew who he was before he said it.

“I’m Joshua Lexington, Nate’s brother.” He held out his hand, and I shook it.

“I’m Ashlee Webb, Nate’s girlfriend.”

His eyes widened, but I wasn’t offended. Besides the fact that I didn’t look like the women Nate usually dated, I’d already suspected he hadn’t told them about me. The only way any of them would’ve recognized me would’ve been if they’d seen pictures of Nate and me, and even then, I wouldn’t have been mentioned as a girlfriend.

“You work for him too?”

The question was polite enough, but there was no mistaking the disdain in his eyes. He thought what everyone else thought: I’d slept my way into a job. Or maybe he thought that Nate had seduced an employee, which still didn’t exactly paint the most flattering portrait of either of us. In fact, I was fairly certain that his estimation of me

had dropped the moment the word ‘girlfriend’ had come out of my mouth.

“Not exactly.” I was now even more grateful than before that Nate had changed things around for my job. “I’m technically a freelance contractor who works for the A&R department. Stu Hancock is my boss, not Nate.”

“I suppose that’s something.” Joshua sounded more like he was talking to himself than to me.

“You said you wanted to see your brother?” I had a feeling this wasn’t a conversation to be had in such a public place.

“I do,” Joshua agreed, giving me that charming smile again, the one that looked so much like his brother’s. “But I don’t have an appointment.”

I gestured for him to move with me away from the desk, not quite to the elevators but closer to them than the door. “I can take you up if you like. Technically, we’re supposed to schedule guests, but there’s generally some leniency about that. Since you’re the boss’s brother, I don’t think it’ll be a problem.”

Joshua tilted his head, a strange expression settling on his face. “Has Nate ever talked about his family? Told you about us. About me?”

I answered honestly, “He said there was a falling out between you and him, and that you moved away. He told me that you were back in New York and that you wanted the family to get together.”

And that was the extent of my knowledge. I supposed some people might think that people who were at the boyfriend / girlfriend stage would know a little more about their significant other’s life, but Nate and I weren’t going to define our relationship by what other people expected.

At least, that was the plan.

Joshua laughed, the sound bitter and harsh. “That’s not exactly the whole story.” He scratched the back of his head. “You know what, coming here was a mistake. If Nate wants to reach out, he knows how to find me.”

With those cryptic statements, Joshua turned and walked away. I glanced at Wayne, who mouthed thank you, and I managed a smile in return. My encounter with Joshua hadn’t ruined my day, but it had cast a bit of a shadow over it.

I needed to talk to Nate.

Nineteen

Nate

Finley's visit yesterday had given me an edge through most of the rest of the day, making me glad that Ashlee and I had just exchanged texts. I didn't want her knowing about the conversation. I honestly wasn't sure how she'd react, and I didn't want to find out.

There was a possibility she'd take Finley's concerns to heart, but I was more worried that she'd get mad at him. If this harmed her relationship with her father, she might never blame me for it, but I would. And despite what Finley thought about me, I wanted to protect Ashlee as much as he did.

Today was better. Not a great day, but a good one. I accomplished everything on my to-do list, had no crazy surprises, and had plans to introduce Ashlee to phone sex tonight.

At least that was the plan until Ashlee came into my office just as the day was ending. She wore a troubled expression on her face, and I didn't like it.

I crossed over to her in just a couple long strides, wrapping her in my arms even as my mouth came down on hers. She leaned into me as we kissed, her body humming with a tension that I wanted to help shift into something different. I parted her lips with my tongue, sweeping in to explore even as my hands roamed her body, reacquainting themselves with each curve as if I hadn't touched her for months.

Before I could do something stupid, like take her in dozen equally thrilling ways, she pulled back. Her hands stayed on my chest, but I had the feeling it was more to keep

me back than because she wanted to be touching me.

“I didn’t come up here for...this.” She gestured between the two of us and then took a step back.

“What’s wrong?” I didn’t follow her even though all I wanted was to reach for her again.

“When I came back from lunch, your brother was downstairs in the lobby.”

My reaction was equal parts instinct and habit the instant I heard ‘brother.’ My shields slammed into place, and I took a few mental steps back.

“My brother.”

She nodded. “Yes. He was down at the receptionist’s desk, talking to the temp down there. Wayne seemed a little...intimidated, so I stepped up to help him.”

“Wayne?” My voice was flat, but my stomach knotted at the sound of another man’s name coming out of her mouth.

“The temporary receptionist,” she said, a frown line appearing between her eyebrows. “He’s not a big guy, and your brother is huge. I wasn’t going to let him intimidate Wayne.”

A flash of jealousy went through me. “Of course not. We can’t have someone hurting Wayne’s feelings.”

Even as the words came out of my mouth, I could hear how snarky they were. Judging by the flash of surprise on Ashlee’s face, they’d been a bad choice, but I refused to take them back. I wasn’t going to coddle an employee because someone

might be mean to them.

“Wayne’s a good kid. I went to school with his sister.” She crossed her arms, shifting her stance to a clearly defensive one.

I waved a dismissive hand. “Enough about the kid. You said you talked to my brother.”

She nodded, still looking annoyed. “Joshua. He wanted to meet with you.”

Joshua had been here. Okay, not exactly a surprise. As soon as she’d said it was my brother, I’d known she meant Joshua. David wouldn’t have come here looking for me unless I’d done something insanely stupid that could hurt my family. As far as I knew, I hadn’t done that.

Yet.

It was always a possibility with me.

“What did you tell him?” I asked.

“I offered to bring him up to talk to you.”

I wasn’t sure which emotion was worse, the admiration I felt because she was being honest or the anger that she’d been nice to him.

How nice? I wondered suddenly. And what had he told her? About me? About him? About what had finally driven us apart?

“What did he say about me?”

“He said you were his brother. It’s not like I stood down there and had a long conversation with him.”

“But you did have a conversation.”

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“A short one, yes.” Her voice had an edge now that was beyond surprise. “I introduced myself to a member of your family and extended a common courtesy.”

My eyes narrowed as suspicion joined jealousy. “How did you introduce yourself?”

“The same way you referred to me when you invited Finley over to dinner. Your girlfriend. I wasn’t aware that it would be a problem.”

“It’s not like we’d really talked about who we were going to tell.” That was a shit excuse, and I knew it.

“So, I’m a secret.” Hurt flashed, there and gone almost too fast for me to see.

I needed to fix this, but like every other time I’d found myself on a path that only promised destruction, I refused to turn around. “That’s not the point. I want to know what you two talked about.”

“I told you, we said who we were, and I offered to bring him up here.” Her voice was tight, eyes flashing. “What is your problem?”

My hands curled into fists. “My problem is that you know my brother and I have issues, but you talked to him anyway. Or maybe you did more than talk, and that’s why you’re being so defensive?”

Her jaw dropped, and color flooded her face. I wanted to believe it was embarrassment that I was right, but no matter how much I wished it, I knew better. And still, I couldn’t stop myself.

“Did he flirt with you? Did you flirt with him? He had to have told you what happened, right? Did he make you feel sorry for him? Or maybe you just wanted to flirt—”

The slamming of the door cut off the rest of my sentence, and I realized just how badly I’d just fucked things up.

Again.

Twenty

Ashlee

Walking out probably wasn’t the most mature way to handle things with Nate, but if I hadn’t, I would’ve said something that just made matters worse. I was shy around people I didn’t know, and often quiet even around ones I did, but too many people mistook my soft-spokenness for weakness. Even I had my limits, and he’d hit them. I needed to cool off before I could think with any sort of clarity, and my best bet for calming down was to be away from him.

I indulged in a long, hot shower, and then some comfort food for dinner before settling on the couch. I was a little disappointed that he hadn’t reached out yet, but it didn’t surprise me. He was a proud man, unused to having to bend, especially when it came to relationships.

I’d probably give in before he did even, even though he’d been in the wrong with his accusations. I wasn’t going to just back off though. If this was going to work between us, we had to communicate. If all we were doing was having sex, we’d only need to have an initial conversation where limits were set, and then it’d only be a matter of sticking with them. He had no problem respecting limits and safe words.

The thing was, now I wondered if he respected me outside of the bedroom. As an individual, yes, I could count on him, but I was still trying to understand where I stood as his girlfriend.

I sighed and let my head rest on the back of the couch. I couldn't figure this out by myself. I needed someone to bounce ideas off, someone to talk things through with.

I needed my mom.

I turned off the TV I hadn't really been watching and picked up my phone. It was seven o'clock, which meant she was probably getting herself a glass of red wine and some dark chocolate – her favorite evening indulgence. When I'd still lived at home, I'd often joined her, doing my homework while she read or watched TV. It had been my favorite time of the day for a long time.

"Hi, Mom." I didn't bother trying to pretend I was okay. She would've heard it in my voice anyway.

"Hey, sweetie. What's wrong?"

"I need some advice," I said. "Well, I need to vent and get some advice."

She immediately understood. "It's about Nate, isn't it?"

"He's so frustrating!" I pulled my legs up onto the couch, tucking my feet under my butt. "Today, when I was coming back from lunch, his younger brother was in the lobby. Now, Nate told me on Sunday that he and this brother didn't get along. Something happened that messed up their relationship."

"He didn't tell you what it was, or is it something you can't share with me?"

I knew that tone. Mom always had these sorts of clarifying questions when I was upset. From the outside, it might've sounded like she was nitpicking, but she liked to have context when she responded.

“He didn't say,” I answered. “I'm okay with that. Things between us happened so fast and out of order. Or at least the order I'd always thought my relationships would go. There's a lot we haven't shared, but no one knows everything about their partner right away. It takes time.”

“It does,” she agreed, seeming to sense that I needed her to reassure me that my thoughts weren't just me being naïve.

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“I didn’t ask Joshua what had happened, of course, but he was there to see Nate, and I didn’t think our temp receptionist should have to deal with a family issue. I introduced myself and offered to take Joshua upstairs. He declined and left, but I didn’t want to keep it from Nate.” My actions still sounded logical. “I waited until the end of the day because I didn’t want to interrupt him.”

That wasn’t entirely true, I realized. I’d waited because I’d been worried he’d react badly, and I didn’t want anyone else to hear him. Now, I was glad I’d done it.

“I also thought he could be upset, and it’d be better if no one else was around,” I added, wanting to be completely truthful with her. “I was right. As soon as I told Nate that his brother had been there, it was like nothing that had happened between us mattered. He just shut down, started asking questions, but they weren’t real questions. He wanted to know if Joshua had told me anything about what had gone on between them, and he didn’t believe me when I said no. Then, he accused me of flirting with Joshua.”

Mom didn’t ask if I’d done it, and the relief I felt just made everything else worse. She knew I’d never do anything like that, and Nate should’ve known it too.

“Do you think it’s possible that whatever happened between Nate and his brother involved a woman?”

Dammit. I hadn’t even thought of that. It made perfect sense, and while it didn’t excuse how Nate had handled things, it did make me a little more sympathetic to his concerns. If his brother had betrayed him with someone Nate had been involved with, it wasn’t strange at all that Nate wouldn’t want his new girlfriend talking to his

brother.

“This is why I needed to talk to you,” I said. “That never occurred to me. I thought he was just being all possessive and jealous because he can be a dick sometimes.”

I didn’t add that I’d also assumed at least some of the reason for his attitude came from his Dominant side taking being possessive too far. Now that I really thought about it though, I knew that wasn’t the case. Nate always seemed to be in greater control during those Dominant times than he was outside of them.

“It doesn’t excuse the way he handled things,” Mom said, “but if he has a legitimate reason for jumping to conclusions, it at least means there’s something there to work on.”

She was right. It would be worse if he just acted that way for no reason at all. Then it’d be part of who he was, and I couldn’t be with a man like that, no matter how much I wanted him. Something influenced by an event from his past was understandable and could be dealt with.

I should have thought of that. I’d been there before. After Mona left, I’d struggled to deal with abandonment issues. I’d never worried that Mom would leave, but only because she made a point of telling me every night for months that she wasn’t going anywhere. Everyone else, however, was fair game, especially since Mom’s family had left her too. To this day, I was amazed at how my mother hadn’t become bitter and cynical.

“How do you think I should handle it?” I asked.

“It depends on whether or not he’s willing to tell you about what happened between him and his brother.”

“If he is?”

“Tell him about the problems you had when Mona left,” Mom suggested. “If he knows that you understand what it means to struggle with trust after someone’s hurt you, he’ll probably be more willing to admit just how badly it affects him and be more likely to ask for help.”

“All right,” I said, taking in a deep breath. “I can do that.”

It wouldn’t be fun, but I’d worked through that issue a while ago. Mom had found a great therapist who’d worked with me individually and then together with Mom so that our relationship didn’t suffer. Not for the first time, I thought about how difficult it must’ve been to do that, to be willing to admit that she needed help after Mona left. She’d always tried to be so strong for me, and it had taken me a while to realize that going to a therapist had been one of the strongest things she’d ever done.

My mom was the most amazing person I knew.

“If he doesn’t want to give you specifics, you can tell him you understand what it’s like to have something from the past influence present behavior.”

“Shouldn’t I just tell him about therapy either way?”

“You could,” she said, “but I don’t think that would be best. From everything you’ve told me about Nate, I think he’d feel like you were trying to manipulate him into sharing more than he’s ready for. If you ask him, and he says no, but then you share something so personal, he might think the only reason was because you were trying to make him feel obligated.”

I was constantly amazed by her ability to figure people out. She’d rarely been wrong, and I sometimes wondered if maybe she hadn’t been wrong about Mona as much as

she'd ignored what her gut had told her because she hadn't wanted to lose the love of her life.

“Either way, you need to make sure he understands that taking those things out on you can't keep happening. You have to draw that line between being understanding and enabling him. If he doesn't think he needs to change his behavior and his way of thinking, then you're not in a good place.”

Suddenly, I wondered how much of this advice came out of her own relationship. Had there been something like this between Mom and Mona? Had it been Mona's unwillingness to change that had caused the rift that had eventually ended the relationship? I liked to think I was more observant than most, but Mom and Mona had always been very private about their disagreements.

For that reason, among others, I didn't ask. I didn't need to know what had led to the break-up. I knew enough. Mona had walked away from both of us and never tried to contact me. Mom had stayed, and she loved me. If she wanted to tell me more, that was her decision. Unless I had a clear reason to ask, I never would.

“I know you're a strong person,” Mom continued. “I've seen that strength first-hand in more than one situation. When it comes to matters of the heart, though, it takes a whole other kind of strength. Do you think you have it? Can you be firm with him, or will he be able to sweep you off your feet without having to face the truth about anything?”

It was a valid question. I'd seen so many people – man and women alike – be these pillars of strength for years, only to crumble when love was involved. I'd never doubted my own ability to stand firm, but I'd never been in this situation before. I had to take an honest look at myself, and when I did, my past behavior didn't help.

I'd let him virtually blackmail me into going to that first event with him. He hadn't

manipulated me into sex, but he had a way of stoking that fire inside me until up looked down and black looked white. Before I'd met him, I'd been a virgin who'd never even given a guy a blowjob, let alone considered allowing someone to spank me or make me beg.

“Honestly, Mom, I don't know.”

She was silent for a second, then said, “I'd rather have you admit you're unsure than lie to me and to yourself by saying it wouldn't be a problem.”

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“What do I do?” I asked the question even though I was half-convinced she’d tell me to break things off until I was more certain that I could handle things the way they needed to be done.

“Do you want to put in the work?” she asked. “If he’s willing to grow, are you willing to do what’s necessary to help him? It won’t be easy.”

“As long as he promises to work on his weaknesses as much as I’m going to work on mine, I want it.”

“All right then. I’m going to keep you accountable. The next time you see him, remember that I’ll expect to hear about it. You’re going to tell me if you caved the moment you saw him or if you talked to him about what happened. You’re going to tell me his response, and then your response. Until you’re able to handle things on your own, I’ll be here to tell you when you’re being weak, and I’ll help you be strong.”

My mom was the most amazing person in the world. I never really had serious thoughts about having kids of my own, not yet anyway, but the one thing I knew was that if I was half the mom she was, I’d be doing things right.

Someone knocked on my door, and my stomach flipped as I got up to see who it was. I kept the phone with me as I crossed the few feet to the door. If it was Nate, I wanted to let Mom know. If it wasn’t, I’d ignore it. I wasn’t in the mood for Mormon missionaries or Girl Scout cookies.

It was neither of the latter.

“Mom, Nate’s here.”

“Let him in. Talk to him. I’ll expect a text or call either tonight or tomorrow. Be strong. I love you.”

The call ended, and I squared my shoulders, determined to make Mom proud.

Twenty-One

Nate

I hadn’t done anything wrong.

I had every right to be pissed when my girlfriend was chatting up my brother, especially when it was Joshua. And she’d done it at work too.

I’d thought making her a freelancer would keep my personal and professional lives separate, but I’d clearly been wrong. She shouldn’t have interfered with the temp receptionist doing his job, no matter how new he was, and she certainly shouldn’t have offered to bring someone upstairs. That wasn’t her place.

The moment she’d heard who he was, she should have come right up to see me so I could handle it. Who knew what Joshua had told her? She’d said that he hadn’t said anything about what had happened between us, but how did I know she was telling the truth? Sure, I’d thought that I could tell when she was being honest, but how did I really know? It wasn’t like we’d known each other very long.

Then again, if he’d told her anything more than what she’d said he had, she probably wouldn’t have been so calm when she’d first come to see me. And it wasn’t like she was the sort of woman who wouldn’t have confronted me if she’d learned something like that about me. Right?

But if Joshua hadn't said anything, then that probably meant everything else she'd told me had been true too.

Or maybe she'd been able to use my past behavior to justify her own actions because she and Joshua had been flirting.

Or maybe I just had my head up my ass.

"Dammit!" I kicked my desk and immediately regretted it, though not as much as I regretted how I'd acted with Ashlee.

She wasn't the one at fault, not really. It was all Joshua. He probably hadn't had any intention of talking to me at all. He'd just come by to see what trouble he could make for me and struck the motherload when he ran into Ashlee. I was willing to bet that as soon as he found out that he was talking to my girlfriend, he'd immediately started thinking about all the ways he could fuck with my relationship.

I needed to call him and tell him to back off. Ashlee was off-limits. He could've fucked with anyone but her...and that's exactly what I'd be telling him if I gave in to my impulse. He'd know that the best way to hurt me would be to mess with her. Seduce her. Flirt with her.

Turn her against me.

And I'd deserve it.

Because I'd done it to him.

A decade ago, I'd slept with his then-girlfriend, Calah Evenstar, and it wouldn't surprise me in the slightest if he tried to return the favor.

Ashlee wouldn't fall for that, though. She was too smart.

But she had fallen for me, so maybe she wasn't as smart as I thought when it came to men. I felt like the worst person ever as soon as I thought it. What sort of man took a dig at his own girlfriend like that? Of course, Ashlee was smart. She was one of the most intelligent people I knew. And the kindest. She'd never betray me like that, no matter how hard Joshua would try or even had tried already.

My toe throbbed as I practically stomped to the elevator. I didn't know who else was in the building, but I didn't care. I needed to get out of here. I hadn't bothered to call my driver, and it didn't matter that the gorgeous day had turned into just another gray and dreary evening. I walked anyway.

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The sun was already down, but the streets were well-lit, and I'd made this trip this way before. On days when taking a run wasn't an option, walking home was sometimes enough to combat the stress. I didn't think it was going to be enough this time.

I couldn't just ignore this and hope it went away, not if I wanted to salvage things with Ashlee. My gut told me that the longer I waited, the worse things would be, and the greater my chance of losing her for good would be.

The thought of Joshua talking to her still set my teeth on edge, but I could no longer deny that I'd overreacted. If it'd been Roma or any other woman I'd ever been with, it might've annoyed me, but I wouldn't have cared enough to have the same sort of intense reaction that I'd had with Ashlee. Even if they'd cheated on me with Joshua, I wouldn't have had an issue with dumping them and moving on to the next woman.

Ashlee was different.

I'd known that from moment one, even if I hadn't wanted to accept it. Now, I knew that merely admitting it wouldn't be enough. I liked to control everything, and I'd always considered myself good at it, but I was now beginning to see that I wasn't actually that good at the relationship part of things. Not when it involved more than just the basic emotions like lust and possessiveness.

I couldn't control Ashlee, not as my employee and not as my girlfriend, and if I kept running headfirst into this wall, I wasn't going to have her as either much longer.

I ducked into a diner and ordered a sandwich and a drink. I wasn't very hungry, but I

hadn't eaten much for lunch, and a growling stomach wasn't exactly conducive to making a proper apology. I didn't linger over the meal, barely tasting any of it. As soon as I was done, I flagged down a cab and gave him Ashlee's address.

Something about my expression must have made him understand that I didn't want to talk to him because he barely said anything beyond the most basic of polite small talk. After thanking him and giving him a decent tip, I headed up to Ashlee's place, still unsure of exactly what I planned on saying.

"I wasn't expecting to see you tonight," she said as she opened the door after my second knock. Her phone was in her hand, and I knew she'd just gotten off the phone with her mom.

I didn't mess around with pleasantries or passive-aggressive shit. "I owe you an apology and didn't want to wait until tomorrow. You deserved to hear it face-to-face, as soon as I could get here."

Her eyes widened slightly, and she stepped back, motioning for me to come inside. I waited until she closed the door behind us to speak again.

"I'm sorry I behaved the way I did. Certain things...too many things...set me off. There's bad blood between Joshua and me, and it's...complicated. But it's not your fault, and I never should have allowed my issues with my brother to spill over onto you."

If she asked for specifics, I would tell her the whole story, but I was desperately praying that she wouldn't. The moment she discovered what I'd done, the way she looked at me would change, and I wanted a little longer with her before that happened.

"All right." She walked over to sit on the couch. "I accept your apology."

“Thank you.” I hoped she could hear how sincere those two words were.

“What now?”

Twenty-Two

Ashlee

The moment I asked the question, I knew what the answer was going to be. His lips curved up into that deliciously wicked smile that always made me wet. I no longer cared that I’d been angry and hurt not more than five minutes ago. His apology had been sincere, and I saw no reason to dwell on the past, no matter how recent. If my life had taught me anything, it was to embrace what I could, when I could.

And right now, I wanted to embrace Nate. Nothing could make me feel more alive than being with him.

Two steps were all he needed to be able to take me in his arms and kiss me. Hot and sweet, it was over quicker than I’d thought it would be. He cupped my face in his hands, the passion in his eyes tempered slightly.

“I didn’t apologize because I wanted sex. You know that, right?”

“The fact that you took a minute to ask speaks volumes.” I smiled at him, then wrapped my arms around his neck. “Thank you.”

I’d barely finished the last word when his mouth was on mine again, and there was no ending it this time. His lips molded to mine, taking control of the kiss the same way he did everything else. His fingers ran through my hair, kneading my scalp and sending ribbons of warmth down through my body.

He walked me backward until my legs bumped against the couch and then he turned me around, sitting even as he pulled me down onto his lap. I moaned as his cock rubbed against me, our bodies kept from more intimate contact by our clothes.

Stupid clothes.

It wasn't until Nate laughed that I realized I'd said it aloud. I rocked against him, and he moaned, fingers tightening on my hips. Teeth dug into my bottom lip, worrying at it until I whimpered, nails scratching at his shoulders but unable to reach skin through the fabric covering him.

I clawed at his shirt, dragging it up until I could reach skin. We both groaned as my fingers played across those rock-hard abs. I'd seen sculptures less beautiful than him. His body was a work of art, and I wanted to admire every inch of him.

"Condom?" I tore my mouth away from his.

My impatience made him laugh again, and I smiled at the sound. He didn't laugh nearly as much as he should. I resolved to fix that.

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After I got off on that amazing cock of his.

I didn't know how many stories I'd heard from women whose first times had been little more than unpleasant experiences, women who'd never had a man bring them to orgasm at all, let alone with his dick. Not only was he well-endowed, he knew how to use all of the tools at his disposal, including the massive thing between his legs.

"Someone's eager," he said, biting his way across my jaw and down my throat. "Normally, I'd make you wait, just to teach you a lesson, but I'm not feeling particularly patient either at the moment."

I grabbed the front of his pants, quickly working the button and zipper open. He cursed when I grasped him over the soft cotton boxer-briefs he wore and gave him a squeeze.

"Condom?" I asked again.

His eyes flicked up to meet mine. "You'll need to get up."

I frowned but climbed off his lap. It was necessary, anyway, thanks to the pants I wore. Some women might've been coordinated enough to maneuver out of a pair of leggings while still sitting on someone's lap, but I wasn't one of them. I wasn't a klutz, but I wasn't exactly graceful either.

While he dug into his wallet for a condom, I pulled off my pants, and then I was back straddling his legs, watching as he rolled the latex over that thick shaft. He put his hands on my hips, his gaze traveling up my body until he reached my eyes. Neither of

us looked away as I pulled the crotch of my panties aside and lowered myself onto his cock.

Inch by inch, I slid down, my breath hitching as he stretched me. His hands stayed where they were, slipping under my shirt along my ribs and making me shiver. I hadn't bothered to put on a bra since I'd expected to be alone, and now I was glad since it meant there was nothing between his hands and my breasts.

He cupped both of them, brushing his thumbs back and forth over my nipples. Within seconds, they were both stiff and aching. I arched my back, the movement dropping me the last inch. Soft cotton brushed against the insides of my thighs, another sensation added to the fullness inside me, the friction on my nipples, the almost tangible caress of his gaze.

"You feel so fucking good," he groaned.

"So do you," I breathed.

I moved my hips, shifting back and forth tentatively, adjusting to the position and enjoying the sounds Nate made. His fingers pinched my nipples, his hands flexing.

"Ride me." He leaned forward, his mouth mere millimeters from mine. "Make us both come."

I closed the distance, running the tip of my tongue along his bottom lip before slipping inside his mouth. I wrapped my arms around his neck and rolled my hips. We both shuddered, our bodies moving together without thought. We knew this dance, no matter what the position, as if our bodies had been designed to fit together like two parts of a puzzle.

"I'm close, le soleil."

I nodded, so overwhelmed with the sheer volume of sensations that I couldn't form words. My eyes were clenched shut, my nipples chafing against my shirt as Nate squeezed my ass. I felt every drop of sweat that rolled down my spine, every pass of Nate's tongue and teeth on my neck, little pricks of pain that sent shivers of electricity across my nerves.

Nate's muscles tensed as he fought to maintain control, but we were both wound too tight. His growl was muffled against my neck as he came, and the sound was enough to set me off. We clung to each other as we soared, those moments of pure pleasure tying us together more securely than any restraints ever could have.

It frightened me, how much I wanted this man, how much I needed him. Frightened because I didn't know if he'd break my heart. Frightened because I feared he would.

And frightened because I thought he might not.

Twenty-Three

Nate

I could get used to this. Knowing I had Ashlee with me, even if she was technically down the hall, made my day brighter. What had happened two days ago had changed things for the better. I'd gotten angry and said some stupid things, but it hadn't ended us.

I'd come to my senses and apologized.

She'd accepted.

I was trying to be better. I didn't know exactly how I was going to do that or how well I'd do it, but it was more an effort than I'd ever put out for a woman. I'd shied

away from anything that meant more work, but she was more than worth it.

My phone rang, and I answered without looking at the screen, mentally cursing the moment I saw the caller ID.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Nate.” She sounded surprised that I’d answered, and I experienced a flash of guilt.

“Is something wrong?” I hoped I sounded as if I’d intentionally answered the call. I loved my mother but talking to her was...difficult. It was easier just to ignore the calls.

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“No,” she said quickly. “We’re all fine.”

“That’s good.”

A few seconds of silence followed my inane statement.

“We’re having dinner this Saturday evening, and we’d like you to come.” She continued, almost without taking a breath, as if she was worried I’d shoot back a rejection without even thinking about it. “The whole rest of the family will be here for the first time in a long time, and it would be great if you could join us.”

I couldn’t shut down the idea immediately. It would hurt her too much. I had to be gentle about it. “I don’t know if that’s such a good idea, Mom.”

“Joshua said he met your girlfriend this week. You weren’t in your office, but she was there and talked to him.”

I’d never realized before just how much she hesitated when she spoke to me, as if she felt the need to choose each word carefully.

“Yes, she told me she’d spoken with him.”

“You can bring her. We’d all love to meet her.”

I knew what she wasn’t saying. Everyone would be more likely to behave themselves if we had guests.

“Joshua’s girlfriend will be here too, so yours won’t be the only one.”

Double insurance then. And neither woman would be the only new person in the room.

My answer should have been the same as always: no thank you. At least twice a year, she’d extend an invitation to one family thing or another, and I always turned her down as politely and gently as I could. I knew it hurt her when I did, but it would’ve hurt her worse if I’d shown up and there’d been a fight.

I couldn’t do it, though. I couldn’t tell her no again.

Wanting something new with Ashlee made me wonder if other parts of my life could be new too. Seeing Roberta and Ashlee together had made me realize how much I missed my mom.

I couldn’t, however, say yes right away either. I needed to think about it and not make an impulsive decision. I also wanted to check with Ashlee because her presence would definitely make a difference.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Really?”

I hated how surprised she sounded. It shouldn’t have been like this. She shouldn’t have felt pulled between her children. It should have been my absence that was odd, not the possibility of my presence.

“Yes, really. I’ll need to talk to Ashlee and see if she has plans for us this weekend. I promise that I’ll truly consider it.”

“That’s great. Really, Nate. I hope you two can make it. It’d be good to see you again.”

“You too, Mom.” I meant it. When things happened with Joshua, I’d put her in an awkward, impossible position, but I held no anger or bitterness toward her for taking his side.

“I’ll let you go now,” she said. “I’m sure you have work to do.”

“Thanks for calling,” I said.

“I love you, Nate.” She quickly ended the call before I had to decide whether or not to return the sentiment.

I would’ve said it back.

Slumping back in my chair, I closed my eyes. I’d been so angry when I’d heard Joshua had come to my office; would I be able to deal with seeing him face-to-face? I believed that Ashlee believed it when she said that Joshua hadn’t flirted with her, but I also knew it was entirely possible that she just hadn’t registered it. She would’ve hated to think of my own brother hitting on her, knowing who she was.

Then again, Mom said he had a girlfriend coming too. Even if he had flirted with Ashlee, he wouldn’t do it in front of his new girl. That was a good thing, but him having a girlfriend there might bring up bad memories. I had no desire to be with anyone but Ashlee, but Joshua might not be willing to believe it.

Not that I could blame him. I’d really fucked things up when I’d slept with Calah. I couldn’t go back and change anything, but I could show him that I wasn’t that man anymore.

I could show them all that I was trying to change.

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I doubted we'd ever be close, but at least we could patch things up to the point where we could stand to be around each other for family events. Dad and David would hold their tongues if Joshua and I didn't butt heads, at least for Mom's sake. She could have all of her kids together and not have to worry about one of us blowing up at the other.

I could have a family again. Finley had been my only family for so long that the thought of having everyone in my life again was almost dizzying. I needed something to ground me.

No, not something. Someone.

I reached for my phone and tapped out a message.

Would you be interested in dinner tonight? I can pick you up after work.

I drummed my fingers on the desk while I waited for a response. Technically, I could've called her or gone to see her, but I was trying hard to keep professional and personal separated. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't only the sex aspect of it. The time I'd spent with Ashlee when we weren't having sex had been great too. She was genuinely enjoyable to be around.

My phone dinged, and I picked it up.

I can't tonight. If I don't do laundry, I'll have to come to work...never mind. My boss's boss might not mind that ;) Is the invitation valid tomorrow evening?

I was disappointed that I'd need to wait, but the fact that she was teasing me made me smile. She was only half-right. Her boss's boss wouldn't have minded her not having anything to wear, but only if no one else saw her.

Half the time, I wanted to wrap her head-to-toe so others couldn't see what a gorgeous body she had, and the other half, I wanted to put her into something slinky and sexy to show off what only I was allowed to enjoy.

The invitation is indeed valid tomorrow evening. I'll pick you up at your place at six o'clock. Will you have clothes to wear? I'm certain I can find somewhere we could go where they're optional.

I was only half-joking about that last bit. Club Privé, the hottest BDSM club in the entire northeastern part of the country, allowed members such as me to more or less create their own dress code. At any point in time, members could be dressed in a full latex bodysuit or nothing but a collar.

I intended to take her there at some point, but she wasn't ready for it yet.

My phone dinged again, and her reply hit me with a wave of desire.

Six is great. Yes, I will. As to exactly what those clothes will look like, I'll leave that to your vivid imagination.

Twenty-Four

Ashlee

I'd spent the entire night before trying to figure out something to wear for my date, and I'd come to a conclusion.

I needed more fancy clothes.

I'd bought a few when I'd gotten my promotion since I knew there would always be the possibility of attending events, and I hadn't wanted to make the label look bad. I'd never once thought I'd use them on dates with Nate Lexington, or that I'd need to buy new ones, so it wasn't the same three all the time.

The one I wore now was a rich, mossy green velvet, with three-quarter sleeves and a sweetheart neckline. It reached to mid-calf and was form-fitting enough that I had to take smaller steps than usual. I doubted Nate would mind needing to shorten his stride since he seemed to like my curves, and this dress enhanced every inch of them.

The weather had taken a turn this week, reminding us that even though, technically, spring was here, New York was among the places that didn't relinquish its grip on winter easily. That was how it seemed at times, that winter had tried to leave, but the city wouldn't let it.

I tried looking at the positive side of the brisk wind and dropping temperatures: I could wear velvet without having heat stroke.

As I waited for Nate by the door, I pressed my hands against my stomach and forced myself to take slow, deep breaths. I wondered if there'd ever be a day when I didn't get these butterflies at the thought of going out in public with him. They weren't as bad as before, but they were still there, the nervous ones lurking among the excited ones. I hoped the excited ones never went away.

He knocked, and I answered immediately, eagerly drinking in the sight of him in another suit. I'd always thought men pretty much wore the exact same suit all the time. Not the actual suit but the same style, cut, etc. It had only been since I'd come to work at Manhattan Records and had the opportunity to see men in suits more often that I realized the truth of the matter.

Some did have identical suits but rotated different-colored dress shirts and ties, and some had similar suits with small differences. Nate must've had an entire closet of suits, ties, and shirts that he could mix and match because I had yet to notice a repeat. He must have repeated combinations eventually, but always far enough apart that no one could remember.

“Keep looking at me like that, and we won't make it to the car,” he said, his eyes dark and full of all sorts of depraved secrets.

“Would that be such a bad thing?” I asked, not at all surprised by how breathless my voice was.

He caught me around the waist and yanked me to him so that we were standing in the doorway to my apartment, bodies pressed together, and completely oblivious to whether or not my neighbors were watching.

“Don't tempt me, le soleil,” he growled.

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Damn. That sound always made me wet.

“I have other plans for you tonight.”

I shivered. “What plans?”

He smiled and released me. “Get your purse. When we get to the restaurant, I’ll tell you all about the little game you and I are going to play.”

I half-expected him to tease me in the car, fingers straying to places he couldn’t touch in public, but he simply held my hand, his demeanor more at ease than I’d ever seen him. It was nice, sitting like this. I enjoyed the sexual part of who we were, but I didn’t want us to only be about the physical. His previous relationships had been so focused on sex that I sometimes worried he wouldn’t be interested in anything else.

I was pleased to see I was wrong.

“How’s your mom?” he asked suddenly.

“Good.” I smiled, warmth spreading through me at his question. He wouldn’t have asked if he hadn’t sincerely wanted to know. “More than good, actually. She’s been asked to research the Quaker movement, and it’s not one she knows much about, so she’s really excited about learning new things.”

“It must’ve been nice when you were in school, having a historian for a mom. I’ll bet homework was a breeze.”

I shook my head, laughing. “Not at all. If anything, she made it worse. No help, but she always insisted on checking things over. She’d mark whatever I got wrong and tell me to do it again but wouldn’t help me find the right answers.”

He whistled between his teeth. “Yikes.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Were you good in school?”

He held up a hand and wiggled it back and forth. “I could’ve gotten better grades if I’d applied myself to school half as much as I had to making money.” He grinned at me. “I was determined to be one of those people who made my first million before college.”

“If I remember correctly, you graduated from NYU.”

“I did, but just like in high school, I spent more time trying to come up with get-rich-quick schemes than caring about my grades. I paid attention in the ones that I thought would help me make money, but in everything else, I just made sure I passed.”

I tried to mesh the picture he was painting with the hard-working man I knew now, and it was hard to do. Though I supposed he hadn’t really changed. He’d just streamlined his life to only focus on the things he cared about. Anything he thought of as useless went by the wayside, and he determined what percentage of his attention he gave to everything else.

“Does all that hard work mean you weren’t a fraternity guy?” I asked.

He rolled his eyes, and I laughed.

“No. I didn’t belong to a fraternity. I also wasn’t a jock in college. I didn’t even really go to many parties.”

I found that a little hard to believe, and he must've read that on my face because he held up his hand in a Boy Scout salute.

"Scout's honor."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I was a Boy Scout," after a moment, he added, his face perfectly sincere, "for three weeks."

"You quit?"

"I was 'asked to leave.'" He made the air quotes with his fingers. "My scoutmaster didn't take kindly to me taking bets on how long it took various scouts to earn their badges."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me."

We pulled up in front of a restaurant, and Nate got out of the car, walking around just as Angus opened the door. Nate helped me from the car, and we hurried inside, wanting to get away from the drizzle as quickly as possible.

As much as I hated the scorching summer heat, the back and forth of seasons in New York drove me crazy. Pick a temperature and go with it.

We were led to a private table without the hostess asking for Nate's name. What would it be like, I wondered, to be remembered pretty much everywhere you went? I'd always been the easily forgettable sort. People I'd gone to school with rarely placed me in their memories. Some of it was because I'd spent a lot of time taking care of Mom when I was in high school, but a bigger part was because I wasn't someone who stuck out in people's minds. Quiet, unassuming, shy – those were

words used to describe me, and they'd applied even more back then than they did now.

“Is something wrong?” Nate asked.

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I snapped back to the present. “No, I was just thinking about how everyone seems to know you wherever we go.”

He tilted his head, his gaze searching, as if he was trying to figure me out. Considering how different I was from the women he’d been with in the past, that probably wasn’t too far off the mark.

“Is that a bad thing?”

I shook my head. “Just different from my experience is all.”

I perused the menu as Nate ordered wine – without seeing a wine list – and an appetizer. By the time he was done, I’d already decided what I wanted. We both ordered and handed over our menus.

I wondered if I’d ever get used to places so fancy that they didn’t list their prices in their menus. I wasn’t entirely comfortable with how much Nate was probably spending on me, but if I wanted him to trust me to tell him when something was bothering me, I had to trust him to do the same.

Besides, it was clear he’d been here before, so it wasn’t like he didn’t have an idea of what things cost. Also, it wasn’t as if he’d been raised with a lot of money. I was sure he’d had his own learning curve when it came to things like this.

“You have that look again,” he said. “What are you thinking about now?”

“Just wondering how long it took you to get used to eating at places like this.” I

smiled at him.

He leaned forward slightly, a playful smile on his lips. “Honestly, it’s still strange to me. Sometimes, I ask places like this to do something for me just to see if they will.”

Like a little kid with an adult who spoils them, I thought. It made sense, actually. He had a poor relationship with his family and didn’t really have a lot of people he could trust in his personal life. Finley, and now me, seemed to be it.

Of course, he’d be a little child-like when it came to certain things. People who came across as confident – or arrogant – and larger than life often had insecurities they hid from the world.

I suspected Nate wasn’t any different.

He leaned back as the wine was brought to the table, along with our appetizer. After our glasses had been poured and we’d both enjoyed a couple minutes of food and drink, he leaned forward again and caught my fingers. He gave them a quick squeeze before releasing them, but it was the heated expression on his face that made me realize that we were about to start playing the game he’d mentioned earlier.

“You’ve heard of the game Never Have I Ever?”

I nodded and hoped we weren’t about to play it. He and I came from such different worlds that we’d go through a lot more than a single bottle of wine.

“We’re going to play a version of that,” he said. “One without alcohol.”

My relief must’ve shown on my face because he chuckled.

“Here’s how it’s going to work,” he continued. “I’m going to say something sexual

I've done, and if it's something you'd be interested in trying, you say next, and I move on to the next one. If it's something you aren't interested in trying, you say ask, and you have to answer any question I ask you."

"If I say I'm interested in something, does that mean I can't change my mind about it in the future?" I was fairly certain of his answer, but I needed to hear it from him to make sure we were on the same page.

"Not at all," he said. "I'll remember the things you're interested in and will most likely bring them up at some point, but we'll always talk about them, and you can always use your safe word."

"And what if you think I'm lying now just so I don't have to answer questions?"

His smile widened. "You won't."

I could've taken it as him being all alpha male, but that's not what I saw on his face. It was trust. He was trusting me to be honest and play by the rules. Even if I hadn't been intrigued by the game itself, wanting to be worthy of the trust he was placing in me would have made my answer the same.

"All right. Let's play."

"Excellent." He took a long drink of his wine. "I'll start off easy."

I was nearly positive that his version of easy and mine wasn't the same thing, but I didn't protest.

"Gotten a woman off in a near-public setting where we could be easily caught."

I flushed, the memory of how he'd made me come on his fingers the first time we'd

ever gone out. We hadn't been literally out in public, but we hadn't been shut away in a hotel room or at one of our places.

The grin on his face told me he was remembering too.

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“Next.”

“Used something non-traditional as a sex toy.”

My blush deepened. Every time I saw the remaining hair chopstick on my dresser, I remembered the feel of the other one in my ass.

“Next.”

“I still owe you a replacement.” He gave me the same smug, self-satisfied smirk he’d had back then, and it made my stomach clench the same way.

I understood now why he’d decided to ‘start easy.’ By reminding me of the things we’d already done, he was drawing me into the mindset I needed to play his game.

“Fucked a tight ass.”

The crudeness of his words flipped that switch in me that loved it when he talked dirty. That, combined with me imagining what it would feel like to have him take me that way, had me nodding my head even before I said, “Next.”

“Had a threesome with another woman.”

My stomach dropped. It wasn’t a surprise that he’d been with more than one woman at a time, but hearing it stated flat-out like that, when I was supposed to tell him if that was something I wanted...

“Ask.” My voice was barely a whisper as I fought to keep my face expressionless.

“How old were you when you had your first kiss?”

“Seventeen. My senior prom date dropped me off at home and kissed me.” I tried to recapture the excitement I’d felt when we’d started this game, but I didn’t know if it’d be possible. Not if I couldn’t stop thinking about how I wasn’t going to be enough for Nate, how he’d want to bring someone else into our bed.

“Had a threesome with another man.”

I suddenly remembered something he said when he’d been using my hair chopstick in my ass. He’d said that he’d show me one day what real double penetration felt like. At the time, I’d wondered if he wanted to share me with another man, but I hadn’t asked. I hadn’t even been sure we’d make it past that one encounter. Now, I was wondering if I should have brought it up.

I hadn’t heard him move, but suddenly he was kneeling in front of me, gathering my hands in his, oblivious to what anyone around us might think.

“Look at me, le soleil.”

It was an order, no matter how softly spoken, and I did as I was told.

“I don’t want anyone else to join us, man or woman.” He put his hand on my cheek and wiped away a tear I hadn’t known I’d shed. “But I would bring someone in if that’s what you wanted. Yes, in the past, that’s been something I’ve enjoyed, but from the moment I saw you, I’ve wanted to...possess you. I’m a selfish bastard, and I don’t want to share you with anyone. Ever.”

The intensity in his voice, the need that filled every word, it was like nothing I’d ever

heard before, not from anyone.

“But I would do it,” he continued. “I’d share you if it meant I could keep you.”

I leaned down and covered his mouth with mine. I could feel his surprise, but he didn’t take control of the kiss. I kept it brief but put all the emotion I was feeling into it. As I ended it, I rested my forehead on his.

“I don’t want anyone but you.”

We stayed like that for a minute longer, Nate rising to his feet only as the waiter approached with our meal. The young man with the tray smiled politely as Nate kissed the top of my head and waited until Nate returned to his seat before setting down our plates.

We each ate a few bites in silence, enough to appreciate the quality of the meal and for us to each process the heavy conversation that had unexpectedly come out of Nate’s game.

“Are we okay?” Nate finally asked, his gaze darting up to mine.

“We are.” I smiled at him and reached out to squeeze his hand. “As long as you’re okay.”

“I am.” He raised our hands and kissed my knuckles. “And I meant what I said. I didn’t come up with this game so I could see what I could convince you to do.”

“I believe you,” I reassured him. “And I’d like to keep playing...if that’s what you want.”

His face lit up, and he drained the last of the wine from his glass. While he poured

another, I watched his mind working, and I knew he was trying to get back on the same path he'd been on before I'd accidentally derailed us.

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“Spanked a woman while fingering her until she comes.”

My breathing hitched at the memory of his skillful fingers inside me, the sting of his palm on my ass, and I could only imagine what it would feel like to have them combined.

“Next.”

Twenty-Five

Nate

The first thing I noticed when I opened the society section of the newspaper was my face. The second thing was that I hadn't seen the photograph being taken because I'd been staring at Ashlee. We'd been caught just as we'd left the restaurant last night, and we looked just as wrapped up in each other as I'd felt. She was tucked against my side, the expression on her face matching mine.

We looked like a young couple in love.

Love.

That wasn't a word I was comfortable using with anyone other than my mom.

I pushed it from my head and looked down at the photo's caption, curious to see what the reporter had to say about the two of us.

Manhattan Records CEO, Nate Lexington, seen leaving One if by Land, Two if by Sea with friend.

Friend.

I didn't like that. Any other time I was spotted with a woman, reporters would speculate about romance. It was always with possible love interest or seen cozying up to. That sort of thing. I glanced at the byline and saw a familiar female name: Marty Perez. That explained it.

She'd had a thing for me for years and had often fought her editor because she would submit a snarky caption, then be told that she had to behave because of who the women were. Models. Actresses. Singers – though never ones signed to my label. Ashlee didn't have that protection. She had me, so the caption wasn't insulting, but it was still dismissive.

I was tempted to call the paper and tell them that if they valued my business, they'd keep tighter control on Ms. Perez, but I knew that wasn't what Ashlee would want. She'd want me to let it go.

There were so many things I didn't know about Ashlee, but facts and figures would only have supported what I did know about her. She was a good person, a kind person. She dismissed things that weren't important, and the caption wasn't important, not as long as she knew that she wasn't just a 'friend.'

I couldn't say love yet, but she was my girlfriend, and I would make certain that no one would mistake Ashlee as anyone other than who she was.

My phone rang, and I knew who it was without looking at the screen. "Hi, Mom."

"You sound happy," she said. "That was a very nice picture of you in the paper this

morning.”

She wanted confirmation and wanted to be sure I wasn’t cheating on my girlfriend. “It is a nice picture of Ashlee and me. Her name isn’t really out there, so it’s not surprising the reporter didn’t know it. They’ll figure it out soon enough.”

“She’s as pretty as Joshua said she was.”

I didn’t like that Joshua had described Ashlee as pretty, but I supposed I would’ve liked it even less if he’d said she wasn’t attractive.

I closed my eyes. “She’s even prettier in person.”

“Does that mean the two of you will be joining us this evening for dinner?” Mom couldn’t quite keep the hopeful note from her voice, and it was that, more than anything else, that made me decide.

“I have to check with Ashlee to see if she can come with me.” I had a feeling it wouldn’t be a surprise to her that I hadn’t asked Ashlee yet. I was ashamed to admit that I’d put it off, but Mom deserved the truth.

“It’ll be good to see you both.”

I could hear the smile in her voice, and it made me smile too. Dinner wasn’t going to be fun, no matter how positive Mom was trying to be about it. Even if Joshua and I let things go, we couldn’t just magically undo a lifetime of tension. We’d had issues before I’d slept with Calah, and not only Joshua and me. I’d never really felt like I fit in with my family, and no matter how much Mom tried to fix things, that feeling would continue to be there.

Still, I was already trying to change things in my life by making a real relationship

with Ashlee. I could try to make things better with my family too, at least enough that I could give my mom holidays with the whole family but without the extra drama.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said. “I’ll text you if something comes up, but otherwise, we’ll be there.”

I ended the call and took a minute before dialing Ashlee. I only hoped that she was free tonight because I didn’t know if I could handle going by myself. I would still go, but I doubted it’d go as well as it would if I had le soleil with me.

Twenty-Six

Ashlee

I'd been a little surprised when Nate had taken me home after dinner Friday and simply given me a kiss rather than coming inside, but we didn't need to have sex every time we were together. If anything, it was healthy for us to spend time together and then go to our separate homes.

It didn't make me miss him any less when I wasn't with him. I hadn't realized how important someone could become in such a short period of time. Maybe I should've been frightened by it, but I didn't have it in me.

Today had been nice and quiet. Mom had called me and said a picture of Nate and me was in the paper. It was a nice picture, she said. We both looked happy. They didn't have my name and only referred to me as a friend, but I didn't care about that. I wasn't concerned with the publicity that being with Nate brought. I didn't care if anyone knew my name or anything about me, but I couldn't help feeling a little pleased at the picture being out there for the world to see.

Then, a couple hours later, Nate called, and my nice quiet Saturday went from me hanging out in casual clothes and watching a movie to trying to figure out what I should wear to meet Nate's family.

Shit.

I was going to meet my boyfriend's family. Technically, he'd met all of mine since I

only had Mom and Finley – he’d actually met Finley first if I wanted to be picky about it – but my family wasn’t as intimidating as his. They were a whole family. Two parents. Siblings. All of it. They knew how this ‘meet the family’ thing was supposed to go.

I didn’t even know if they knew anything about me. Maybe I was a surprise that he was going to use to make sure everyone behaved themselves. People were often less willing to make a scene when they had a guest. I didn’t mind being that guest for him.

It just made it a lot harder to figure out what to wear.

I finally decided on a nice pair of black jeans and a short-sleeved, deep blue, cold-shoulder shirt, and dress sandals. Not a moment too soon, either, because Nate was knocking at my door, a sharper, harder knock than usual.

He’d sounded nervous when he’d called about the dinner, so I hadn’t commented on how his ‘asking’ had been more ‘telling,’ but it seemed as if the tension had only gotten worse.

He was dressed as impeccably as usual, but not in a suit. Dark gray dress pants and a fitted, long-sleeved, crimson shirt. Lust twisted my stomach, and I let it show on my face.

“I feel underdressed,” I said as Nate stepped past me. “Should I change into something else?”

The fact that he didn’t automatically answer, but instead looked me over from head-to-toe, told me how tightly wound he was. The nerves I’d managed to keep under control so far exploded into full-blown anxiety.

Immediately, he wrapped his arms around me and rested his cheek on my head. “You

look great. I'm sorry if I made you feel otherwise."

I put my arms around his waist and breathed in the scent of him. "It wasn't you. I've just never done the whole family thing, and I want to make a good impression."

"None of the guys you dated took you home to meet their parents?"

I shook my head. "I was never with them long enough, I guess. I never minded, but I hadn't realized that would just make me more nervous when I finally found someone whose parents I really wanted to like me."

I worried that I'd revealed too much, but he didn't seem to be weirded out by what I'd said. If anything, his embrace tightened as he ran his hand up and down my spine.

"They're going to love you," he said. "I have no doubt about that."

I raised my head so I could look at him. "What do you doubt?"

He considered the question before answering, "That tonight isn't a huge mistake. Not because of you. You're the only thing that's going to make it bearable. If it tanks, it'll be because of me."

I gave him a squeeze. "If Joshua's reaching out to you, doesn't that mean he wants the two of you to work things out?"

"My family and I...let's just say I've always been the odd one out. I don't know if that's changed."

I heard it then, clearer than I ever had before. Loneliness. He wanted his family to love him for who he was, to have the sort of unconditional love that they were supposed to have for one another.

Whatever the falling out had been between Joshua and him, the walls Nate put up hadn't originated there. He'd been building them his whole life, trying to keep anyone from seeing how badly he was hurting, trying to keep anyone from getting close enough to hurt him that way again.

"Hey." I reached up and put my hand on his cheek. "If they can't see the wonderful man I know, then it's their loss. Give them a chance. Patch up what needs patching. But if they can't make an effort, we walk. Together."

He turned his head and kissed my palm. "I like the sound of that."

The touch of his lips sent a thread of warmth through me, and I was tempted to slide my hand under the back of his shirt. I couldn't get enough of touching him, of him touching me.

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“I can help you take the edge off,” I heard myself saying. Bolder than usual, I felt no fear or risk. He wanted me. If he declined, it wouldn’t be a rejection of me, just of timing. My trust in him gave me the confidence to act. “You helped me. Let me do the same for you.”

He bent his head to give me a heated kiss, his hands sliding down my back to palm my ass. His teeth tugged at my bottom lip, not releasing it until I moaned. When he pulled back, I expected him to instruct me to get down on my knees or open his pants so I could get my hand around him.

Instead, he squeezed my ass before taking a step back and releasing me.

“Do you really want to help me relax?”

The gleam in his eyes said that he had something different in mind than what I’d been thinking.

“Yes, Mr. Lexington.”

The smile he gave me was beyond wicked, and I wondered if I was going to regret my offer.

“Do you have that package I sent you?”

When I nodded, he told me to get it. I headed to my room, eager to see what was inside. It’d been delivered Thursday afternoon with a note saying not to open it until I was given permission. I’d assumed he’d sent it for me to open after we’d gone to

dinner last night, but he hadn't even mentioned it.

I brought it back, and he motioned for me to open it. There was another box inside the plain brown box, and this one was fancier, with shiny white and gold surfaces and a sparkling gold ribbon. When I opened that box, I found a few things inside, all of them clearly sex toys that Nate intended to use on me. Some I recognized, but others were a little less obvious.

“Eventually, we’re going to experiment with all of these,” Nate said as he reached into the box to pluck out something. “Change from what you’re wearing into these.”

These were a pair of barely-there panties that had what appeared to be a small pocket at the front of the crotch. I turned to go to my bedroom when a sound from Nate stopped me. I looked over at him, and he shook his head.

“Here.”

Despite the fact that he'd seen me naked more than once, I still blushed as I pulled my pants off. I swapped my simple pair of black cotton panties out for the filmy lace ones Nate had handed me. He didn't say anything until I had my pants back on and moved to do up the button and zipper.

“Wait. Come here.”

I went, stopping when we still had a few inches separating us. He held up his hand, and I saw a small metal object between his thumb and forefinger. It took me a moment to place, but even after I did, I was still confused. Then he shoved his hand down the front of my pants – and panties – and I figured it out.

The metal had already been warmed by his hand when he slipped it into the little pocket. I gasped as his fingers probed between my folds, half-caressing, half-

situating. By the time he removed his hand a minute or so later, the bullet was resting against my clitoris, and I was well on my way to being wet.

“Let’s test it to make sure it works.”

I barely had time to register his words before the metal vibrated. I cursed, nails digging into my palm. It lasted only a few seconds before it stopped and then Nate took my hand, uncurling my fingers and kissing the places where I’d left marks.

“Did it hurt?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I-I just wasn’t expecting it. I mean, I knew what it did, but it was...” I struggled to find the right words.

“Different context,” he said. “A vibrator during something sexual, in a bedroom or the like, that makes sense. Like this, fully clothed, ready to go into public...it screws with your brain.”

“That’s one way to put it,” I muttered.

“Will it be too much for you?”

I didn’t blurt out an answer, needing to give myself a minute to think so I could answer honestly. He hadn’t spelled out exactly what this meant, but it wasn’t difficult to figure out. He wanted me to wear this tonight so that, periodically, he could press a button and watch me squirm. While I was sitting at the dinner table with his entire family, trying not to have an orgasm and hoping that no one could hear the subtle buzzing.

This wasn’t a punishment for me, no matter how torturous it might end up being. I’d asked him if I could help with his tension, and this was his answer. He didn’t need me

to get him off. He needed me to be a distraction. He needed something that he could control in the middle of a place and with a group of people who were all outside his control.

I understood that in a healthy Dom / sub relationship, the sub actually had the final say. Any control that the Dom had, it was only because the sub allowed it. The power dynamic came from the existence of a safe word and the understanding that when a sub used it, the Dom respected it. Some people might've seen it as some sort of contradiction or paradox, but it really was a logical progression.

This was the first time I went beyond understanding it from a logical standpoint. I actually felt it. I wanted to help him, and this was a way I could, but he wouldn't take it without complete consent. Me giving him the ability to control that part of me would be what he needed.

And only I could offer it to him.

Twenty-Seven

Nate

As Ashlee and I walked up the short walkway to the front steps, I held her hand with one of mine, and the other stayed in my pants pocket, firmly wrapped around the slim button that was connected to the vibrator in Ashlee's underwear. I wasn't going to turn it on just yet but knowing I could was enough.

Before I could decide which hand to use to knock, the door flew open, and Mom was there. New wrinkles at the corners of her dark eyes. Gray and white mixed in with her platinum blonde hair. Changes that I hadn't watched happen because I hadn't been here.

The smile was still the same, though, as was the enthusiastic way she threw her arms around me. At five foot eight, she was taller than Ashlee, but she somehow felt more delicate in my arms.

A wave of guilt washed over me. I might not have ever been her favorite, but she loved me, no matter what I'd done. No matter how much friction I'd caused.

I hugged her back, grateful for the hand Ashlee had at my back, a simple touch reminding me that I wasn't alone. She grounded me in a way no one else ever had.

"Come in, come in," Mom finally said, pulling away. She wiped at her cheeks, not bothering to try to hide the tears that had been there. She'd never been an overly emotional person, but she also had no issues with showing her emotions, not like the Lexington men.

I followed her inside, reaching back for Ashlee's hand as she came after me. Inside was the usual awkward shuffle as shoes came off and jackets were hung, all within a small space before we moved into the living room. Dad pushed himself up from his chair as we entered, coming over to stand next to Mom.

"Mom, Dad, this is Ashlee Webb, my girlfriend."

"It's wonderful to meet you both," Ashlee said with a smile.

Mom went in for a hug as Dad and I shuffled our feet and tried to pretend that we weren't looking each other over. His hair was grayer than it was ginger now, and most of the top was gone. His eyes were still the sharpest sort of blue, missing nothing.

He'd finally started softening a little, I saw. Physically, at least. I'd gotten my broad shoulders and build from him, my height from both he and Mom, but he'd always intimidated me. Not that I'd ever let it show.

"You can call me Tabitha," Mom said to Ashlee. "And you can call him Lex."

I was suddenly glad that Mom had put that out there because I hadn't even thought of what I'd do if Ashlee called my father 'Mr. Lexington.'

"Nice to meet you." Dad's voice was gruff but polite.

"You too."

Movement from behind my parents caught my attention, and I saw my older brother and his family coming into the living room. They must've been waiting in the kitchen, either not wanting to overwhelm Ashlee or because Mom had asked for a minute or two with just her and Dad. The latter made more sense. I could see some of

the worry on Mom's face ease when neither Dad nor I started sniping at each other.

"Ashlee, this is my older brother, David, and his wife, Julia."

David was even bigger than I remembered. At least two inches taller than me and a good thirty pounds heavier. Next to him, Julia looked even more delicate than usual. She was actually the most like I remembered. She and David had been high school sweethearts, so she'd been around for pretty much all of the drama between my family and me.

"Nice to meet you." Ashlee stepped forward with her hand out.

To my relief, both David and Julia shook Ashlee's hand and greeted her politely. Hanging back behind their parents were the niece and nephew I barely knew...and that was being generous.

Catherine hadn't even been a toddler the last time I'd seen her, and I'd never even met Jacob. I always sent gifts for their birthdays and Christmas, letting Mom give them to the kids to make sure no one threw them out, but I didn't know if they could connect my face to my name.

"These are our kids," Julia said softly. "Catherine and Jacob."

Both kids waved at Ashlee and me, the expressions on their faces saying they could sense the tension but didn't know why. I appreciated that. I hadn't known if David had been bad-mouthing me all these years. Maybe, if things got better, I'd be able to thank him for it.

The backdoor closed, and I didn't need the sudden silence to know who'd just come inside. A moment later, my little brother walked into the living room. L.A. had agreed with him. He'd always been a good-looking kid, but now that he'd lost the last

of the baby-face he'd had even through college, he was a handsome man. And a little taller than David, I saw. Not as broad, but Joshua had always been leaner than David and me.

Movement to his left drew my attention to a short woman with jet-black hair and an expression on her face that said she didn't take shit from anyone. I wondered if she was the reason Joshua had come back to New York after all these years. Between the way she carried herself and the way Joshua looked at her, I had a feeling she was one of the few people who could get my stubborn-ass brother to do anything.

I knew the feeling.

"Ashlee." Joshua nodded at my girlfriend, who nodded back. "Nate."

"Hey, Joshua," I said, hating how unsure I felt. Ashlee squeezed my hand, reminding me that I wasn't here alone.

"This is Trissa Harring, my girlfriend."

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“It’s nice to meet you,” Ashlee said, giving Trissa a warm smile.

“You too.” Trissa came over to give Ashlee one of those small hugs that women sometimes gave to each other but looked weird when men tried to do it. Or maybe that was just the men in my family.

“When are we going to eat?”

Leave it to an eight-year-old boy to say the one thing that could move things along before they could get even more awkward.

We’d made it all the way up to dessert without anyone shouting, throwing things, or mentioning Calah. That alone would’ve made it a win in my book. Granted, the conversation had gotten a bit stilted a few times, but each time, Jacob had inevitably said something that had made us laugh, and things became smooth again for a little while.

Then there was my little toy, and the reactions only I noticed. I’d intentionally picked this specific model of bullet vibrator because it was subtle enough to be used in public without anyone hearing it. Only the slightest changes to Ashlee’s breathing when I pressed the button indicated that it was working.

I’d kept it to only a few seconds every ten or fifteen minutes until this last time when I’d let it go a little longer. She’d grabbed my leg under the table, squeezing until I’d clicked it off, then excused herself to the restroom.

I’d been tempted to follow, if only to see just how wet she was, but my family had

been watching me closely all night, and I had no doubt they'd know where I went if I disappeared. Aside from embarrassing Ashlee, it would've felt disrespectful, hooking up with my girlfriend in my childhood home. What I was already doing toed the line enough for me.

Now, as I waited for her to come back, Mom and Julia went to the kitchen to get dessert, and I listened to Catherine talking about how excited she was for the new Golden Words release. I made a mental note to get a signed souvenir for her and to thank Mom for making sure my niece and nephew knew at least a little about me, even though I hadn't been around.

"Gramma says that when I'm older, maybe you can get tickets to a concert for me." Catherine glanced at her dad as she spoke, and I wondered if David would allow it. I hoped he would, for Catherine's sake at least.

I hadn't realized just how much I'd been missing out on until I was sitting right in the middle of it. I'd buried myself in my work long before I'd started Manhattan Records. For as long as I could remember, I'd tried to find something I could do well, something to excel at. I'd wanted to prove that I was worthy of my family's attention.

I hadn't been neglected, but I'd always known that I was...out of place. David had been Dad's little helper since he could walk. Joshua was Mom's baby. Neither one of them had ever needed to do much to get our parents' attention. Or so I'd always thought. Now, I couldn't figure out how much of that had been the truth, and how much had just been the way I'd seen the world.

Even after we'd become estranged, I'd kept pushing myself. I'd told myself it wasn't because I needed to prove myself anymore. I did it because I liked working hard. I liked earning money. I liked the way people looked at me when they knew how important I was.

Sitting here, talking to Catherine, waiting for Ashlee, seeing my family all together...I couldn't help but think that maybe I needed to sort out my priorities and decide what I truly wanted out of my life.

Twenty-Eight

Ashlee

I didn't know if I hated Nate's new toy or loved it.

He hadn't used it to the point where it'd hurt or that I'd actually climaxed, but it'd certainly been enough that my new panties had been soaked through before we'd made it to dessert. I'd even had to excuse myself, so I could dry myself off as much as possible before returning to the table. I'd never been so grateful for denim in my life. If I'd been wearing something thin, I would've been completely humiliated.

All of that, though, I'd endured willingly, safe in the knowledge that all I'd needed to do was whisper my safe word and Nate would've immediately stopped. I'd seen the emotions on his face each time he'd pressed the button, and I hadn't asked him to stop.

It'd been that one thing that'd kept my safe word locked away. The pride he'd had in me had been part of it, but more than that had been the relief I'd seen underneath every time he'd pressed the button.

I'd given that to him. By allowing him that control, I'd helped him face something difficult in a way that no one else could have. I'd taken care of him the way he'd been taking care of me.

Now, as I followed Nate out to the car, I barely felt the chill of the wind. The warmth curling inside me wasn't something the weather could touch. I'd felt similar heat

before, but it had always been the result of Nate's attentions on me. Granted, he'd been paying attention to me tonight, but it hadn't been about me this time. It'd been for him.

Was this how it was for him? The way it felt to take care of someone in a way that a lot of people couldn't understand. People got things like bringing someone food, cleaning up, fixing something, that sort of thing. Not many people understood that there was another way to care for someone. Hell, I hadn't understood it before Nate. Not really.

"Thank you," Nate said as he pulled away from the curb. He glanced at me, something softer in his eyes than usual. "I don't know if I could've gotten through tonight without you."

I reached over to take his hand, and he threaded his fingers between mine, the gesture feeling almost completely natural. I wondered how long it would take for me to not have a thrill run through me when we touched or if it would ever go away.

I hoped it wouldn't.

"Thank you for letting me help you tonight." I ran my thumb back and forth across his skin.

He gave me a sideways look. "And how are you feeling about that help?"

I blushed. "Honestly, I'm feeling a bit...wound up."

He chuckled at my word choice. "I know the feeling." He raised our hands and kissed mine, then went back to weaving his way through the New York traffic. "Would you like to come back to my place and...unwind?"

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“Yes, Mr. Lexington.” He glanced at me, and I winked at him. “Do you have something special in mind?”

The expression on his face was answer enough.

This was going to be interesting.

Nate had a playroom. The bed was as large as the one in his guestroom, though not as big as the one in his bedroom, and it definitely had some specialty attachments. Attachments that made it easier to restrain me in all sorts of different ways. High posts on each corner. Leather restraints and metal rings at various points on each post.

He had one of those giant Xs too. A St. Andrew’s cross, or something like that. More leather restraints hung from the large piece. The same on the bench against the other wall. There was a chest of drawers over there too. I assumed there were all sorts of toys in it, but at the moment, I was more concerned with the items on the wall above it.

A flogger with what appeared to be soft leather strips. A thin, flexible piece of wood. A whip. A couple different-sized paddles that appeared to be made out of wood. A leather strap about an inch wide.

Nate’s attention was on these things as well, and I waited to see what he’d choose. He was stripped down to his boxer-briefs, and I took the opportunity to admire his firm ass while I waited. It was better than thinking about how I was standing next to one of the bedposts, stark-naked, my hands stretched over my head, wrists tied by either end of a soft cotton strip of cloth that was threaded through the metal ring near the top of

the post.

We'd been two blocks from his place when he'd turned on the vibrator again, leaving it on this time until he'd handed his keys off to a valet. Only then had he turned it off, but I'd still needed him to help me make it to the elevator, my legs trembling from the nearly nonstop orgasm I'd had for half a block.

In fact, they still felt a little shaky.

Everything between my legs was throbbing, and we hadn't even really started yet. I wondered what he'd do if I passed out like this.

"I'm trying to decide," Nate interrupted my thoughts, "if I want to see what your ass looks like with thin red stripes or if I want to turn both those pretty cheeks into something hot pink."

I had no idea what to hope he chose.

He reached up and plucked the cane from the wall. My stomach flipped as he swung it, and it whistled as it cut through the air. He wasn't going to hit me that hard, I knew, but it still made my breathing quicken.

"You were amazing tonight," Nate said as he turned toward me. "So, we'll start with five, and if you can handle that like a good girl, it'll stay with just those five."

My mind spun for a second before I managed to get a question out. "What do I have to do to be a good girl?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Smart question."

He came over to stand next to me, reaching out to slide the braid I'd made across his

palm. His hand moved to my breast next, fingers teasing my nipple into a tight point as he made me wait for an answer to my smart question. I moaned as he pinched it lightly, sending a shiver through me.

“After each swat, say thank you, Mr. Lexington and nothing else.” He leaned down, putting his mouth next to my ear. “Five times. If you can do that, I’ll fuck you.”

“And if I can’t?”

He bit my earlobe. “Then we’ll try for five more.”

Fuck.

He stepped back, disappearing from my line of sight. I closed my eyes and tried not to tense. This was going to hurt, but Nate would make me feel good. I had absolutely no doubt about that. It’d just hurt worse if I was tense.

The first strike caught me off-guard, and I barely managed to hold back a yelp. I sucked in a breath and then spoke, my voice shaky. “Thank you, Mr. Lexington.”

The sting was sharper than it had been when he’d used his hand, but it wasn’t over as large of an area either. The second strike made me flinch, but it was no worse than the first, just on the other side.

“Thank you, Mr. Lexington.”

I could handle this. It wasn’t too bad.

And then number three landed across the first one, and it was all I could do not to make a sound. The place where the two crossed felt like I’d been stung...except more. Sharp pain mingled with a deeper, hot throbbing.

“Thank you, Mr. Lexington.” My voice wasn’t entirely even, but it didn’t break.

I wasn’t so sure I’d do as well on the last two.

The sound the cane made as it cut through the air made it worse, I decided. Knowing what was coming made my muscles automatically tense up, and when that fourth stroke met the second, my nails dug into my palms in my effort not to yell.

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“Thank you, Mr. Lexington.” I forced the words out from between gritted teeth.

One more. I could get through one more.

“Last one,” Nate said. “Let’s make it count, shall we?”

Before I could process what he even meant by that, the cane whistled through the air before connecting with a loud crack. He’d managed to land across three of the four other lines, creating tiny explosions of pain to stand out brightly against the rest. These wouldn’t merely make my skin sensitive. I’d be lucky if I didn’t bruise.

I closed my eyes, biting my lip until I knew I could open my mouth without making sounds other than the single phrase I was permitted. He didn’t speak either, waiting for me to succeed or fail before following through on whatever would come next. Seconds ticked by in silence broken only by my harsh breathing.

“Thank you, Mr. Lexington.”

“Good work, le soleil.”

I let out a sigh of relief but didn’t relax. My body was too alive, too keyed up. Between my previous climax and Nate touching me, I’d been primed for more pleasure. Pain had confused me, putting my nerves on high alert, unsure what the next sensation would hold.

The familiar sound of a condom wrapper being ripped prompted my eyes to open, and a few seconds later, Nate’s hands were on my waist.

“I don’t want you holding anything back now,” he said, sliding his hands up my ribcage to cover my breasts.

His cock pressed against my ass, too much friction and pressure on the marks the cane had left, but I couldn’t bring myself to protest because all I could think about now was how much I wanted him inside me and how good he always made me feel.

“Make as much noise as you want.” His tongue flicked out against my earlobe, and his fingers pinched my nipples, adding two more conflicting sensations. “My place is sound-proof, so you don’t need to worry about anyone hearing you.”

I appreciated him saying it, but I doubted even the threat of someone hearing would’ve been enough to stop me. The moment he’d told me I didn’t need to hold anything in, I’d began making embarrassing mewling sounds. Or rather, they would’ve been embarrassing if I would’ve been able to muster up the slightest hint of embarrassment. I couldn’t.

He kissed his way down my spine until he reached the small of my back. His lips stayed there as his hands dropped to knead my ass, making me gasp and squirm as he came in contact with the more sensitive spots.

“One day in the near future,” hot air puffed against my skin, “after I take your ass, I’m going to show you how it feels to have my mouth there too.”

Fuck.

“But right now, I just want to bury myself in that sweet little pussy of yours and make both of us come.”

Men who looked like him shouldn’t have been allowed to talk that way. It was definitely an unfair advantage.

Any other thoughts I might've had flew right out of my head as he sank his cock inside me with one unrelenting push. Everything became about the slip and slide friction of our bodies with only a thin layer of latex between us. The pain in my ass cheeks when he bottomed out. The ache in my arms from the position I was in. The new pressure on my scalp when he wrapped my braid around his fist to use it for leverage.

He rode me hard, not even pausing when I climaxed, but driving past it, letting it roll over me again, stronger than before. I was still calling out his name when he let out a guttural groan and pushed himself impossibly deep. He kissed my shoulder as he slumped over me, our bodies still joined.

Despite all the ways I knew I'd be feeling this tomorrow, I wasn't in any hurry to move. Staying conscious was about all I had the strength for, and even that was up in the air. For now, I was content to let myself float.

Twenty-Nine

Nate

The Golden Words release party was this upcoming weekend, and things were going as smoothly as I'd ever seen. Everyone involved was busy, of course, but there was none of the chaos that had been a part of our most recent event.

I only hoped that meant the party itself would go off without the drama that'd been a part of the other event too. Granted, not many people knew about the drama that had almost resulted in me injuring the lead singer of my label's first band, but that didn't mean I wanted it to happen again, quiet or not.

Fortunately, Golden Words was nothing like Unraveling when it came to the antics of their members. Four women who got along better than any band I'd ever seen, they

managed to pull off a nice blend of pop and rock that appealed to the masses without being formulaic or trite.

This was going to be their second release, and the singles from it were already getting serious radio play. My gut told me that they'd be our top earners soon, and that, if they maintained, they could easily become bigger than Unraveling.

The reminder of Zed and his idiotic demands made me want to thank Chana Beach for being more mature at twenty-two than Zed was at more than a decade older. If nothing else, I would at least give A&R the go-ahead to take care of anything Chana and her bandmates asked for.

I was in the middle of sending an email to Stu to ask for an update when someone knocked on my door. Hoping it was Stu with an in-person update, I called out for whoever it was to come in.

It wasn't Stu.

What the fuck was she doing here?

I didn't bother to ask how she'd gotten past the receptionist in the lobby. Wayne wasn't necessarily the best person for the job, but Ashlee liked him, and he was a good kid. He could get better at what he was supposed to do, but it was damn hard to 'teach' someone to be a good person. I'd decided to keep him on, but I was going to need to talk to Chris about paying closer attention until Wayne was up to speed.

Flora strolled into my room like she owned the place, those cyan eyes of hers gleaming in a way that I didn't like any more than I liked her attitude.

"It's easy enough to slip into a group coming back from lunch. Security doesn't always check those groups as thoroughly as they check people first thing in the morning."

I definitely needed to talk to Chris.

"I'm not sure why you feel like you should be here," I said, "but I'll give you one chance to leave before I call security to escort you out."

"I think you might want to hear what I have to say before calling anyone." She sat down across from me, a smirk on her lips.

I wasn't really in the mood for this, but I suspected it'd be faster to just let her say her piece and be on her way. "Go on."

"That was a lovely picture in the newspaper," she began, looking pleased with

herself, as if she'd just outmaneuvered me. "You and...her. Though the reporter didn't seem to know her name. Not surprising. I'm sure you don't want everyone knowing who she is. Wouldn't look too good, would it? I mean, dating an employee." She shook her head, her lower lip poked out in feigned disappointment.

"Get to the point, Flora. I have work to do."

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm sure you do. Other employees to take advantage of. People to unjustly fire."

I sighed. "If you just want to run your mouth, I'll call the company lawyer, and you can talk to her."

"And if I want to threaten to tell someone that your new fuck buddy works for you?"

I gritted my teeth, but there were two things I needed to make clear before I called Chris to get her out of here. "Ashlee is my girlfriend, and she is a freelance contractor for the A&R department under Stu Hancock. You clearly haven't learned anything about spreading lies."

She rolled her eyes. "Maybe they're lies, maybe they're not. Doesn't matter. People will eat them up the same."

"And I could sue you for both libel and slander."

"But a lot of people will still think that Ashlee slept her way into a job she didn't deserve."

Shit. She had a point.

"So, you just came here to tell me your vengeful plans?" I doubted that was the case,

especially since she knew all I needed to do was pick up my phone and I'd have a lawyer preparing an injunction and anything else she could to make Flora's life miserable.

"I can't find a job, thanks to you." A scowl twisted her expression into something ugly. "I want money. A hundred thousand. Cash or a transfer if you don't carry that much cash here at the office. No, I won't take a check, and no, I won't leave until I have either the cash in hand or see the money in my bank account."

Blackmail. That sounded about right for Flora.

I knew that if I agreed to it, Jailene was going to have a fit. Logically, I understood that paying Flora off once meant that she'd probably come back for more, but I also knew that if I did anything other than pay her, she'd immediately start contacting media outlets just to beat me to it.

Legal action still would've been possible, but like she'd said, the rumors would already be out there. If that small amount of money could spare Ashlee from the same sort of shit Flora had pulled before, only on a larger scale, I'd pay it a hundred times over.

"I'll do a transfer," I said. "I don't keep that much cash at the office. Do you have the account information?"

She wasn't able to mask her surprise, but she covered it quickly, rummaging through her purse until she found her checkbook. "This will work, right?"

I almost wanted to laugh. I loved dealing with people who thought they were smarter than they actually were. Cash could be tracked, but generally only under a specific set of circumstances. A wire transfer of money was risky but made less so when it was to an off-shore bank or one under a false identity. Flora had just handed me all the

information I'd need to give the police if I wanted to file a report.

If she left Ashlee and me alone after I gave her this money, I'd let her go about with her life as well. Going to the police wouldn't be worth the time and hassle. If she broke her word about talking to the press or if she came back for more money, however, then I'd make this a legal matter.

But that was a problem for another day.

Thirty

Ashlee

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I had to tell my mom that I'd talked to Finley. Needing a short time to process things myself made sense, but I didn't want to wait too long. Then again, it wasn't like there was some book on what the appropriate amount of time would be. How long should someone wait to tell their mother that they'd broken this kind of news to their biological father, who also happened to be their boyfriend's best friend slash business partner?

It wouldn't be a bad conversation, but it was going to be a weird one. I supposed other children who'd been conceived the same way had been part of similar talks, though I doubted the whole employment or boyfriend aspect had come into play very often.

Part of me wanted to talk to Mom face-to-face because this didn't exactly feel like the kind of conversation one should have over the phone, but the drive to and from Staten Island was unappealing, to say the least.

If I hadn't already told her that I'd looked for and found my biological father, I would've made the trip, but I knew her well enough to know that she would be okay with me calling her for this update. It was also miles better than a text.

Once I'd made the decision, I was ready to act on it, but I still had an hour left at work, and calling her from here wasn't even an option. While I doubted Mr. Hancock or Ms. Lamas would mind, I didn't want even the appearance of receiving special treatment, especially not now that the majority of the people here knew I was dating Nate. I'd even taken to cutting my breaks and lunch short by a few minutes so no one could claim I was late.

Not that I'd told anyone that. Nate would probably ignore any complaints. Mr. Hancock and Ms. Lamas would most likely keep an eye on me to make sure the claims weren't true. No matter how it played out, however, if anything was even close to the line, it'd look like I was being shown favoritism.

I didn't even want to think about what would happen if anyone found out that Finley was my father. He and Nate knew I wasn't after money or anything like that, but it could still be blown out of proportion. The last thing Manhattan Records needed right now was scandal.

Nate hadn't said anything, but I knew that *Unraveling's* numbers were still falling. With the exception of "Fire and Light," all of the tracks from their most recent release were bombing. People were buying the single and ignoring the rest of the album, or they were buying the album and writing reviews about how there was only one good song on it.

Not helping at all was Zed Hipwood's arrest for drunken disorderly yesterday morning. Fortunately for us, there'd been enough bigger stories that Zed's incident was barely covered at all. Still, it was out there, and I had a bad feeling that his antics would only increase as his popularity waned. Judging by the reviews I'd seen and the chatter I'd heard, things would only get worse.

I hadn't talked to Nate about any of it since we were still figuring out how to talk about work without crossing any lines. It was a strange dance, but more than worth it.

That was something my mom needed to hear about too. She knew how much I cared about Nate, and she believed he cared a lot about me too, but she was wary, and I understood why. Not only did Nate and my relationship have its own complications, but Mom knew firsthand what it was like to have her heart broken, and she didn't want that for me.

I sent out my last email and double-checked the list of things I had to do tomorrow. Only two workdays until the Golden Words release party and organization was the key to making everything go smoothly. Unlike those who were thrown when something random disrupted a schedule, I handled sudden situations more easily when everything else was planned out. Well, if I was on schedule. If I got behind...

A burst of laughter from down the hall made me look up, and I saw people closing down their computers, chatting as they gathered their things. I'd been so absorbed in what I was doing that I hadn't seen the hour turn. I finished up what I was doing and did a last look-over to make sure I hadn't missed anything.

I would call Mom while I fixed my dinner tonight, I decided. Nate and I hadn't made plans until the party this Saturday evening, so I wouldn't have to worry about interruptions or rushing. Mom wouldn't be upset about this, I knew, but I still didn't want to make her feel like I was brushing her off with a few cursory details, especially since I'd kept Finley a secret for so long.

I made it home in record time and quickly changed out of my work clothes. Once comfortable, I headed to the kitchen. I called my mom and set the phone on the counter while I opened the fridge to see what I had to eat.

"Hey, sweetie! What's going on?"

"Getting some dinner together and calling my mom. What about you?"

"Eating dinner and talking to my daughter."

I smiled, the familiar banter exactly what I needed to help me arrange my thoughts about the main reason I'd called. Mom and I talked often, usually without any specific reasons, but she knew that if I needed to tell her something, I'd get to it when I was ready.

“How’s work going?” I asked. “You said something about doing some research on a ship’s manifest from the seventeenth century while you waited for some information on your Quaker project?”

“Yes, Professor Luther wants to do a special workshop over the next winter break for a handful of his grad students. It should be interesting.” She paused, then asked, “How is work going with you?”

I couldn’t have asked for a better segue. “It’s going well. The new contract and job description was a brilliant idea on Nate’s part.”

“I take that to mean he’s been behaving himself at work.” Mom sounded amused.

Heat crept up my neck. “He has.”

“Good. I’d rather not get myself into trouble vandalizing his expensive car. I assume he has an expensive car.”

I laughed. “I wonder how many other mothers would admit to considering vandalism for their child.”

“Any good mother would.” She joined in my laughter. “But a good daughter would offer an alibi.”

I put my chicken in the oven and brought up the main reason I’d called. “So, I talked to Finley.”

A beat of silence. “How did that go?”

“Really well.” I leaned against the counter. “Nate actually invited Finley over to have dinner with us at Nate’s place. A neutral place, but also a private one.”

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As I told her the story, I suddenly realized how worried I'd actually been about this thing with Finley damaging my relationship with my mom. But Mom wasn't reluctantly supporting this simply because she didn't want to hurt me. I knew her well enough to hear what she wasn't saying.

She wasn't only happy for me. She wanted to be a part of this, if that was what I wanted too.

I'd been so afraid of hurting Mom with my search, and now I found myself tearing up because things were working out better than I'd ever imagined possible.

Thirty-One

Nate

For a week, the only communication I had with Ashlee were in texts and a couple calls, and I felt the absence of her presence like an itch underneath my skin. We were both busy with the Golden Words party, and usually, when I was focused on work, especially for something like this, it wasn't strange for me to go days or weeks without making contact with a girlfriend. I didn't treat them like shit, but they knew they weren't my priority.

My relationship with Ashlee was different. I wanted to see her, talk to her, be with her. I'd been able to focus on work this week, but only because I'd had in the back of my mind that I wanted this to be the type of event that Ashlee would be proud to attend with me. I'd never considered anything like that before. Other women had been with me because of who I was. Ashlee was with me because...well, honestly, I

sometimes wondered why a woman like her wanted me.

I pushed that thought aside. I refused to let the insecurities I always tried to hide screw up my night. I had very specific plans for tonight. Ashlee and I were going to attend the release party, and I'd make sure the reporters knew exactly who she was this time. After we'd been there an appropriate amount of time, I'd bring her back to my place for a weekend of decadence.

To kick things off, I'd sent her a dress for tonight. I'd included with it a note, telling her that I wanted to see her in it, but that I didn't want her to wear anything underneath it.

The moment she opened the door to her apartment, and I saw her in it, I knew I'd made a great choice.

Floor-length with a slit that went half-way up her thigh. A tucked-in waist that flared back out to accommodate her full breasts. A sweetheart neckline that left a tantalizing bit of pale skin bare. Clingy, soft turquoise fabric the exact shade of her eyes.

I let out a low whistle, letting all of my admiration show on my face. I was going to fuck her in that dress before I took it off her tonight. Hell, I was tempted to have her ride me in the back seat of the limo on our way to the party. The only thing that kept me from suggesting it was knowing that it would make Ashlee anxious the whole night, wondering if people would suspect what we'd done. I didn't want her nervous tonight. She deserved to relax and enjoy herself.

"Right back at you." She smiled warmly, her heated gaze running down my body and then back up again. When her tongue ran along her bottom lip, my cock stiffened.

"Damn, you tempt me." I held out my arm, and she took it. "As soon as we can leave without our absence drawing attention, I'm taking you to my place, and I'm going to

show you just how much I like that dress.”

“I like the sound of that.”

I was impressed by how natural Ashlee had looked on the red carpet. She’d smiled as we’d walked and hadn’t looked away when I’d introduced her to the journalists clamoring to know who she was. I’d felt her hand trembling on my arm, but she hadn’t shown any fear at all.

I was going to reward her for that tonight.

We made our way through the party, shaking hands and making small talk. Or, rather, I made small talk and Ashlee smiled, speaking only when someone directed something at her. She wasn’t shirking away from people, but it was clear the attention wasn’t something she craved.

Another way she was different from all the other women I’d dated.

The thought made me smile.

“Nate, nice to see you.”

I turned to see Saya Wong smiling at me. She was one of the few agents I liked, and fortunately, Golden Words was one of the three Manhattan Records artists she represented. Saya was professional, intelligent, and had a good sense of humor. She’d also never flirted with me or expressed any interest in dating me. I didn’t know if I wasn’t her type or she had stricter rules than I did about dating someone she had a work relationship with. Whatever the reason, I liked it.

“You too,” I said, extending my hand. She shook it and then held hers out to Ashlee.

“Ashlee Webb, right? You were here with Nate at the last event.”

“I was.” Ashlee shook Saya’s hand, a genuine smile on her face. “I’m a big fan of Golden Words.”

Saya winked at her. “I like to hear that.”

“They look good tonight,” I said, nodding toward where Golden Words had been set up for interviews. “Even if Peach looks like she wants to hide.”

“If this album goes the way I think it will, she’ll have less time to be in the background than before.”

I nodded in agreement. All of Saya’s artists were talented and professional, but these young women were definitely the best of the bunch. It wasn’t too often four genuinely kind, intelligent, and talented people came together to create great music.

Which reminded me... “Before the night’s over, I’d like to get them to sign something for my niece.”

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If she was surprised by my mentioning family, she didn't show it. Ever the consummate professional.

As if merely thinking the compliment had conjured the exact opposite, Zed appeared behind Saya.

"Well, if it isn't some of my favorite people." He draped an arm around Saya's shoulders.

Before I could offer to remove his arm – from his body – Saya firmly grabbed his wrist and twisted out from under his arm, the expression on her face making me wonder if this had happened before. I needed to talk to Finley, and then to Stu and Suzie. If Zed couldn't keep his hands off my employees, I didn't even want to think what he did around women who weren't connected to his career.

"Always the feisty one, Saya." Zed grinned as she released his arm. He massaged his shoulder but didn't seem put out by the less than enthusiastic reception to his advances.

That might've had something to do with the fact that he was high as a kite.

"I'm surprised you're here, Zed," I said tightly. "You usually don't show up to things that aren't about you."

"I'm hurt." He put his hand over his heart. "Nothing means more to me than the success of God's Worlds. Gold Stars. Ghost Words." He frowned. "Whoever the hell they are."

“I’m sure they appreciate your support.” I didn’t even attempt to hide my sarcasm. “Still, it’d probably be better if you left.” When he didn’t move, my eyes narrowed. “That isn’t really a suggestion.”

“C’mon, Nate. You wouldn’t throw out the man who gave you your first big break, would you?” Something cruel gleamed in his eyes. “Well, not again, anyway.”

Shit.

“Which reminds me,” he continued, “I hear Joshua’s back in town.”

Ashlee shifted next to me, but I didn’t look at her. Zed was treading on dangerous ground, but if he said too much, I’d end up being the one in the hot seat.

“Think he’d be interested in a reunion?” Zed’s expression hardened even though he still wore a smile. “Not with you, of course, but with me and the guys.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to go check on the ladies.” Saya was already walking away as she spoke.

“Did you know Nate has a little brother?”

My attention snapped back to Zed, who was leering at Ashlee. “She does.”

“I met him, actually.”

Shit. I could tell she thought she was helping by showing Zed that I’d introduced her to my family, but she had no idea what was actually going on. This had nothing to do with what people might think about our relationship. Zed was trying to sabotage what she and I had, but if I told her that, she’d want to know more.

I was fucked, no matter what.

Zed's eyebrows went up. "So, the rumors are true. The prodigal's returned." He gave me a sideways look. "Although, you always struck me as the prodigal more than a baby brother."

It was no wonder there hadn't been as many reports of Zed being caught high as there were of him being drunk. In all honesty, he almost sounded more intelligent when he was high than he normally did.

"This conversation stops here," I said firmly. "We're not going to talk about my family."

Zed held up his hands, palms out as if he was surrendering. "All right, all right. I get you don't want to talk about them at work...but technically, Joshua was my family too. I mean, he was one of the founding members of Unraveling."

Thirty-Two

Ashlee

Nate's brother was a founding member of Unraveling? That didn't seem possible. I'd been a fan since their first single was released, and I'd been researching every artist Manhattan Records had ever signed. I'd never seen Joshua's name on anything. No pictures either, and he was a hard man to forget.

I looked up at Nate for a response to Zed's statement, but one look at his face told me that Zed wasn't lying, about this at least. Nate was furious, his entire body humming with tension.

"Walk away." His jaw was clenched so tightly that I didn't know how he was even

managing to speak.

With an obnoxious little salute, Zed backed away, not taking his eyes off Nate. He didn't have to worry. Nate wasn't the sort of man who'd wait until someone's back was turned to hit them. Then again, if what Zed was saying was true, maybe this was another one of those instances where I didn't know Nate as well as I thought I did.

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“Was your brother one of the original members of Unraveling?” I asked, keeping my voice down so that no one else could hear me. “Is that what happened between you two?”

“This isn’t the time or place for that particular story.” Nate didn’t look at me as he spoke.

“All right,” I agreed. “But I’ll want to talk about it later.”

He nodded, then went back to his professional demeanor to greet an older man who came over with an outstretched hand.

I understood him not wanting to talk about it at a work function, especially if it wasn’t something that was common knowledge. I just hoped he realized I was serious when I said I planned to bring it up later. I didn’t like being caught off-guard like that, especially not by Zed Hipwood, of all people.

At some point during the evening, I lost track of names and the faces they belonged to. Other Manhattan Records artists were here, so those I remembered, but all of the people in the music industry outside of the label started blurring together after a while. Then there were the hundreds of media representatives milling around. Everyone from vloggers to reporters from actual newspapers, and all of them wanting a piece of Nate’s attention and time.

I didn’t mind fading into the background, content to watch and listen, to learn. I wasn’t here to make my name known. In fact, now that I’d connected with Finley, I was beginning to wonder if I wanted to be a part of this world after all. Maybe I’d be

better off doing something like what my mother did. In fact, now that I thought about it, I realized that the position Nate had set up for me was perfect for going the self-employment route.

I filed those thoughts away as something we'd discuss at some point this weekend. I didn't plan on venturing out on my own right away, but one of the first things I needed to do was make sure that I wouldn't be stepping on anyone's toes when I went.

I was so caught up in my thoughts that, when I realized I was alone, I had no idea where Nate had gone or what he'd said before he'd left. I went up on my toes – which was pretty much pointless thanks to my heels – but still couldn't see well enough above the crowd to spot him.

Dammit.

I scanned the people closest to me, looking for a familiar face to ask if they knew where Nate had gone. The moment I spotted one coming toward me, however, I had to swallow a curse.

“Ashlee, I was hoping I'd get a chance to talk to you without Nate around.”

Zed was clearly one of those guys who oozed creep even when he was sober. Not that I thought he was completely sober now, just not drunk. I didn't have a lot of experience with people on drugs, but I was pretty sure he was high.

“I don't really have anything to say to you, Mr. Hipwood.” I crossed my arms and prayed I wasn't glaring at him. The last thing Nate and I needed right now was a reporter snapping a picture with the caption ‘Nate Lexington's girlfriend in spat with Unraveling front man Zed Hipwood.’

“It’s what I’ve got to say to you that you’re going to want to hear.”

“Is that so?” I said dryly.

He nodded. “First, I gotta apologize for my behavior when we first met.”

My jaw dropped.

“I can be a real bastard sometimes when I’m drunk. Get all handsy and touching things that aren’t mine to touch. Anyway, I’m sorry about that.”

“Apology accepted.” I was still wary of him, but I wasn’t going to be rude enough to reject an apology that seemed sincere.

“Thanks.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and rocked from heel to toe. “I figured you had to have a forgiving nature, considering you’re dating Nate.”

“What, exactly, is that supposed to mean?” I tried to keep my voice from sounding defensive, but I didn’t quite manage it.

“It’s just that a guy who could betray his brother like that, I don’t think I’d be able to trust him in anything but a professional capacity.”

“Betray his brother how?” A sick feeling settled in my stomach. I should have told Zed to go away, but I’d seen it on Nate’s face. There had been something he hadn’t wanted me to hear about Joshua. I wasn’t going to automatically believe whatever it was Zed was about to say, but I had to know.

“Shit. You don’t know.” Zed rubbed the top of his head as if he felt awkward, but I didn’t believe that for a second. He’d found me because he wanted to tell me whatever Nate didn’t want me to know.

“Just spit it out,” I snapped.

“When I auditioned for Unraveling, Joshua was their keyboardist. He’d joined a couple weeks before me. By the time a few months passed, we’d replaced most of the rest of the band, but we sounded good enough for Joshua to get us a meeting with his big-shot brother.”

The noise from the rest of the guests faded into the background as I listened.

“We were still in the negotiating stage when the shit hit the fan. Turned out, Nate slept with Joshua’s girlfriend. And that wasn’t the worst of it.”

My stomach was churning. I wasn’t sure what could make that any worse.

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“Nate told the band that if we didn’t boot Joshua, Manhattan Records wouldn’t sign us.”

Fuck.

A double betrayal, first by having sex with his brother’s girlfriend, then by giving the band an ultimatum to get rid of Joshua.

“I guess I don’t need to ask what choice you made.”

“Look, we’re not proud of it, but Nate hadn’t really given us many options. He threatened to blackball us if we didn’t do it.”

I wanted to say that Nate wouldn’t do anything like that, but I knew from personal experience just how ruthless he could be when it came to getting what he wanted. Hadn’t he blackmailed me into being his date back when we’d met for the first time? I’d told myself that he hadn’t truly meant it. That he wouldn’t have actually fired me if I’d said no. Now, I wondered if that was really the case.

“Don’t take my word for it,” Zed said. “Do a little digging. You’ll find out that Nate Lexington isn’t who he pretends to be.”

With that final ominous declaration, Zed hurried away, leaving me to think about what he’d said and wonder how much I could believe. When I brought this up to Nate tonight, would he give me the same version of the story as the one I’d just heard and expect me to be on his side? Or would he have excuses for what he’d done? Or would he tell me that there was no truth to anything Zed had said and offer me the real

story?

One thing was for certain: I wanted answers, and as soon as we left the party, I intended to get them.

Thirty-Three

Nate

I was going to kill Zed Hipwood.

First thing Monday morning, I'd have Jailene combing through Unraveling's contract to find out if I could fire Zed but keep the rest of the band. Hell, I'd even give him a 'severance package' or whatever I needed to call it for it to be legal. I wanted him gone.

Thanks to him, I would need to come up with a creative way of explaining the whole Joshua-Unraveling thing. The last thing I wanted was to ruin my weekend by telling Ashlee the whole dirty truth.

At some point, we'd gotten separated, so by the time I'd made my way back around to her, I was more than ready to leave. The party itself was already a huge success, and Stu was more than capable of handling things on his own.

It wasn't until we stepped outside that I noticed how quiet Ashlee had been these last few minutes. She wasn't a naturally talkative person, but this wasn't a normal sort of silence. It felt more like she was pulling away from me, and I could only blame one person.

Zed fucking Hipwood.

“A&R did an amazing job tonight.” I chose to ease into whatever was on her mind. “Not that I expected anything less.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was calm, polite...and distant. She continued to stare out the window, but the blank expression I could see in her reflection made me believe she was looking away from me more than she was looking at something in particular.

“Saya had the entire band sign a poster and a t-shirt for Catherine.” I held up the bag Saya had given me, but Ashlee didn’t look at it. “I suppose I’ll need to figure out what Jacob’s into so I can get him something similar.”

“I’m sure Catherine will love it.”

Okay, at least she was paying that much attention. I let a minute pass without either of us saying anything, hoping she’d give me something. Anything.

“Are you all right?” I finally asked.

“Did you sleep with Joshua’s girlfriend?”

I felt like a bucket of ice water had just been dumped over my head. When I’d imagined all the ways this conversation could go, I’d never pictured her flat-out asking me that question. The only thing that could’ve prompted it was someone telling her what’d happened all those years ago. I had a pretty good idea of who that person was, but I asked it anyway, not wanting to jump to any conclusions.

“Where did you hear that?”

The edge to my question was far too sharp, but it was too late to call it back.

“Zed.”

“And you’re just going to believe him? Since he’s clearly such a reliable person.” I was making it worse, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“No, Nate, I’m not ‘just believing’ him. I’m asking you to tell me what happened.” She sounded tired.

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“Why bother?” I snapped. “You clearly know the answer, or you’d have told Zed to fuck off.”

The more I said, the deeper I buried myself. Why was I arguing with her as if she’d accused me of something I hadn’t done? Granted, there was context to go around it, but the fact of my having slept with Joshua’s girlfriend was the truth.

She finally turned toward me, eyes flashing. “I don’t know the answer, Nate. That’s why I’m asking. I’m sorry that you don’t like me having to ask, but you’re not exactly an open book about anything that matters.”

“So, it matters if I had sex with my brother’s girlfriend?”

I tried to convince myself that the real reason the question came out angry had nothing to do with the fear that had kept me from telling her any of this in the first place. I was a shitty brother and not a much better man. I didn’t deserve someone like her, and this would be what made her finally see it.

“Should it?”

I had no answer for that, so I ignored it and continued on the offensive. “It’s not like you’ve always been the most honest person in the world when it comes to your past.”

Her mouth flattened into a line, and I knew I’d struck a nerve. “You’re right. I kept my reasons for being at Manhattan Records to myself. But when you had suspicions that I wasn’t being completely honest, you didn’t ask me a straightforward question. You went off on me. Should I have resorted to that tactic to get the truth out of you?”

“I apologized for that.”

“Yes, you did, but you don’t seem like you’ve learned very much from it,” she countered. “If you talked to me about things that mattered, maybe I wouldn’t have to hear rumors secondhand and then come to you for clarification because I’d looked like an idiot.”

“Maybe you should just trust me to know what’s best for you,” I shot back. “Or do you only trust me when it comes to fucking you?”

Color flooded her cheeks. “I trust you during sex because I know you’d never physically hurt me. You’re not that sort of man. But when it comes to my heart, I still don’t know how much I can trust you not to hurt me.”

She was right, no matter how much I hated to admit it.

“Maybe, once in a while, you could trust me,” she continued. “Trust that when I ask a question, it’s not an attack. Trust that I want to know the answer, and I want to talk it through with you if it’s an answer I don’t like.”

I wanted to believe what she was saying, but I couldn’t. She didn’t know what I’d done, so how could she know how she’d feel when she learned it? My own family had cut me out of their lives. People who were supposed to love me unconditionally.

Then again, I’d betrayed one of them first, so I supposed I deserved it.

Except they didn’t know the whole story. No one did. And I intended to keep it that way.

Besides, if they had really known me, they wouldn’t have believed the worst to begin with. Or, maybe, if I hadn’t always been such an ass, they would’ve had a reason to

stop and listen.

Either way, it didn't matter. My life was fucked up, and nothing was going to change it. Not Joshua moving back here. Not having dinner with my family without there being an argument. And not finding someone I cared about enough to want a real relationship with her.

Thirty-Four

Ashlee

I waited for his response, hoping he would acknowledge that he needed to work on trusting me. His first impulse when he felt threatened in any way was to fight back. He needed to start thinking first, determining if what was being said was even an actual attack.

I'd asked a question that I wanted to know an answer to because it connected with a conversation he'd agreed to have after we left the party. If he hadn't made the connection, maybe I should've communicated it better, but it wasn't always easy to maintain a cool head when he kept being deliberately pig-headed about things.

The worst part was, I was more sad than angry. I understood that the two of us needed time to share things with each other, but for me, it wasn't a matter of not knowing him well enough to share everything. Not anymore.

Once we'd decided to try to make this work, I'd been all in. Anything he would've asked me, I would've answered honestly. We knew each other's bodies so intimately that I couldn't quite understand why we'd hide anything else.

If all he'd wanted was my body, he should have told me that, and I wouldn't have let myself get so invested. I assumed that wanting a relationship had meant non-physical

intimacy as well. I'd thought we'd been on the same page since Virginia Beach, even if we'd still had some miscommunications. If he didn't want to answer a simple question, then I'd been mistaken.

Which only made me wonder what else I'd been mistaken about.

"I don't know what you want me to say," he said finally. "I'm asking you to trust me to tell you what you need to know, and you're insisting that if I trust you, I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"Do you hear yourself?" I asked. "You get to decide what I need to know, which means you also get to hide anything you don't want me to know. How am I supposed to be close to someone who won't let me in? How equal is a relationship when one person gets to make those decisions for both of us?"

"Are you saying that I need to bare my soul, tell you all of my deepest and darkest secrets? Are you forgetting that we've known each other for a month? And it wasn't that long ago that you were expecting me to be understanding of why you hadn't told me about Finley being your father."

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We weren't getting anywhere, and I couldn't lay the blame for that totally at his feet. I'd made mistakes in the past, and I understood why he was bringing them up, even if I wanted to remind him that we'd been at a different place when that'd happened. Maybe that was the problem. I thought we were in a different place now while he thought we were still in the same.

I leaned forward and knocked on the divider that, thankfully, kept Angus from hearing what we'd been talking about.

"What are you doing?"

I ignored Nate as the divider came down an inch. "Drop me off at my place."

"No, we're going home."

I shot him a glare. "Angus, please take me home before you drop Nate off at his place, and I'll remind Nate that taking me somewhere against my will is kidnapping."

The divider went back up without a word, but I'd seen Angus nod at me.

"What the hell?" Nate asked as I sat back in my seat. "We had a weekend planned."

"You're right," I said. "We did, but I don't really feel like spending the weekend with you would be the best thing for me right now."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I sighed. “Spending the weekend with you isn’t the healthiest thing for me because we’re clearly not on the same page. So, here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going home and going to sleep. Tomorrow, I’m going to spend some time with my mom, and you should probably think about what it is you want from this relationship. It wouldn’t hurt to figure out some specifics of what that looks like too. On Sunday, I have brunch with my mom, so if you’ve had enough time to figure things out, you can call me sometime after one or two.”

“You can’t just unilaterally decide that.”

My voice was so cold I could barely recognize it. “Fine. Don’t think about what you want or how you want to get there. Do whatever you want. But I’m going to do what I just said I would do because I can ‘just unilaterally decide’ what I want to do with my own life. If you don’t want to be a part of that, it’s your choice.”

“Ashlee...”

I held up a hand. “I’m not in the mood for your alpha male bullshit. And, honestly, I don’t want an apology either, though I doubt that’s what you were going to do. If you insist on talking, I’ll have Angus pull over right now, and I’ll walk the rest of the way to my apartment. Got it?”

He nodded, and I dropped my hand, suddenly weary in a way that had little to do with sleep. I’d heard dozens of times that little worth having came easily, whether in profession or romance, but none of those little nuggets of made this any less difficult.

I was willing to put the work in, but I wasn’t going to do it alone. If he thought it was too much effort to communicate, to be vulnerable, then I had to wonder what he thought we were doing.

When Angus pulled over in front of my building, I got out without waiting for either

man to open the door. The wind whipped my dress around my legs, and I hurried inside, grateful to have a legitimate excuse not to have heard anything Nate might've called after me. And just as grateful to not know if he hadn't said a word.

I kicked off my shoes as soon as I stepped inside my apartment, then stripped off my clothes as I walked. It didn't matter that I was leaving them on the floor. No one but me would be in here tonight. I'd pick them up in the morning.

Less than ten minutes later, I was sinking into bathwater hot enough to turn my skin pink. Not wanting the hassle of washing and drying my hair, I'd left it pinned up, needing the relaxation of a bath more than I needed to shampoo my hair. It felt like every muscle in my body was tense, and I knew I'd never get to sleep like that.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on relaxing each muscle individually. First, my jaw. Unclenching was harder than it should have been. Then my neck. Shoulders. Arms. Torso. Hands. Each time, I visualized the muscles bunching then releasing. When I finally reached my toes, I breathed out a long, steady breath and then took inventory. I wasn't as physically tense as I had been before, but the knot in my chest hadn't eased at all.

I couldn't regret the things I'd done to get me to this place because they'd led to me having a relationship with the wonderful man who'd helped bring me into existence. I couldn't even regret my time with Nate, as frustrating as it'd been, because of how much he'd opened up my world. If this was all there was and all there'd ever be, I could be thankful for it. I didn't want it to be over already, but I couldn't let things continue on if we wanted different futures. We both deserved more than that, no matter how much I wanted to throttle him right now.

Maybe it was better this way. The physical attraction would've eventually brought us together and the inevitable fall-out could have been much worse. Now, at least I felt like I'd tried to have something more.

If I would've walked away after our first night together, I would've always wondered what could have been. But we hadn't been together too long either. I wouldn't feel like I'd wasted time trying to make things work.

I hated that I was trying to convince myself that everything was playing out in the best way possible, but the alternative was worse. Picturing the way life could be if we worked things out. Seeing a future where my crazy family and his different-but-still-crazy family came together for holidays. A world where I finally had the extended family I'd always wanted.

No, better to face the most likely outcome head on.

Unfortunately, that particular brand of logic did absolutely nothing to help me get to sleep.

Thirty-Five

Nate

I spent yesterday working out in an effort to clear my head so I could figure out how to handle this thing with Ashlee, but I didn't wake up with any more clarity this morning than I'd had yesterday. I'd slept like shit both nights too, so I wasn't in the best place right now.

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I didn't understand what she expected from me. I'd never claimed to be a nice guy – just the opposite in fact. She'd known what she was getting into.

She should have understood why I didn't want to talk about what'd happened between Joshua and me, especially after Zed let it slip that my brother used to be a part of Unraveling. Well, not so much slip as announce. Which I assumed was also how he'd 'shared' that I'd slept with Calah.

Why couldn't she have just accepted that it wasn't anything she needed to know about? It was in the past, and I wasn't planning on doing it again. It had nothing to do with her and me, but she didn't seem to see it that way, and nothing I'd said had made a difference.

Not that I'd actually said anything. More like argued and barely kept from shouting. I knew better, and not just in hindsight either. I'd known it when the words were coming out of my mouth. Just like I'd known it before.

This was going to keep happening. It wasn't a guess. I knew it because it's who I was. I fucked up everything. From the outside, I looked like I had it all, and in business, I supposed I did. It was the one thing I knew how to do well, and I never fucked up.

I supposed this was where the choice came in. I could let her go, let what we had end the same way as every other relationship I'd ever had. Or I could try to figure out how to fix things.

I wanted the latter. At least, I knew that for certain.

Which meant I needed to get help from the only person I could count on. Sure, it made it awkward that Ashlee was Finley's daughter, but it wasn't like I planned to tell him details about what she and I had done to and with each other. I just needed someone who'd be honest with me but didn't hate me. Sad to say, there weren't many of those sorts of people in my life.

And if I'd fucked up too badly with Ashlee, there was one less.

"I'm assuming this visit isn't because you've missed me," Finley said as he stepped aside to let me in. "It's still pretty early in the day, but you look like you could use a drink."

"I'm half-tempted to ask for one," I said as I headed for my usual chair. "But I should probably keep my head on straight. I make a fool of myself enough sober."

"That doesn't sound like you're here for a friendly chat, or a business one either. Can I get you anything before I sit down?"

I shook my head. "I just need to pick your brain."

He took the seat across from me. "I'm going to take a guess that you want to talk about Ashlee." He smiled. "My daughter. Still feels strange to think it, let alone say it."

"Is this going to be weird?" I asked. "Me talking to you about her?"

He shook his head. "Not unless you intend to get more descriptive about certain private aspects of your relationship than you have in the past."

"I don't."

“Then I don’t think we’ll have a problem.”

I was relieved to hear it because I didn’t know who else I would’ve gone to about this. My relief must’ve shown because he chuckled.

“Sorry, kid. If you could’ve seen your face, you would’ve laughed too.”

He was probably right about that.

“Let me guess, you did something stupid. Again.”

I glared at him, but he wasn’t wrong. “I have absolutely no clue how to handle women. Women like Roma and the other ones I’ve been with over the years, those I understand. It was always simple with them. I knew what they wanted and what was expected of both of us. But with Ashlee, I don’t really know what to do. I don’t know what she wants.”

“You do realize you’re coming to a gay man to ask for advice about your girlfriend, right?” He crossed his arms. “I mean, I have a sister, but she’s more like the others than she is like Ashlee.”

“I didn’t know you had a sister.”

He waved a dismissive hand. “Not important. Tell me what’s got you so confused, though I suspect looking at it as ‘handling’ women is probably a good indication as to why you fucked up.”

He probably had a point there.

I went through the entire evening, not holding anything back. If I wanted an honest answer, I needed to be honest about everything that’d happened, even if it made me

sound like an ass. When I finished, I looked at him expectantly, ready for whatever came next.

“You could’ve dealt with that better.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I said with a sigh.

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“You tell me something first. What is it you want from her? With her?”

“I want to do the right thing,” I said immediately. “I want this to work with Ashlee.”

“That’s good,” he said. A troubled expression settled on his face, and he looked reluctant to share.

“Spill it, Finley. I came to you because I knew you wouldn’t pull any punches.”

“I don’t know Ashlee very well,” he began. “But I know you. When it comes to business, you’ve got a competitive edge that nobody can match. You revel in things that are difficult. You’re the same way with sports and working out.”

I sensed a ‘but’ coming.

“When it comes to relationships, though, it’s different. When things get hard, you move on. You run. You don’t like it when things get too messy. In your previous relationships, it worked because you’d already decided that you both didn’t want anything complicated, but you and Ashlee decided you wanted more, and with more comes complexity.”

Everything he said was true, but it didn’t make it hurt any less to realize that my friend could see that part of me. Was I truly that transparent?

“You run by ending things, by cutting people off. You have to stop, or you’re going to lose her.”

Again, no surprises, but still not easy to hear.

“Here’s the thing...not running won’t be enough,” he continued. “If you truly want this relationship, you have to fight for it. Fight for her.”

I nodded. Now we were getting somewhere. This was what I needed to know. A list of how to fix things.

“You’re probably not going to like this,” he said, “but sometimes, fighting will look a lot like surrendering. Let down your walls. Stop protecting yourself. Trust her with the truth.”

After a minute, he excused himself, saying he needed to get something to drink, but I knew it was his way of leaving me alone to process everything he’d told me.

It wouldn’t have made a difference if he’d stayed, though. I still had absolutely no clue what to do.

Thirty-Six

Ashlee

Instead of going out for Sunday afternoon brunch, I went back home. It was funny how I had a place of my own but going back to the place where I’d grown up was always a different sort of going home.

When Mom texted me to ask if I’d mind coming out because she had a cold, I hadn’t told her yet about what was going on with Nate and me, but I’d been glad of her suggestion. I needed the comfort of familiar surroundings.

I’d meant every word I’d said to Nate, and it might’ve come across as if I’d been

calm and cool, but inside, I'd been torn up. It hadn't gotten better either. I knew what I wanted, but I had no experience with something like this. I knew how to go on dates. I didn't know how to build something real.

Then again, it wasn't as if Nate's previous relationships had been anything like what I wanted either. I was willing to learn, to try. Was it too much of me to expect the same from Nate? Or was I just wrong to expect him to know what it meant to try at something real?

The one thing I did know for sure was that I couldn't do this on my own. I needed Nate to work with me instead of against me. If he couldn't – or wouldn't – do that, I had to be prepared to let him go. No matter how much it'd hurt.

The moment I'd walked into the house, Mom had asked what was wrong, and that's how I ended up sitting across from her, spilling out the whole mess before we'd even set the table. I wasn't crying, but it was a near thing, and it didn't fool my mom for a second.

She squeezed my hand as I finished and shook her head. "That was a tough call to make, sweetie, but I agree that it needed to be made. If you let these sorts of things slide because you don't want to lose him, you'll regret it in the long run."

I was tempted to ask if that was what had happened between her and Mona, but I didn't want to bring up something painful, not when it wouldn't make a difference. Mona was gone, and whatever was going on with Nate and me wouldn't change based on where Mom had gotten her insight.

"It's all right," she said quietly. "You can ask."

My head jerked up, and I wondered what, exactly, she'd seen on my face. "Mom?"

“The answer’s yes, I do know from experience. There were things that Mona and I should have talked about when we first got together, but I told myself it’d be better to wait.”

I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to hear all of this right now, but I didn’t know if I’d get another chance. I’d never wanted Mom to have to call up those painful memories, but she’d volunteered them, and I still wanted answers after all these years.

Before I could ask anything, however, someone knocked on the door. Mom started to stand, but I motioned for her to sit again.

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“I’ve got it.”

The first thing I noticed when I opened the door was that there were three people crowded together on the little stoop, two who looked to be in their seventies and another who seemed to be somewhere around my mom’s age.

“May I help you?” I prepared a polite but firm dismissal that’d cover whatever reason they had to be here.

“You must be Ashlee.” The older woman beamed at me as she spoke, her accent thick. “I’m your Granny, and this is Gramps. And of course, your Aunt Janette.”

Somehow I managed not to gape at them like an idiot. “Mom! Um, could you come here a minute?”

“Don’t stand on ceremony, honey. It’s a mite wet out here.”

Something Southern, I thought, but not the deep south. I wasn’t entirely sure why that was what my brain was choosing to focus on, but until Mom got here to explain who these people were, I would go with it.

“Mom?” Mom spoke from behind me, and I turned in time to catch my mother’s arm to steady her. All the color had drained from her face, and her eyes were wide.

“Hey there, little bee.” The man had a creaky voice with the same accent as his wife.

“Dad?”

My grandparents?

“Aren’t you going to invite us in, Bobbi, or are you too good for that?” The younger woman had the sort of expression that made me wonder if she ever smiled.

“Come in.” Mom stepped back, taking me with her. “Have a seat. Can I get anyone something to drink?”

“Sweet tea all around,” Granny answered for all three.

Granny?

My life over the past month had been strange, but this was definitely going at the top of my ‘weird shit’ list.

“Of course. Ashlee, would you mind helping me?”

I nodded dumbly and followed my mom into the kitchen, wondering how this conversation was about to go. Honestly, I wouldn’t have been entirely surprised by any explanation at this point. Body snatchers. Aliens. Clones. All of those seemed as likely as the family who’d disowned my mother for how she’d been born suddenly showing up on her front stoop.

“Did they say...who did they...what...” Mom sighed and closed her eyes, leaning against the counter as she tried to gather her thoughts.

“Are those your parents?” I pitched my voice low as I opened a cabinet to retrieve five glasses. Even if Mom and I weren’t thirsty, it seemed like a good idea to have something for us to hold.

“They are.” Mom opened her eyes, that bewildered look still on her face. “And my

little sister, Janette.”

I didn’t ask if Janette was always so unpleasant. It didn’t seem like the most important thing at the moment.

“They didn’t tell you they were coming?” I opened the fridge and pulled out the large glass pitcher of sweet tea.

Mom shook her head. “I haven’t talked to them since they told me I wasn’t welcome in the family as long as I insisted on ‘bringing that kind of shame to the family.’”

I handed her the first glass. “Any idea why they showed up here? Or how they found you?”

“None. Not either one.” Mom took a sip of her drink. The color was starting to come back to her cheeks, and she’d lost that dazed expression. “Maybe something happened to my brother. He’s not here.”

I hadn’t known she had a brother. Or a sister. She never talked about them except to say that they disowned her when she’d come out and started dating Mona her junior year of college. There’d been no birthday or Christmas presents or cards. Absolutely nothing.

Something popped into my mind. “They called me Ashlee.”

“What?” Mom looked at me.

“When I opened the door, Gra...your...” I shook my head. What the hell was I supposed to call them? “She said, ‘you must be Ashlee.’”

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Mom frowned. “I didn’t know they knew I had a kid. I didn’t bother sending them an invitation to the shower or an announcement when you were born. I assumed they’d be as close-minded as before. A baby wouldn’t fix that.”

“All right,” I said as I finished with the last glass. “That’s where we’ll start. I’ll ask how they knew about me.”

Mom nodded and followed me into the living room. My grandparents were on the couch while my aunt had taken my favorite chair. That was fine. I wasn’t planning on sitting. Too much nervous energy. I took the tray of glasses around, managing a tight smile for each stranger.

“You know, I didn’t get the chance to ask how you knew who I was.” I set the tray aside and picked up my own glass.

“It was just obvious, honey,” my grandmother said with a smile I didn’t quite trust. “You’re the spittin’ image of our Bobbi.”

I glanced at Mom. I’d never heard anyone call her Bobbi.

“I go by Roberta, Mom. And I think what Ashlee wants to know, what we both want to know, is how you knew my daughter’s name is Ashlee.”

I’d never heard my mother’s usually gentle voice come out so hard.

“We saw that picture,” Aunt Janette spoke up.

If she smiled, she and Mom would resemble each other, I realized with a start. Her hair was more auburn than a true red, and she was slender where Mom had curves, but the features were there.

“What picture?” Mom asked.

Oh. I had a feeling I knew which one.

“The one with her and her friend or whatever he is,” Janette continued. “I thought she looked a lot like you, but there wasn’t a name, so I started looking. Tennessee isn’t New York City, but we know how to use the internet.”

Tennessee explained the accent. I’d never caught it from Mom, and now I wondered how long it’d taken her to get rid of it.

“Seems my niece found herself a man.”

Maybe Janette just made bad first impressions, but I really didn’t like her.

“Janette, you hush now.” Granny – the name still spun me – took a long draught of her tea and then smiled at me. “We never knew Bobbi had a child, and once we realized she did, why, we had to come find her. We wanted to meet our grandbaby.”

“It’s not like you don’t already have grandkids,” Janette muttered.

“Yours or Chester’s?” Mom asked.

Janette glared at her and held out her left hand. A ring shone on her finger. “Larry and I’ve been married for twenty-eight years. Got four kids. Three girls and a boy.”

“You remember Larry Morrissey, don’t you, little bee?” Gramps spoke up. “Graduated

a year or two before you.”

Mom nodded. “Quiet guy. I remember.”

“Ashlee, you’re what, twenty-one?” Granny asked.

“Twenty-three.”

She nodded. “Same age as Janette’s middle girl, Yvette. Estella’s three years older; Pauline’s three younger.”

“Trenton’s sixteen,” Gramps said. “Didn’t think we were gonna get a boy after all those girls, but Larry had it in him for one at least.”

This was the most bizarre conversation I’d ever been a part of, but judging by the look on Mom’s face, it wasn’t anything new for her. What would it have been like, I wondered, growing up with this sort of uncomfortable, stilted conversation where no one said anything real?

“Chester doesn’t have any kids?” Mom asked.

Granny’s mouth flattened, and Janette scowled. It was Gramps who answered, “He went and got converted by those Jehovah’s Witnesses. Married one of ‘em and they moved to Pennsylvania. We get Christmas cards, but that’s about it.”

So, Mom wasn’t the only one of her siblings who’d turned out differently than their parents had expected. Maybe seeing my picture in the paper had prompted them to rethink how harsh they’d been. They could fix things between them and Mom, get back some of what they’d lost. I wasn’t naïve enough to think that things would be all rainbows and unicorns with a single visit, but maybe, just maybe, I could have the bigger family I’d always wanted.

Thirty-Seven

Nate

I didn't call Ashlee.

I thought about it. A lot. After I left Finley's, I went home with every intention of calling her and asking if I could see her. It felt like the sort of conversation we needed to have face-to-face. Except, when I settled in my favorite library chair and picked up my phone, I didn't call.

In my defense, she didn't call me either, but I knew that wasn't really a defense at all. She'd put the ball in my court, so to speak, and it was up to me where things went from here.

After talking to Finley, I was more certain than ever that she was worth fighting for, but I still was at a loss for how to do it. He said I'd need to be vulnerable, to trust her with the truth, but I couldn't imagine a world where any woman would be able to look past a man sleeping with his brother's girlfriend. If what I'd done didn't scream betrayal and mistrust, then I didn't know what would.

I'd never before considered myself a coward, but when Sunday slipped into Monday, and I hadn't reached out to Ashlee, I had to accept that I had abandoned my spine somewhere.

I winced when I saw the dark circles under my eyes when I shaved before work, but nothing short of makeup would do anything about them. I'd barely slept over the

weekend, and it showed. It was all I could do not to snap at anyone who got in my way. Only knowing how disappointed Ashlee would be if I bit someone's head off kept my tongue in check.

Maybe this was what Finley had meant. I'd certainly never cared before about what anyone else thought of my behavior. My desire for my business to succeed usually overrode any poor decision making in that area of my life, but everywhere else, I did as I pleased and fuck off to anyone who didn't like it.

She wasn't at her desk when I passed it on the way to my office, and I couldn't decide if I was happy about that or not. If I saw her, I'd talk to her, and while that was technically what I wanted, the thought also frightened me.

I'd gone skydiving, scuba diving, rock climbing on some fairly terrifying cliffs...but having a real conversation with a redhead a foot shorter than me scared the shit out of me.

While I was ashamed to admit that I was relieved to have yet another reprieve, I couldn't stop myself from feeling that way. Even when I been at my lowest point, I'd never been this indecisive or unsure of myself. In the past, I'd fucked up any number of ways, but I'd always just gotten right back into the mix, working on fixing whatever it was I'd broken. Why couldn't I do that with Ashlee?

Somehow, I managed to get through the morning even though I kept wondering if Ashlee was going to come talk to me, but by the time I was ready for lunch, I'd made up my mind. I would ask Ashlee to have lunch with me and tell her about my conversation with Finley, what it'd made me realize...and what had happened with my brother. If I was too afraid of losing her to tell her the truth, I'd lose her by closing myself off. At least talking to her would mean I'd tried.

I'd just sent off the last email I'd needed to respond to when someone knocked on my

door. I was already anticipating it being Ashlee when I raised my head, a greeting halfway out of my mouth when I realized the person standing in front of me wasn't Ashlee at all.

"Catherine?"

"Hi, Uncle Nate!" She beamed at me and practically bounced into my office.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" The question was out of my mouth before I realized the more important thing to ask was how she got here.

She shook her head. "I'm on spring break this week."

I stood up and walked over to the door. A quick glance around told me that no one from my family was lurking around. I turned back to see a sheepish but slightly defiant expression on her face.

"Who dropped you off?" I came back over to stand in front of her.

"Nobody," she admitted as she stared down at her feet. "I wanted to see you, but I knew Mom and Dad wouldn't bring me, so I came myself."

I closed my eyes for a moment, reminding myself that losing my temper would be the worst thing to do right now. When I opened my eyes, I found her watching me with eyes the same shade of brown as her father's.

"You came from the Bronx by yourself?"

She nodded. "It wasn't that hard. I looked up how to do it on the computer at home and memorized which lines I had to take. It was a short walk to the stations from home and to here."

I wasn't sure if it was better or worse that she'd taken the subway instead of calling a cab. On the one hand, anyone could've grabbed her or hurt her at any point along the way, and a cab driver would have most likely refused to take a passenger that young, but there was always the chance of an unscrupulous driver taking advantage of her age. A best-case scenario would be to take more money than was owed, but it wasn't too far-fetched to imagine a driver kidnapping her for all sorts of things I didn't want to even think about.

"Where do your parents think you are?"

"My friend Natalie's house."

"I see. And does Natalie know where you are?"

"No. I didn't tell her anything either."

"So, if your parents call Natalie's house, she's not going to know anything about you telling them you were with her today." I made it a statement rather than a question.

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The look of confusion on Catherine's face would've been amusing under different circumstances. I had a feeling that if I'd asked where she'd gotten the idea for her little subterfuge, she'd tell me about having seen it on some tween show where the kids were inevitably caught when the parents contacted each other, and each realized they'd been lied to. Apparently, she hadn't learned that part of the lesson.

"I wanted to hear about the Golden Words release party," she said. "But I didn't want to have to wait until you came over for dinner again because it took my whole life for you to come last time."

Not for the first time, I wondered what David and Julia had told their kids about me and why I wasn't around. Joshua was an easy one since, until recently, he'd lived on the other side of the country.

"I'm going to be around more now, I promise." I didn't say the words lightly. I'd missed too much already. I would be around as much as my family allowed it.

She gave an excited squeal and threw her arms around my waist, nearly knocking me off balance. I caught her before we both fell, awkwardly patting her back. Kids usually just eyed me warily from a distance, but Catherine clearly didn't have any issues with me.

"Can I stay here for a while and you tell me all about the party?" she asked, letting me go. "I want to hear everything. Did you talk to Golden Words? I mean, I know you've probably talked to them before, but did you talk to them at the party? What are they like? Naoko is my favorite, but I like Peach's name the best. Is it for real? They all have great names, not a boring name like Catherine."

I stared at her as she wandered around my office, looking at everything as she talked. How was anyone supposed to get a word in edgewise when she was going like that?

“Catherine. Catherine!” I raised my voice the second time I said her name, and that caught her attention. “You need to call your parents and tell them where you are.”

Her face fell.

“And then I’m going to take you home.”

“But Uncle Nate...”

I shook my head. “I love that you wanted to come talk to me, but you need to talk to your parents about that and have them decide if and when you come to see me. And never alone. You’re a smart girl, so I know you had to know how dangerous this was.”

She looked at her feet, the answer in her lack of verbal response.

“Now, let’s get your mom on the phone.”

Thirty-Eight

Ashlee

I didn’t call Nate.

Granted, I’d told him to contact me if he’d had enough time to decide what it was he wanted, which made me hopeful that he just needed more time. I clung to that hope because the alternative wasn’t something I wanted to think about.

It was fear of that alternative that followed me into work and kept reminding me to avoid him so I never had to admit that he'd decided I was too much work. That voice grew louder with each passing hour until I decided that I needed to spend my lunch finding something to distract me.

That something turned out to be me deciding that my parents needed to meet. I shot off a text to Mom, telling her my great idea, and then spent the ten minutes it took her to reply wondering if this would blow up in my face. Mom said she was okay with me having a relationship with Finley, but it was one thing to talk about it and something else entirely for it to be right there in her face.

I never should have doubted her.

That sounds like a wonderful idea! I have to admit, I'd been hoping to meet the man who gave me the most important person in my life. I'd love to host too, if that'd be all right with you. I've been watching a new cooking show, and I have a whole list of things I'd like to try. Find out if he has any dietary restrictions.

I hadn't asked Finley anything about family health history, I realized as I read the last line in my mom's text. Sure, he would've included relative things when he'd donated, but that'd been more than two decades ago. Some things had most likely changed. I made a mental note to add that to the growing list of things I was curious about.

After I finished eating my lunch, I decided I had enough time to go talk to Finley before turning my attention back to work. Mr. Hancock and Ms. Lamas had both told me it was going to be an easy day and I could be flexible with breaks and such since I'd put in extra work last week.

There'd been surprisingly little I'd needed to do to wrap things up for the release party. A lot of that, I suspected, had to do with the fact that the young women of Golden Words were all-around decent and considerate. I hadn't been in the business

long, but it'd still been long enough for me to understand how rare it was for four talented and well-mannered people to come together to form a band.

I hummed one of their songs as I made my way down the hall to Finley's office. He's stopped at my desk to say hello when he came in today – unlike his business partner.

It was definitely time to start looking elsewhere for employment, I admitted to myself. If I'd been concerned about rumors when Nate was the only one I had a personal relationship with, the thought of what people would say if it came out that Finley was my father bothered me even more.

I loved being able to talk to him whenever it didn't interfere with work, but I didn't want a job where people would assume I'd gotten it because of who I knew rather than what I could do.

I knocked on his door, praying that Nate's door stayed closed. I didn't want an awkward run-in to be the reason we finally spoke to each other. When I heard Finley call for me to come in, I breathed a sigh of relief and went inside.

"Ashlee, it's good to see you." He rose from his seat with a smile. "I wasn't expecting it to be you."

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A not-so-small part of me wondered if he'd been expecting Nate, but I didn't ask because I didn't want to know. Rather, I wanted to know but didn't want Finley to know that I wanted to know...my head was going to explode if I kept that going.

"I'm not here on business," I said, taking his outstretched hand. We didn't shake, but instead gave a brief squeeze and then released. Less formal than a handshake but not quite as intimate as a hug.

"Have a seat." He gestured to the chairs across from where he stood. They didn't look quite as comfortable as the ones in Nate's office, but even my inexperienced eye could tell they were expensive.

"I'd rather stand," I said with a smile. "I like to stretch my legs as often as I can."

"I should follow your example." He patted his stomach as if he carried extra weight there instead of what I suspected was probably a six-pack. He was forty-six but barely looked forty, and from what I could tell, it was mostly good genetics.

Personally, I was hoping that was the case, and I'd inherited that quality.

"What brought you by?" he asked, leaning against his desk instead of sitting back down again.

"I was wondering if you might like to have dinner with me...and my mom. I'd really like the two of you to meet. If that's too weird for you, it's okay." The last thing I wanted him to feel from me was pressure.

“What does your mom think about this?”

My admiration of him went up, though it didn't surprise me that he wanted to know my mom's opinion. He was just that sort of person, thinking of others first.

“She's all for it,” I said. “She volunteered to host the dinner, but I'm not sure if that was her showing support or because she wants to experiment with dishes she saw on some cooking show.” I paused, and then added, “I feel like I should apologize in advance.”

He chuckled. “I'm sure everything will be perfect, and I'd love to join the both of you.”

“Great!” I smiled hard enough to make my cheeks ache. “And Mom's usually a good cook. Sometimes, she just bites off more than she can chew when it comes to trying to prepare something elaborate.”

“Do you cook much?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Not really. I can do it, the basics at least, but I've never really enjoyed it, not like Mom.” My smile softened. “When she was having chemo, even the smells of food made her nauseous, so I'd do everything I could to keep meals bland. She hated that I was eating like that and decided that when she got better, she'd learn how to make all sorts of things we could enjoy together.”

“She sounds like a remarkable woman,” Finley said. “I look forward to meeting her.”

I gave him the address and left his office happy enough that even the sight of Nate's closed door couldn't dampen my spirits. Even better, I had a note sitting on my desk when I returned. Because I'd put in extra hours the week before and today was slow, I had only one more task that needed to be done, and once that was finished, I could

leave for the day.

The only thing that could've made it better would have been if things between Nate and me had been settled.

I pushed away that thought as soon as it formed, not wanting anything to ruin an otherwise perfect day. Re-focused, I turned my attention to the task in front of me. I made short work of it and sent it off to Mr. Hancock. While I waited for his approval or his request for changes, I tidied my desk. When his response came back with an enthusiastic thumbs up, I let him know I'd be leaving shortly. Another two thumbs up, and I figured that meant I was good to go.

When I stepped out of the elevator, I saw that Wayne wasn't busy, so I headed over to say hello. He was doing much better than he had when he'd first started, but he still wasn't quite as sure of himself as he needed to be. I hoped with some encouragement, he'd rise to the occasion and show everyone why I was supporting his being kept in this position permanently.

"Anyone giving you any trouble?" I asked.

Wayne shook his head. "Thanks for asking Chris to keep an eye on me. I haven't had to ask him to escort anyone out, but knowing that he will if I need him to has helped a lot."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. How's your sister?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but before he could, a tall, slender woman approached the desk. I stepped off to the side, deciding to wait to continue my conversation with Wayne.

"I'm here to see..."

The woman's voice trailed off as she glanced my way. Her bright green eyes glinted with something I couldn't quite place, and I almost took a step back when she came toward me. Only my immediate impression of her as a predator kept me standing my ground. I had to pretend she didn't intimidate me.

"You're Ashlee Webb," she said, holding up a finger with a beautifully manicured nail. "Nate's new..."

She waited for me to finish the sentence, and I didn't disappoint. "Girlfriend."

I intended to hold that title until I was told it no longer applied.

"I'm Calah Evenstar." She held out her hand, and I shook it, working to maintain eye contact. "I'm sure you've heard of me."

I shook my head. “Sorry, no.”

Her mouth twisted as if she’d just eaten something sour. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Nate never has liked taking responsibility for his actions. I mean, he did chase his brother to the other side of the country.”

“Joshua?”

One eyebrow went up. “I’m surprised you know his name, considering how the two of them left things between them.”

I was starting to suspect who she was, but I refused to let her have the satisfaction of knowing it. “I’ve met him, actually. Twice. He and his girlfriend moved back here a few weeks ago.”

As a child, Mom had used that clichéd parenting advice of ‘if you keep making that face, it’s going to get stuck that way.’ The way Calah kept scowling made me want to impart that same bit of sage wisdom.

“Well, it’s not surprising that neither of them reached out,” she said. “Not after everything that happened.”

I refused to give her the satisfaction of indulging her passive aggressive hints. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Wayne looking back and forth between Calah and me, a look of confusion on his face, but I refused to give in. I didn’t know much about the woman standing across from me, but I didn’t like her. Most of the time, my immediate reactions to people were accurate, Nate being a notable exception. I still

hadn't figured him out.

"I was Joshua's girlfriend ages ago." She broke first. "Back when we were at Julliard."

Another pause where I got the impression she was waiting for me to gush about how amazing that was, and another silent minute of disappointment for her.

"Anyway, Joshua and I were so serious about each other. I was expecting a ring for graduation, but we didn't get that far." She sighed a deep, dramatic sigh. "Nate seduced me. Joshua's career was taking off, and I was so afraid that he'd leave me behind, I was vulnerable, and Nate took advantage of that. He knew it would destroy Joshua and me, but he didn't care. He saw me as something he couldn't have, and decided I was a challenge."

I didn't want to believe her, but I recognized at least some truth in what she said. Nate did have a thing about getting his own way.

"I'm so glad I ran into you," she continued. "I saw your picture in the paper with him, and I just knew that I had to warn you that he can't be trusted."

I had a brief flash of *déjà vu* back to when Nate's ex, Roma, said something similar. Roma had told me to be careful about what he promised to give me. Calah wasn't saying the same thing, but it was close enough to make me wonder if I needed to be more wary. And I hated myself for thinking it.

Calah put her hand on my arm. "I wish I'd had someone give me that advice before I'd gone anywhere near Nate Lexington."

My mouth opened, ready to ask why she was here if she hated Nate so much, but I didn't get a single word out before someone else's voice interrupted.

“Enough!”

Thirty-Nine

Nate

Catherine had talked to her mom and then handed the phone to me. I'd honestly thought I'd be on the end of a tongue lashing, but I'd been surprised when Julia had thanked me for having Catherine call. She'd offered to come get her daughter, but I'd said I could take her home. I'd just needed to finish up a couple things at the office.

Now, Catherine and I were taking the elevator down to the lobby. I'd considered driving her myself but decided that I preferred to be able to talk to her without the distraction of trying to make it through New York traffic, so Angus was on his way.

At the moment, however, Catherine was absolutely silent. She'd been that way since I'd given her the signed gifts I'd gotten her at the release party. Her parents probably wouldn't be happy that it seemed like I was rewarding her behavior, but I figured it was their call to make, not mine. Besides, I'd had twelve years of spoiling my niece and nephew to make up for. I made another mental note to find out what Jacob liked.

I didn't get any further than that though because, as Catherine and I walked out of the elevator, I saw a brunette and a redhead standing together at the reception desk. Only the presence of my niece kept me from completely exploding, but as soon as I was within earshot, I heard Calah say something about how she wished someone had warned her about me, and I knew exactly what she and Ashlee had been talking about.

And I'd be damned if I let Calah fuck up one more thing in my life.

“Enough!” Both women turned to look at me, surprise written on their faces. I fought

to keep my voice low and civil. “Calah, I’ve had enough of your lying. We both know why I did what I did, and we both know why I’ve kept my mouth shut about it all these years, but I’m through with covering it up, but no way in he...” I cleared my throat, sliding a look at my niece. “No way am I going to let you keep screwing me over.”

Calah folded her arms, her eyes flicking down to Catherine and then back up to me. “Whose brat is that?”

To my surprise, before I could even say a word, Ashlee stepped between Calah and Catherine. “I think it’d be best if you left.”

The dismissive look Calah gave Ashlee had me bristling, but Ashlee didn’t even blink. “You have no authority to tell me to go.”

“But I do,” I said. “Consider this your only warning, so listen well. I’m done letting everyone believe the sh...crap you’ve been spreading. I hear a single word or see a single interview, even if it’s some ‘anonymous source’ talking about this in any way that isn’t what actually happened, I’m coming after you. Slander and libel both. I’ll take every penny you have and hire a team whose sole purpose will be to prevent you from ever having a career in music. Anywhere.”

“You can’t threaten me like that,” she hissed, jabbing at me with one of those awful fake nails she always wore. “I’ll go to the police. I’ll tell them all sorts of things—”

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“Chris,” I called to the massive man standing only a couple feet away. “Please escort Ms. Evenstar from the premises and put her on the no admittance list. I don’t want her to step foot in my lobby ever again.”

“Your lobby?” She practically screeched. “What kind of fucking power trip are you on?!”

“It’s his building,” Chris said as he cut between her and me. Not many men could tower over Calah, but he was even taller than me. “Do I need to call the cops and charge you with trespassing?”

She sputtered out a few more curses but walked away, Chris trailing behind just in case she decided to double back.

“Sorry about that,” I said to Catherine, who’d been watching the whole thing, wide-eyed. “Maybe you don’t tell your mom and dad this part, okay? They don’t like that woman very much.”

I didn’t add that it was because of that woman I’d lost my family for a decade. No, she’d been only a part of it. It had been my decision not to come completely clean. I had to own that as much as I had to own what really happened.

It was time. Past time, if I was being completely honest.

“Did you mean what you said?” Ashlee asked. “About being through lying about what happened with her and your brother?”

I met her eyes, wanting her to read the truth in mine. “I do.”

She reached out and caught my hand, squeezing it in a way that told me if we’d been somewhere less public and without a twelve-year-old watching, she would’ve kissed me in an indecent way.

“Good. I think you should start with Joshua.”

That wasn’t what I’d expected her to say. I assumed she’d want me to tell her what happened now. My reaction to her question about it had been the thing that’d set things off the other night.

“What now?”

“Take Catherine home and find out where Joshua is living,” she said, her voice gentle. “Tell him the truth and apologize for keeping it from him. At least if he’s angry at you after that, it’s for the right reasons.”

She was right. I owed Joshua the truth. How much we shared with our family after that, I would leave up to him. The only other person I’d tell was the beautiful woman in front of me. I would follow Finley’s advice and take the risk that came with letting her see the bad and good. I still had secrets, but this would make it one less.

“Will you come with me?”

She frowned. “You want me to come with you?”

I nodded. “You deserve to know the truth too. And,” I squeezed her hand, “I don’t know if I can do it on my own.”

Her face shone as she smiled. “Of course.”

Forty

Ashlee

My surprise at seeing Catherine was minor compared to what I felt when Nate confronted Calah. Neither one, however, came close to the shock of him asking me to go with him to tell his brother what'd really happened all those years ago. Of course I agreed, but only a small part of the reason was getting an answer to my questions. Mostly, I just wanted to be with him.

"Angus is here," Nate said with a jerk of his chin toward the doors. "We should probably get going before Julia and David decide that I'm kidnapping their daughter." He winked at Catherine, who giggled. "Tempting as that sounds."

My heart warmed to see him with his niece. He'd talked to her during the family dinner, but being one-on-one with a kid when your normal, everyday life never included children was different. Would it be like that with me, I wondered, when I met my cousins?

Not exactly the same, of course, because they were all adults except for Trenton, but talking with him would be a little like talking to Catherine. And Aunt Janette said that two of my cousins had kids already, so there'd be little kids during the holidays. Since I didn't have siblings, cousins and second cousins would have to do.

"Did you come to see Uncle Nate too?" Catherine asked me as we headed for the car.

"No, I work here," I said. It wasn't until that moment that something hit me. "How did you get here?"

Her cheeks turned pink, and she looked away. "I snuck out."

My eyebrows went up, and I looked at Nate, who gave me a half-grin that told me he was trying not to tell his niece that he appreciated her rule breaking.

“Ah. I hope you didn’t cut school today too.”

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She shook her head. “We’re on spring break. And I wouldn’t skip school anyway. It’s too important.”

“Do you like school?” I asked as she slid into the back of the car, putting herself between Nate and me. I was grateful. Being too close to him tended to muddle my thinking. Better that we kept our distance when a child was present.

“Most of the time,” Catherine said. “I don’t like history or art.”

“Why not?”

“I’m no good at art,” she said matter-of-factly. “I can follow directions, but it never comes out looking as good as it is in my head.”

“I can sympathize,” I said. “When I was your age, my art teacher had the class use this sculpting clay to make a basket. Should’ve been simple, right? Mine was so lopsided and uneven that anything I tried to put in it rolled or spilled right out.”

Catherine giggled again, but my attention was caught by the heated gaze Nate was sending my way. It held a lot of his usual desire, but there was something else to the warmth this time. Something...deeper. I didn’t have words for it, or maybe I did but didn’t want to say it. It felt like one of those things that, as soon as they were acknowledged, they fell apart.

“What’s your favorite subject?” The question was as much to remind Nate and me both that we weren’t alone as it was genuine curiosity.

“Music,” she answered promptly. She looked up at Nate, hero worship shining in her eyes. “I’ll bet that was your favorite subject too.”

“You’d be surprised,” Nate said wryly. “Let’s just say I didn’t apply myself to school as much as I should have, so my favorite subjects tended to be the ones where I didn’t have to work much to get good grades.”

“And what might those classes have been?” I teased. “Gym?”

He grinned at me. “Oh, I killed it in gym class...but I also killed it in math. I don’t know how many times my math grade pulled my GPA up enough to keep me from being benched during football.”

“I’ll bet history was easier back then too,” Catherine said.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing at the indignant look on Nate’s face.

“Why do you think that?” he asked.

“There was less stuff to learn,” she explained. “You didn’t have to learn all about 9/11 or the war or the first African-American president.”

She had him there. Even I’d learned about 9/11 in high school because I’d been too young to remember much of anything about it.

“Then there’s the Oklahoma City bombing and Watergate and the Cuban Missile Crisis—”

“Wait a minute,” Nate cut in as my laughter finally escaped. “How old do you think I am?”

She shrugged. “Like fifty?”

I clapped a hand over my mouth as Nate glared at me, but I could do nothing to stop the laughter from coming up. I could only muffle it.

“I’m thirty-five,” he said. “And I’m younger than your dad.”

She shrugged again. “Dad’s ancient.”

Nate’s mouth opened, then closed again, and it sent more laughs bubbling up inside me.

“You just wait.” He pointed his finger at me. “Someday, a kid’s going to think you’re a lot older than you are, and I’m going to be the one laughing.”

“How old are you?” Catherine asked, her head swiveling to me.

I could see Nate preparing to tell her that most women didn’t like that question, so I shook my head at him. I didn’t mind. “I’m twenty-three.”

She looked at Nate and then back to me. I could almost see the wheels turning. “He’s a lot older than you.”

Nate slumped back in his seat. “I get the kid a signed poster and a signed t-shirt from one of the biggest bands in the country, and how does she repay me? She calls me old.”

Now Catherine and I were both laughing, and I could feel the muscles in my stomach already protesting. As we calmed down, she turned her attention to me.

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“Do you have any nieces and nephews?”

I shook my head. “I don’t have any brothers or sisters. But I do have some cousins, and one of them is just a few years older than you.”

“You have cousins?” Nate asked. “I thought it was just you and your mom.”

“It is. I mean, it was, but then something crazy happened yesterday while I was at my mom’s for brunch. Her parents and her sister showed up. No warning, no clue that they were even considering it. I’d never met anyone from her family, and they’d completely cut off all contact with her when they disowned her.”

“Why’d they do that?” Catherine asked.

Shit. Was this something David and Julia would be okay with me talking about in front of her? I was practically a stranger to this child.

Nate took the decision out of my hands. “Ashlee’s mom is a lesbian.”

I shot him a grateful look. The last thing I wanted to do when trying to make a good impression on his family was step on anyone’s toes.

“Oh, okay.” Catherine frowned, confusion on her face.

I really hoped we weren’t going to have to explain what that meant. I should’ve just told Nate I’d tell him later and avoided this altogether.

“Why would someone stop talking to their family because of that?” she asked. “Miss Barry, my teacher last year, is a lesbian. She brought her girlfriend to the school play. They’re both really nice.”

If I’d known her better, I would’ve hugged her. “Some people get scared or angry when it comes to people who are different.”

“Well, that’s just stupid,” Catherine said, shaking her head. “What fun is it if everyone’s the same all the time?”

“I completely agree,” I said with a grin. At least it looked like I didn’t need to worry about Nate’s family freaking out when they met my mom. If, I amended, my smile fading as I remembered that he and I still had things to work out if we had a future together.

“But they’re okay with her now?” Nate asked, bringing my attention back to the story I was telling.

“It seems that way,” I said. “It didn’t really come up in conversation. I think it took us until an hour after they left to process the fact that they’d actually been there in the first place.”

“They’re not from around here, are they?”

“No, they’re from Tennessee. They flew in Saturday and are spending some time in the city. They said they happened to see a picture of me online, and it made them realize that they wanted to get to know me.”

“That’s great.” Nate’s tone was sincere, but I caught a flicker of concern.

I completely understood it. As much as I hoped their intentions were good, I couldn’t

quite shake all of my doubts. I knew Mom had them too, but I got the impression that she didn't want to bring anything up that could hurt my chances of having a relationship with my extended family.

Once I better understood how things would go with Nate, maybe I'd talk to him about all the new things I had to be worried about. And maybe he could distract me for a little while.

"Do you have a dad?" Catherine asked suddenly.

Nate started coughing, which made me laugh, and Catherine just looked back and forth between the two of us, a bewildered expression on her face. Nate recovered first, but the pleading look he gave me prompted me to rescue him from having to figure out how to explain that to his twelve-year-old niece.

I kept it simple. "I do. His name's Finley, but I didn't grow up with him. In fact, I just met him recently."

"Did your mom do the thing where a doctor helped her get pregnant? I can't remember what it's called."

Her sex ed class in school must've been a hell of a lot more thorough than mine had been. I'd gotten myself into a bit of an embarrassing situation when, during my class, I'd asked the teacher if we were going to learn about ways to get pregnant without having sex. Her reply had been so flustered that it'd taken her a minute to realize that my question hadn't come from naivety but from my mom being very honest about how I'd come to be.

"IVF," I answered. "Yes, that's what she did."

"I thought so. If she doesn't like boys, that makes sense."

I wished everyone who talked to me about my family was this accepting. I smiled at her. “Actually, my mom and my dad are going to meet for the first time this coming Friday.”

“They are?” Nate asked.

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I nodded. “My mom’s making dinner for Finley and me on Friday evening.” I wanted to invite him, but I held back, reminding myself that he and I still needed to have a talk about where things stood with us. Hopefully, we’d be able to have it before the night was over, and we could put all this stuff behind us and move on with our lives.

Forty-One

Nate

When David and Julia had first gotten married, the whole family had helped them move into an apartment close to the family hardware store. Even though Julia had given me a different address, I’d still half-expected to be pulling up in front of the same building when I dropped Catherine off. Instead, I found myself in front of a brick two-story with a porch.

I’d barely made it around the car before the front door opened and both David and Julia hurried down the front steps. I caught a glimpse of Jacob in the window and waved at him. He waved back but didn’t come out. I wondered if his parents had told him to stay or he’d decided it’d be safer for him to stay inside while his sister got in trouble.

Julia gave Catherine a quick hug, relief written all over her face. I could only imagine what my sister-in-law had felt when she’d realized what her daughter had done. I’d practically had a panic attack after the fact when I’d thought of all the things that could’ve happened to a young girl traveling across the city alone, and she wasn’t even my kid.

To my surprise, though, it was Julia who, after stepping back from the embrace, said, “We’re glad you’re okay. You’re grounded.”

Catherine turned to David, whose face had settled into a stern expression that resembled the way Dad had looked at me most of my childhood. The words, however, were quite different, both in substance and tone.

“You heard your mother. It’s two weeks for this stunt, but if you argue, it’ll be more. And you’re lucky we don’t take that stuff your uncle got for you as an extra punishment. Now, go get cleaned up for dinner.”

Shoulders slumped in defeat, Catherine headed for the stairs. Just before she went inside, she glanced over her shoulder and shot me a smile I recognized all too well.

Shit.

I felt the sudden need to apologize to David for his daughter inheriting some of my personality. I only hoped it wasn’t too much. The fact that she applied herself to her schoolwork was a good sign at least.

“Yeah, the first time she smiled that way after she got in trouble for doing something she shouldn’t have done, I was tempted to show up at your office with a paternity test.”

I stared at David as Julia smacked his arm. I hadn’t heard my brother make a joke in...honestly, I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard him make a joke. Or maybe I just hadn’t been paying attention. I was only now realizing just how selfish I’d been over the years. Even things I’d done with what I’d told myself had been the best of intentions had been rooted in selfishness. How much of what I’d thought had been my family shutting me out had actually been me pushing them away?

“Thanks for bringing her home,” Julia said, surprising me with a hug. “I’m sorry she interrupted you at work.”

As she stepped back to David’s side, I ran my hand over my hair. “It was nothing. I was just glad she was safe. I still have no idea how she got past the lobby to an elevator.”

“Um,” Ashlee cleared her throat, “I might’ve gotten an apology text from our new receptionist saying that he had no idea she wasn’t supposed to be there. She told him you were expecting her.”

I sighed. “I can’t even be mad at him for it. If he hadn’t let her through, who knows where she might’ve ended up.”

“I don’t even want to think about that,” Julia said, her face pale. “She knows better too. It’s not like we haven’t warned her about how dangerous it is to be out by herself at her age.”

“She’s a smart kid, and that’s the problem,” David said. “Thinks she knows better than all the adults in her life.”

Yet another way she was like me, but he didn’t point it out this time. Still, his gaze met mine for a second, and I knew he was thinking it.

“I’m grateful you were there for her,” Julia said. “And then bringing her all the way out here, that was just above and beyond. We could’ve come to get her.”

I couldn’t have asked for a more perfect opening. “Actually, I do have some ulterior motive for bringing her home.” I regretted my word choice as I saw David’s face harden. “Well, not exactly. I was on my way to the car, and Ashlee pointed out that this would be a good way for me to find out where Joshua’s staying.”

“Why do you want to know that?” David asked, folding his arms. “I know we all got along at dinner, but are you sure visiting him is the best idea?”

“I want to apologize to him,” I said. It was true, to an extent, since I intended to apologize for not telling him the truth from the start. I didn’t want to get into all of it, though, not before I talked to Joshua. He deserved to hear it before anyone else. Even Ashlee.

I saw a hint of suspicion in David’s eyes, but I really couldn’t blame him. I probably wouldn’t have believed me either if the situation was reversed.

“Joshua’s staying with Trissa and her roommate until they decide what their living arrangements are going to be,” Julia offered. “They haven’t been together long, and they’re not sure if they want to get a place together or if she’ll keep living with her friend and he’ll get a place of his own.”

That was far more information than I’d asked for, and I was beyond surprised that Julia had offered it.

“Do you happen to have the address?” I was pushing my luck asking, but my only other option was to call Joshua and ask him directly if I could come over. I wasn’t confident enough in how well things had gone at dinner to think he’d want to see me again.

Before David could weigh in on whether or not I should have the address, Julia rattled it off. I couldn’t mask my surprise.

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“Tribeca?” If I had listed off the wealthiest places around the city, that was in the top three. “How did he manage that? I mean, I know he was doing well for himself in L.A., but that’s...pricey.”

“It’s not his,” Julia said. “Trissa’s roommate, Bevy, comes from money. I guess when her parents talked her into moving back here, Bevy asked Trissa to come too. And Trissa asked Joshua...”

“Julia.” David touched his wife’s arm. “Dinner’s going to get cold if we stand out here too much longer.”

“That’s our cue,” I said to Ashlee. “Thank you for the information.”

Julia smiled. “Thank you for taking care of our daughter.”

As Ashlee and I turned back toward the car, I realized that Julia had talked to me more now than she ever had in all the years I’d known her. It seemed I had an ally I hadn’t had before today.

I gave Angus the address, not realizing until then that David hadn’t made a snide remark about the fact that I hadn’t been the one driving. Between that and the joke he’d made, I wondered if he was softening toward me too.

Ashlee took my hand and pulled my arm around her shoulders. Leaning in, she wrapped her arms around my torso and rested her head on my chest. This could have felt sexual, and it would’ve been easy to slide into that role, but I didn’t take it there. I wanted her, but I wanted what we had to be real more. I now understood that real

meant waiting until I fixed things with Joshua and until Ashlee knew the truth too. Then I'd make sure she knew that I was all in.

Still, I let myself enjoy the touch, even as platonic as it was.

"Are you sure you want me to go with you?" Ashlee said. "I don't want to infringe on...family business."

I kissed her forehead. "I need you there."

I didn't offer an explanation because I wasn't entirely sure if I had one. Or, rather, I didn't have one I wanted to share at the moment. I still had too much twisted up about her for me to be able to verbalize exactly what was going on with me and her.

She must've been thinking along the same lines as me because she didn't ask me to explain. Though I supposed it also could've been her not trusting what the answer would be. That thought made me uncomfortable, but it would have to wait. At least I knew Ashlee well enough to know that she understood why I wanted to talk to Joshua first.

We didn't talk as we inched through New York, moving from the Bronx to Tribeca, and I was grateful for the silence, but only because I had her next to me. She grounded me, kept my thoughts from spiraling into all the ways this could go wrong. For the first time in days, my mind was blissfully blank.

When Angus pulled up in front of the building where my brother was currently staying, I let out a low whistle. His girlfriend had a friend with serious money. Probably old money.

I told Angus to find a place to park and that I'd call him when I was ready to go. Ashlee took my hand as I helped her from the back of the car. As we walked over to

the doorman, I pulled her tight to my side but didn't release her hand. I gave our names to the middle-aged gentleman at the door and wondered if Joshua would hear my name and tell me to go away.

I didn't have the chance to find out since the doorman recognized my name for some reason or another and let us inside. As Ashlee and I made our way to the elevator, I wondered if he knew me because of who I was, or because Joshua had guessed I'd stop by. Guessed...or maybe hoped?

Whatever the reason, Joshua hadn't known I was coming right now because, when I knocked on the door, I didn't recognize the woman who answered. A little taller than Ashlee, with short dark blonde hair and pewter gray eyes, this woman had the look of someone who was accustomed to people listening to her.

The roommate, I assumed.

"Who are you?" The question was curious, not snotty.

"Nate Lexington," I said, holding out my free hand. "I was hoping to speak to my brother."

"Right." She shook my hand, then stepped aside, motioning for Ashlee and me to come inside. "I'm Bevy, Trissa's roommate." She pointed at me. "You own Manhattan Records, right? I've been trying to convince my dad that we need a couple Golden Words songs for a new project he's working on. I love the man, but he can sometimes need help with what's current in pop culture."

Something clicked into place, and I realized who her parents were. TV producer Dennis Kelly and socialite Francie Kelly. Damn. That was some serious clout right there.

“Call my office and set it up,” I said.

She grinned at me. “This way.”

The short corridor opened up into a large main room that I was sure was spectacularly designed, but Joshua was sitting on the couch next to Trissa and seeing him made me realize that I was actually going to do this.

“Hey, I’m going out for a bit,” Bevy said to Trissa. “Meeting that guy I told you about.”

“Check in when you get home,” Trissa said. “Be safe.”

“Nice to meet you.” Bevy smiled at Ashlee and me, then headed back the way we’d come.

“I wasn’t expecting you,” Joshua said slowly. He stood and put his hands in his pockets, making me wonder if he was reminding himself not to hit me. Had he held back at dinner only because our family had been there? I reminded myself that he’d reached out first.

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“I need to talk to you about what happened with Calah.”

He tensed, and I could see him getting ready to tell me to leave, but Trissa reached out and put a hand on his arm.

“Listen to him,” she said gently. “Hear him out.”

He nodded mutely and gestured to the loveseat next to the couch. Ashlee sat next to me, her hand solid in mine, anchoring me. When Joshua sat, Trissa put her arms around his, and I realized she was doing the same thing for him. Neither of us was comfortable with the prospect of the conversation we were about to have, but the women in our lives would keep us steady while we did it.

“I’m not a saint,” I began, “and I won’t say that I haven’t done some pretty shitty stuff, but what happened with Calah...it wasn’t quite as cut-and-dry as it seemed.”

He didn’t curse at me or demand I leave, so I was going to count that as proof I should continue.

“While you were at Julliard, learning how to be a kickass musician, I was wading through all of the shit that comes with the business side of the music industry.” What had happened with Calah had been one damn stupid decision, but my reason for doing it came from something other than sex. “I saw all the ways the industry chewed people up and spit them out. I didn’t want that to happen to you.”

He didn’t try to hide his disbelief, but he didn’t interrupt, so I kept going.

“The day after you and the rest of the band met with me to discuss your demo, Calah approached me as I was leaving the building. She asked if she could get the ‘family treatment’ since you two were dating. When I told her I didn’t know what that meant, she said that she wanted to cut a demo too. I told her she had to make an appointment like anyone else.”

I could still hear her voice in my head as she made her counteroffer.

“She asked if there was anything she could do to move things forward more quickly. I pretended I didn’t know what she meant, and then she grabbed my dick, right there in the lobby, and said that she would exchange sex for a record deal.” She’d actually been much cruder than that. “I asked what you would think about that, and she said that you understood how the industry worked.” I paused, unsure if I wanted to tell him all of what Calah had said. He was over her, but it’d still hurt.

That was what had gotten me into trouble in the first place, I reminded myself. Telling him what I thought he should know because I was trying to protect him.

Ashlee squeezed my hand, and the reminder that she was there helped me get through the rest.

“She said that you understood it because the two of you were together to help advance each other’s careers. That she’d always wanted you to introduce her to me so she could get on the Manhattan Records label. She said she fucked you to get to me and she’d fuck me to get famous.”

Joshua’s jaw clenched, and I saw Trissa tighten her grip on him. I was almost there.

“I told her that if she had sex with me, I’d let her cut a demo. I honestly wasn’t sure that she’d follow through with it, but I wanted her to do something that would break the two of you up. I thought I was protecting you.”

“By fucking her.” His voice was flat. “You couldn’t have just told me what she’d said?”

“I don’t have an excuse for how I did it,” I said. “I was young and an asshole. I figured if I could have sex and break you guys up, why not do it that way.”

He was quiet for a minute, then reluctantly admitted, “I probably wouldn’t have believed you anyway. It wasn’t like we’d had the best relationship before that happened.”

“And now?” I asked.

He finally looked me in the eye. “I think we can work through it.”

Forty-Two

Ashlee

Nate’s confession wasn’t what I’d expected it to be, if I was being completely honest with myself. He exercised incredible self-control in the bedroom, but as long as a woman was willing, he didn’t seem to feel the need to restrain himself much. Our own relationship was proof of that.

The moment I’d told him I wanted him, he hadn’t tried to talk me out of it. I’d assumed something similar had happened with Calah. His brother’s girlfriend threw herself at him, and he couldn’t help himself.

What did it say about me that I had such a low opinion of him that I was surprised that he took responsibility for his actions? And then there was his reasoning behind it. A bit of immaturity, and as he’d said, being an asshole, but he hadn’t done it with the intention of keeping it from Joshua, wanting to hurt his brother, or even not caring

about who Calah was.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Nate said, twisting a stray lock of my hair around his finger. “Are you sure you want to come home with me? I’ll understand if you need to process everything before—”

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out. At the confusion on his face, I clarified, “I should have trusted that you’d tell me about things in your own time and that if you were keeping anything from me, I didn’t need to know it yet.”

He bent his head and brushed his lips across mine once, twice. “I’m sorry I got so defensive about you asking me about it. Even if I just hadn’t been ready to talk about it, I should have handled it better. You were right to tell me that we both needed to think about things.”

My stomach clenched, and not in a good way. I told myself that he wouldn’t have asked me along tonight if he’d planned on ending our relationship. If anything, since he’d confessed to Joshua in front of me, he seemed more relaxed.

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“We always seem to get interrupted when we need to talk.” His thumb traced my cheekbone. “Maybe I should tell Angus not to let us out until we’ve said what we needed to say.”

The smile dancing around his lips told me he was half-joking. “Being locked in a car with you for the unforeseeable future doesn’t sound too bad to me.”

His smile settled, curving his mouth in a way that made me want to kiss him. Then again, there weren’t too many times I didn’t want to kiss him.

“You asked me to think about what I wanted from this relationship,” he said. “I did, and I talked to Finley because I needed someone to tell me to get my head out of my ass.”

“And did he?”

“More or less.” Nate’s expression sobered. “I want this to be something, Ashlee. Not like anything I’ve had before. Every relationship I’ve been in, I’ve always had one eye on the door, waiting to get bored, waiting for something better. I don’t feel that with you. When I call you my girlfriend, I want you to know that, for the first time in my life, I mean it how most people mean it. I’m looking toward a future.”

A thrill went through me, but I didn’t interrupt him. We both needed to know what the other was thinking, or this would never work. No interruptions until we’d said it all. I didn’t really care how fast or slow we took things – as clearly evidenced by the fact of how quickly we’d slept together – as long as we were moving forward.

“I don’t know what that’s going to look like each step of the way, but this is more real than anything I’ve ever had, and I will try my damndest not to lose it.”

Nothing I could say would be able to compare to that, so I didn’t even try. I kissed him this time, my mouth covering his as I attempted to show him how his words made me feel. The rest of the ride back to his place was heat and touch and the sorts of embarrassing noises that would have mortified me if I’d actually been capable of thinking about anything other than how much I never wanted this to stop.

I gave Angus a sheepish wave when he opened the door for us, and he winked as we passed. I pressed my face against Nate’s arm, certain that evidence of our activities was written all over my face for all the world to see. Not that we’d actually been doing much to be embarrassed about, especially not when I knew something far less innocent was waiting for me in Nate’s apartment.

He’d whispered things to me in the car, the words low murmurs of promises too licentious, too wicked for good girls, though not too much for me to hold tight, hoping for each and every one of them. He’d given me enough fodder for years to come, and I was more than eager to continue with our lessons.

Once inside his place, he sent me to his bedroom with instructions. I was to undress and stand in front of the full-length mirror, my hands clasped behind me, back to the door. I wasn’t there for long when he joined me, stripping off his clothes so that he was completely naked by the time he was standing behind me, his cock brushing against my back.

“Have you ever watched yourself come?” He pressed his lips against the side of my neck. “Recorded yourself masturbating? Done it in front of a mirror?”

I shook my head, my eyes glued to his reflection. His hands slid over my sides, then up my ribcage to cup my breasts, thumbs moving back and forth across my nipples

until they were tight little bullets, desperate for attention. My breathing came faster as heat coiled in my belly, my body eager for the release he'd bring me. When he dropped his hands, I made a sound of protest, half-expecting him to punish me for it...and more than half wanting him to do exactly that.

He didn't say anything, though, as he went to the plush chair in the corner and dragged it until it was directly behind me. He sat down and reached out to grasp my hips, turning me toward him. I smiled as he pulled me onto his lap, my knees straddling his legs, but when he kept me from getting close enough to get him inside, I frowned.

"Not yet," he said with a chiding smile. "I just wanted to get your tits closer to my mouth."

I groaned as his lips closed around my nipple. I put my hands on his shoulders for balance, but I needn't have worried about that. His hands moved to my back, holding me in place as he sucked and licked until I was writhing in his lap, practically ready to come right then and there. Then, suddenly, a bright flash of pain and my eyes shot open. He grinned up at me, his teeth still lightly holding my nipple.

"Again, please, Mr. Lexington."

His eyes darkened, and he turned to the other one, repeating every toe-curling moment. My head fell back, and I cursed, nails digging into his shoulders until a hiss of pain snapped me back to attention. I stared at his skin, horrified that I'd broken through in a couple places.

I started to apologize, but he put a finger on my lips.

"Do you have any idea how fucking hot that is?"

“I made you bleed.”

He bit the side of my breast, just enough to hurt but not enough to cause any damage. “And every time I feel them, I’ll remember exactly what you looked like when you did it. I’ll probably have to hide behind my desk for most of the next couple days to avoid some awkward conversations about why I’m hard.”

I had to admit, some primal part of me liked the fact that I’d marked him as mine, even if no one else would see the wounds.

“Now, stand up.”

I was confused but did as he instructed. He opened a condom wrapper and rolled it on, his fist sliding down the thick shaft and then back up again. I had the sudden urge to tell him that we didn’t need anything between us, but I kept the thought to myself. I trusted that he wasn’t having sex with anyone else, and I was fairly sure I’d been on the pill long enough now for it to be effective, but I knew we weren’t at that trust level yet.

“Turn around.”

I did, still not understanding until I remembered we were right in front of the mirror. His fingers curled over my hips, and he guided me back until I was almost sitting on his lap. When he draped my legs on either side of his knees and spread me open, I realized what he was doing.

Fuck.

“Look at how wet you are,” he said as he reached around to slide his finger inside me. “Now, pay attention. I don’t want you to miss a second of what’s coming. I want you to see my cock disappearing into this tight, hot cunt. I want you to see your swollen

clit as it throbs, begging for friction. I want you to watch me fuck you until you come.”

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I shivered, fighting the urge to close my eyes. He hadn't given me an explicit instruction against closing them, but I intuitively knew there'd be some sort of punishment if I didn't watch the entire time.

At some point, I would probably find out what that was, and I couldn't say that I was entirely opposed to whatever it was he'd do, but for now, I was mesmerized by the sight of him guiding his cock inside me. It was one thing to feel him stretching me, to know how impossibly full I felt, and something else entirely to see our bodies come together in a way that shouldn't have been possible.

The muscles in my legs trembled as I settled on him, and I wondered if I'd even be able to ride him in this position. A moment later, my question was answered when he put an arm around my waist and pulled me back until I was resting on his chest.

"I'll do the work." His lips brushed against my ear as he spoke. "You just enjoy the view."

His hips rocked up and down with shallow strokes that never left me empty, but instead showed me each time just how perfectly we fit together. When his fingers parted my folds to reveal my clit, I found myself wondering how the view would change if he'd chosen to take my ass this way. A rush of warmth went through me at the thought, and I made a mental note to ask sometime in the future. Right now...

"Fuck," he groaned as I tightened around him. "Didn't I say I'd do the work?"

I squeezed him again, then yelped as his fingers slapped down on my clit hard enough to hurt. The rush that followed, however, was all white-hot bliss. My eyelids started

to drop, but another smack jolted them open.

“How close are you, le soleil?”

“Close.”

“What do you need me to do for you to come?”

My brain scrambled for anything close to a coherent sentence while my body tried to tell me all the different ways Nate could get me over the edge.

“Where do you want my hands?”

“Clit.” I managed one word, then a gasp before breathing out a second word.

“Nipple.”

I hoped to hell he knew what I wanted him to do to them because I had no clue. A sharp pinch for one and quick, brisk friction on the other, and then I was watching myself orgasm.

My limbs went rigid, my hips jerking even as my fingers tried to find something to grab, something to tear and rip if only to find some outlet for the nearly overwhelming pleasure coursing through me. Nate’s arm tensed around me, and my eyes locked with his in the mirror. Seeing myself climax was amazing, but it would be this moment I carried with me. The moment his walls began to crumble.

Forty-Three

Nate

Finley had been right. Telling Ashlee the truth about what’d happened between Calah

and me had helped our relationship rather than hurt it. Trusting that she wouldn't see that part of me and reject me hadn't been easy, but it'd definitely been worth it. We still had a lot to learn about each other, but crossing this hurdle made me hopeful about what was to come.

That, combined with the relief I felt now that Joshua knew the truth too, was why I was whistling as I rode the elevator down to the lobby to meet Ashlee. She'd asked me to come to the dinner at her mom's where Roberta and Finley would meet for the first time, and since she'd wanted to go straight from work, we'd agreed that meeting downstairs would be enough removed from business that it wouldn't cross any personal / professional boundaries. If she had a job working in one of the other companies in this building, we could've met like this without raising any eyebrows.

"You're in a cheery mood," she said as I leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"Is that a good or bad thing?" I asked, letting my gaze wander over her as if I hadn't already seen her a couple of times today. She wore a nice pair of dress slacks that wouldn't be too fancy for dinner and a shirt that accentuated her curves without being form-fitting.

"Good," she said, smiling. "That's the kind of positive note I want to start the evening with."

Pleased that I could make her happy simply by being happy myself, I reached for her hand as we headed to the car. I'd driven today, so I could drive us to Roberta's and not need Angus to be on call. It was also an absolutely beautiful day for a drive. April had finally given up trying to be winter and was embracing spring in full force. Normally, that meant rain, but today we had sun.

"Did you talk to Finley today?" she asked as she checked her phone for what was probably the hundredth time. "I didn't see him come in."

“He worked from home,” I said. “He wanted to make sure that he didn’t get caught by someone when he was trying to leave and end up being late to dinner.”

“That’s good,” she nodded absently, scowling at her phone.

“Your mom blowing up your phone with questions?”

“She hasn’t sent me a single text today.” Ashlee sighed and dropped her phone back into her purse. “I know that means she probably has everything under control, but is it too much to ask for a ‘hey, I’m alive and the house hasn’t burnt down’ text so I’m not constantly worrying that I’ve missed a message or a call?”

“I’m guessing that means you’re stressing out about this more than your mom.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Less than a second after she said it, she shook her head. “Sorry. I’m a little wired right now.”

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She didn't have to explain why. When she'd met Finley and then again when she'd told him who she was, she'd feared rejection, but now that she was building a relationship with him, she was terrified that he and Roberta were going to hate each other and she'd have to choose between them.

Considering what she'd told me about how Roberta's ex had just walked away from the family without a second look, it made sense that Ashlee would be worried about that. I didn't try to tell her any of that, though. She didn't need me to mansplain what she was feeling. She needed to know that she had my support, whenever, wherever, and however she needed it.

I reached over and took her hand, giving it a firm squeeze. No matter what she needed, I'd take care of her. The new kind of protectiveness was foreign to me. It was more than possessiveness born of control. She was mine beyond the physical.

This wasn't the time or place to go into that, though. Once I wrapped my own head around it, I'd talk to her.

"It was nice of your mom to volunteer to make dinner for all of us," I said. "Does she enjoy cooking?"

"She does, and she's usually really good at it. I'm just hoping she isn't going to try anything too crazy. She has a bad habit of seeing something on a cooking show and thinking she can pull it off perfectly the first time." Ashlee's smile indicated this was more of a mark of amusement than it was annoyance. "Once, when I was fifteen, she got this idea to make a vegan lasagna. It's fine for people who eat that way, but neither one of us is vegan, so I have no idea why she thought that was a good idea."

“It didn’t go well, I take it?”

She shook her head. “It did not.” She chuckled. “Burnt it to a crisp. The smoke in the kitchen was so thick we had to open all the windows and leave for two hours.”

I laughed with her, and then said, “Well, if there’s a repeat, I’ll make a couple calls, and we can move the dinner to my place.”

She gave me a sideways glance. “Do you lock your playroom when you have people over for dinner? I imagine you’d have to, or things could get really embarrassing. That’d definitely make for interesting dinner conversation.”

I agreed, and we continued with general small talk the rest of the way to Roberta’s place. It seemed to help her relax, or maybe that was just my opinion. Either way, she was smiling when we entered the house.

Ashlee went to greet her mother with a hug while I looked around at the home my girlfriend had grown up in.

To a lot of the people outside of the city, there wasn’t much difference between Staten Island and the Bronx, but natives understood the nuances between each of the boroughs. It was less this difference than it was the difference between our families that had me wondering what path life would’ve taken if our positions were switched.

“I’ve got it all under control, Ash,” Roberta assured her daughter. “I’m always glad to spend more time with you, but it doesn’t need to be in the kitchen. Dinner’s in the oven, and everything else is set.”

“And would that dinner happen to be?” Ashlee asked cautiously. “Nothing...imaginative, I hope.”

Roberta looked at me over Ashlee's shoulder. "I don't even want to know what sorts of stories my daughter has been telling you about my cooking."

"Vegan lasagna, Mom," Ashlee answered. "Vegan. Lasagna. I warned you back then that if it went as bad as I thought it was going to be, I reserved the right to mock you about it for the rest of our lives."

"That you did," she said with a smile. "Tonight, I kept it simple. Baked chicken and baked potatoes, a few rolls. Salad in the fridge. Pie for dessert. Does that meet with your approval, Dinner Nazi?"

Ashlee laughed and walked back over to me. "I hear you. I'll stay away from the kitchen."

"Why don't you show that young man of yours around the house where you grew up?" Roberta winked at me. "Nice to see you again, Nate."

"Ms. Webb."

"I think you can call me Roberta."

I smiled. "Roberta, then."

"Come on." Ashlee grabbed my hand and tugged me toward the stairs. "I want to show you my bedroom."

I could've thought she was just making a general statement about where she was taking me first if it wasn't for the way she swung her hips as she led me up the stairs. I kept my gaze glued to that firm ass of hers and tried to convince myself that it would be a bad idea to fuck my girlfriend on her childhood bed.

The first room on the right was hers, and it looked exactly the way I would've pictured it. Neat and clean with mismatched furniture that reminded me of the way all of the rooms in my childhood home had been put together. Hand-me-downs and thrift store finds, most of them, but all looking well-cared for.

Her mirror was covered with pictures, and I crossed to her dresser to take a look. Most of them were mother-daughter, but a couple had been trimmed, as if someone else had been in them. I assumed that would have been the woman who'd left. A few pictures had people her own age, friends, I assumed, but I didn't see any recent ones.

Her arms wrapped around my waist from behind, her clasped hands on the waist of my pants. My heart gave a funny thump as she rested her cheek on my back.

“Tell me what you need.”

“This.” Her embrace tightened. “Just this for right now. Maybe more later.”

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I liked the sound of that. “Just say the word.”

“Orgasms?” She laughed, and I enjoyed the feel of it as much as I did the sound. “Is that like the opposite of a safe word? I just say orgasms, and you give them to me. I like that idea.”

It was my turn to laugh. I couldn’t say I disliked the idea either. At some point, we’d have to try things that way.

Forty-Four

Ashlee

All my anxiety, it seemed, had been for nothing. Mom’s meal was perfect, as per usual. Finley arrived five minutes early, and with both flowers and a bottle of wine. The first minute or so was awkward, but easy humor proved a good way to diffuse things, and both Mom and Finley were good for that.

Now that I thought about it, I was starting to feel as if I’d been cheated out of a sense of humor since both of my parents seemed to have it. And it wasn’t the only thing they had in common, apparently.

“That was a hell of a night,” Mom said with a shake of her head. “Dozens of us arrested.”

“It was the first time for me,” Finley said with a smile. “I usually kept to myself. I wasn’t in the closet, but I wasn’t open about who I was either. That night though, the

guy I was dating, he dragged me out, and after a couple drinks, it looked like a good idea.”

“We were probably in cells across from each other.”

Nate leaned over, his mouth against my ear, “If they start singing jailhouse songs, make a break for it. I’ll provide a distraction.”

I laughed, almost as much at the sheer joy of the evening as his comment itself.

“I must admit, it’s nice to have someone who gets how it was for us just twenty, thirty years ago.” Finley gestured to Nate. “This one here, someone thinks he and I are fuck buddies, and he just laughs about it. He doesn’t get how recent it is that he could do that without being afraid of violence.”

“You know, sometimes I forget just how much older you are than me,” Nate joked.

“Well, I have recently become a father.”

Mom reached over to set her hand on Finley’s. “I can’t tell you how pleased I was to discover that the man who helped me have my daughter was a truly good man.”

“You raised an amazing woman.” Finley’s smile softened. “I’m privileged to know her.”

None of this seemed real. Like it was all too good. As shitty as some parts of my life had been, I tried not to be too cynical, but I wouldn’t have dared to hope that things would go this well. Now, I felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for these two to find something that ended this comradery.

And then it happened.

Without a knock, the front door opened, and three people walked in, laughing and talking as they sauntered into the living room. My grandparents stopped talking when they saw us all sitting around the table, but Aunt Janette kept going, caught up in her story.

“...and that’s when I told her that I didn’t care that she’d gone to chef school. If she thought she could show up at the church potluck with cheesy potatoes when I’d been bringing them for twenty-five years, she was going to find those potatoes and her fancy little container at the bottom of the trashcan. She backed down in a hurry, I’ll tell you.” She laughed, a raucous bark of a sound that effectively silenced everything else in the room. After a beat, she lifted an eyebrow. “What’s all this?”

“Dinner,” I said stiffly. “We didn’t know you were coming or we would’ve made more.”

I wasn’t sure that was entirely true, but I wasn’t going to rock the boat. Not when things were going well.

“We hadn’t realized you’d be having guests over this week,” Granny said, her lips smiling but her eyes cold.

I swallowed a smartass response about us not realizing we had to plan our lives around a visit we hadn’t known about in the first place. I really wanted Mom to be able to reconcile with her family, and if my keeping silent during some passive-aggressive bullshit helped, I’d gladly do it, but they were beginning to piss me off with the way they talked to Mom.

Nate stood up and walked over to my grandparents, holding out his hand to Gramps first. “Good evening. I’m Nate Lex—”

“We know who you are,” Granny interrupted, a glint coming into her eyes. “We saw

your picture online, you and our dear little Ashlee.”

Gramps clasped Nate’s hand and gave him a firm handshake, a stern sort of look on his face as if he was taking Nate’s measure for some reason. I sincerely hoped Gramps didn’t think he had any say in who I dated. I was willing to give my family the chance to prove they’d changed since Mom had last seen them but playing the protective grandparents would be a shade too far at present.

“You’re even more handsome in real life.” Granny held out her hand, and Nate shook it. Even though she wasn’t squeezing his hand, she still looked like she was sizing him up.

“Thank you.” Nate gave her one of his polite smiles. He turned to Aunt Janette and greeted her as well. She didn’t even bother trying to hide the way she was ogling him, and I caught a glimpse of barely disguised disgust on his face. “Did your husband come for a visit as well?”

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How he managed to make the question so innocent sounding when he already knew the answer to that question, I didn't know.

Her lips twisted as if she'd eaten something sour. "He's home with our son, Trenton."

"I hope to meet him the next time your family's visiting." Nate came back around the table and sat next to me.

Mom stood, a polite smile in place, which made me think that Nate had purposefully created a distraction to give her time to gather her composure. She'd given me little in the way of details about what had passed between her and her family when they'd disowned her, but considering how rattled they made her, it had to have been bad.

"Would you like something to drink?" she asked. "We're having wine, but I have other beverages."

"Sweet tea, of course," Granny said. "And while you're doing that, perhaps Ashlee can introduce us to your young gentleman friend."

Finley nearly choked on his wine, and his face turned red as he coughed. Mom looked torn, but I waved her away. I could handle this.

"Granny, Gramps, Aunt Janette, this is Finley Kordell. He's my..." My voice trailed off. Maybe I couldn't handle it.

"Father," Nate supplied the word as he rested his hand on my leg beneath the table.

"He's Ashlee's father."

The near-identical expressions of surprise on their faces almost made me laugh.

“How did that work?” Aunt Janette asked bluntly. “Did Bobbi finally get over her experimenting stage and you were the first guy she banged? Got her knocked up?”

Nate’s fingers tightened on my leg as if he knew I was seconds away from getting in my aunt’s face. I didn’t care how much I wanted an extended family. That comment was completely out of line.

“Mom used IVF.” I bit off each word. “Finley was the donor.”

“And you two just happened to run into each other?” Granny asked. “I thought there were all sorts of rules in place to keep that from happening.”

“There are, but I broke some of them,” I admitted.

“But I’m glad she did.” Finley had finally gotten his breath back. “She’s an amazing young woman.”

“So, you walked up to a stranger and announced that you were his daughter?” Aunt Janette asked.

“She met me through work,” Finley answered. “She’s a freelancer who works in our A&R department.”

“Our?” Gramps echoed. “You work with him?” He gestured toward Nate.

“I do,” Finley said. “We opened Manhattan Records together.”

That was when I saw it, the gleam of something in my grandparents’ eyes. My stomach dropped.

“That’s great that everything worked out for you.” Aunt Janette gave my shoulder a not-so-gentle shove. “You go to find your dad and come back with a rich dad and a rich boyfriend.”

“That’s not exactly how it happened,” Nate said stiffly.

Aunt Janette winked at me. “Of course not.”

“How did you two meet?” Granny asked.

At first, I thought she wanted to know about Nate and me, which sent me scrambling for a way to tell the story without including any of the embarrassing parts, but then I realized she was talking to Finley about Nate.

“You don’t look like you’re close enough in age for the two of you to have gone to college together,” she continued. “Did your families know each other?”

“We didn’t meet until we were adults,” Nate said, his fingers tightening on my leg again. “I was looking to build a record label, and he was interested in being a part of it.”

It wasn’t until he gave that brief explanation that I realized I didn’t know how the two of them even met. I made a mental note to ask at a later time, when we weren’t fielding questions from family members who were increasingly looking more like the people Mom had described to me my whole life.

“You didn’t come from money, then?” Gramps asked.

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“Dad!” Mom appeared in the dining room with a tray of drinks.

“Just making conversation,” he said as he picked up a glass of tea. “You can’t blame me for wanting to know more about the men in my granddaughter’s life.”

I opened my mouth, ready to ask them where all this sudden interest had come from when Nate butted in, “My father owns a hardware store in the Bronx. He started as an employee, and when the owner decided to retire, Dad bought it. My older brother works with him there.”

“You didn’t want to go into the family business?” Granny asked.

“I had other plans for my life.”

Gramps laughed. “Don’t we all, son. Don’t we all.”

Granny turned her attention to my father. “What about you, Finley? What does your family do?”

“My mother was a seamstress,” he said, “and my parents weren’t married.”

“That’s hardly your fault,” Granny said as if Finley had indicated some sort of shame about his parents. “At least you’re here, trying to do right by your daughter, giving her a job and everything.”

“Ashlee was hired long before I knew who she was.” His voice was pleasant enough, but one glance at Nate’s face was enough to confirm my suspicions that Finley was

getting irritated.

“Of course,” Granny said, holding up her hands with a smile. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, though, helping out your own. Speeding up the promotion track. Investing in ideas and business start-ups. Family is everything, after all.”

When I snorted, Nate squeezed my thigh again, and I coughed to cover the sound. “I haven’t asked for investments,” I said before trying to move the conversation elsewhere. “I’m not a business builder anyway. I enjoy working in A&R, but I don’t know that I’ll always want to work in the music business. Maybe I’ll try on Mom’s world to see if it fits me.”

Aunt Janette frowned. “You’re gonna be a dyke? Are you stupid? You got a hot, rich man and you want to trade him in for some pussy?”

Jaws dropped, and we stared at her. Gramps and Granny looked annoyed, but I got the impression it wasn’t that they had a problem with what she’d said as much as how and when she’d said it.

Mom regained her voice first, and I was surprised to hear it steady despite the fury underneath. “I believe Ashlee was referring to my occupation. As far as I’m aware, she’s straight.”

Aunt Janette didn’t even have the grace to at least pretend to be embarrassed. She shrugged. “Easy mistake to make, what with her being raised the way she was.”

“You know,” Finley spoke up, “one thing that I’ve never understood about ignorant straight people like you is how, if a child ‘becomes gay’ because they were raised by gay parents, how were any of us ever ‘made.’”

A beat of silence fell as they worked out what he’d said.

“I should’ve known you were one of them too,” Gramps said, shaking his head.

“It’s an understandable mistake,” Finley said dryly. “My sparkly tutu and rainbow leotard are at the dry cleaners.”

I wasn’t sure if I should cheer, laugh, or say something.

Granny muttered a few words that I didn’t catch, but Nate did, and he was on his feet before anyone else could speak.

“You need to leave. All of you. Now.”

Forty-Five

Nate

I tried my damndest not to take control of the situation despite the fury simmering inside me. This wasn’t my house or even my girlfriend’s house. This was my girlfriend’s mother’s house, and I didn’t want Roberta to feel like I didn’t think she could take care of herself...but even I only had so much self-control.

I ignored the remarks about money, knowing that if I accused them outright, they’d deny it. Better to catch them saying something that was absolutely clear and deal with it then. I could’ve handled more of that.

But then came the homophobic shit. Finley’s tutu comment was apparently the last straw for Roberta’s mom, and as soon as I heard her muttering a list of homophobic slurs, I was done. I’d apologize to Roberta after I kicked her family out of the house.

I got to my feet, towering over all of them, and growled, “You need to leave. All of you. Now.”

For a second, I thought I would have to physically remove them from the house, and that could've gotten ugly, but then Roberta stepped between me and them, fury radiating off her.

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“If you’re not off my property in two minutes, I will call the police and file trespassing charges.”

“I’m more than happy to pay any legal fees, Roberta,” Finley said mildly.

“Thank you, Finley.”

Granny opened her mouth, and I pointed at her. “One word, and I’ll call in favors from every cop, prosecutor, and judge I know to make sure whatever you’re charged with is listed as a hate crime.”

As soon as the door closed behind them, I went to the window to make sure they left and didn’t damage anything on their way out. They seemed like the sort of petty people who’d key a car or throw a brick in retaliation for anything they didn’t like.

“I am so sorry about that,” Roberta said behind me. “My parents and I hadn’t spoken for years, and they suddenly showed up here out of the blue, talking about how they wanted to get to know Ashlee, and I thought maybe they really wanted to make things right. I—”

“It’s all right,” Finley interrupted gently. “It’s not your fault.”

“He’s right, Mom. I know we both wanted something good to come out of this, but I think they just proved that they were only here for themselves.”

Only once their car disappeared from view did I turn back to the others. “Ashlee’s right. Finley and I both have dealt with enough people over the years who wanted

money from us in some way to be able to recognize the lead up to a pitch.”

“I would’ve given them ten more minutes, tops, before they were asking us to invest in some venture or help them out with some debt,” Finley added.

“I should’ve known better.” Roberta sat down in her chair and picked up her half-full glass of wine. “Been a little more thorough in finding out exactly why they were here. It’s not like they’re criminal masterminds.”

“There are always going to be greedy, vindictive people, no matter how well you screen them.” I glanced at Finley. “Just last week, a former employee tried to blackmail me.”

“What? Who?” Ashlee shook her head. “Never mind. I think I know.”

I nodded. “Flora Watts threatened to go to the media with a story saying that your promotion was because we’re together.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Finley asked.

“I took care of it,” I said. “I paid her what she asked and told her if she came back for more, I’d get lawyers involved.”

“I never should have come to Manhattan Records.” Ashlee traced the patterns in the wood grain with her finger. “I’ve brought nothing but problems.”

“Nonsense.” Finley reached over and patted her hand. “Every business has its problems, and we’re no different. People who are going to scheme and try to take advantage will do it no matter what. Flora would’ve found something else to fixate on.”

I crossed over to her and bent down to kiss the top of her head. “Besides, if you hadn’t come to work for us, neither Finley nor I would’ve ever met you, and that would have been the worst thing that could’ve happened.”

She smiled up at me, her eyes shining, and I wouldn’t have traded that image for anything in the world.

“I’m going to reach out to Jailene tomorrow,” Finley said, drawing our attention back to him. “Hopefully, nothing else comes of either Flora or those three, but I think we need to have a legal strategy in place just in case.”

“Unfortunately, I agree,” I said with a sigh.

“It’ll be all right,” Finley said. “I’m going to take care of this.”

“You always do.” I gave him a small nod. “And I know I don’t say how much I appreciate it.”

He looked up at me, his usual good humor returning as he said, “I hate to have to break it to you, Nate, but this time, I’m doing it to take care of my daughter. You’re only included because you’re a package deal.”

I laughed, the weight on my chest lifting. “You’re a good man, Finley. A better one than me, that’s for sure. Always have been.”

“And you’ve always sold yourself far too short,” he said.

The expression on Ashlee’s face said that she believed the same. I’d spent so many years thinking that all I would ever do was disappoint people, and even when I had something I thought of as good, like a successful business, I doubted its worth.

For the first time in a long time, I had hope that I could one day be the man I always should have been. The man Finley and Ashlee saw.

Forty-Six

Ashlee

Tonight hadn't gone as well as I'd hoped, or as badly as I'd feared, which I supposed meant that it'd more or less been a success.

We'd managed to salvage the rest of the evening thanks to another bottle of wine and a strawberry-rhubarb pie Mom had made for our dessert. Before too long, we'd been talking and laughing as if the interruption had never occurred at all, but it had hovered in the back of my mind, and it wouldn't have surprised me to discover that it'd done the same with the others.

Still, none of us brought it up, even as we parted ways. I wondered if Finley was like Mom in that, once something unpleasant was over, she tried not to talk or think about it again.

"Can I ask you a question? About you and Finley." I broke the silence that had ridden with us since we'd left the house. "And feel free to say no. It's been a crazy night."

"If you want to know if we've had people assume we're a couple, then the answer's yes." Nate winked at me, in a surprisingly pleasant mood considering everything that'd happened in the last few hours.

"I'll probably ask for stories about that at some point," I said, "but that's not what I was thinking."

"Go ahead."

“When Finley said he was going to take care of things, you said that he always did.” I glanced at him, but his face gave nothing away. “It sounded like there was something specific you were thinking about.”

Nate nodded slowly. “Did he ever tell you how he and I met?”

“No. I don’t think I’ve read anything about it either.”

“You wouldn’t have,” he said. “Neither of us talk about it even though it shows what a great guy he is. Whenever we’re asked about it, we simply say that I was looking for investors and chance brought us together.”

A snippet of something I’d read when I’d been researching the company floated through my mind. A couple lines in a bio of Nate that said he’d tried to start a label before Manhattan Records, but it’d tanked.

“When I was at NYU, I was obsessed with the idea of becoming one of those overnight millionaire college drop-outs. The ones that have those inspirational stories about how they started a company in their garage or dorm room and grew it into a massive empire.”

I could see him being that way. He had the drive and focus for it, that was undeniable.

“My senior year, I decided to start a record label. I brought on a couple wannabe musicians from NYU’s music program and got to work. I’d considered dropping out, but I wasn’t quite that reckless. I graduated – barely – but I was more focused on the insane amount of money I’d be making soon.” He glanced over at me, a wry expression on his face. “Only a couple months after graduation, however, I realized there was an important fact that I’d neglected to take into consideration when coming up with my business plan. Current or newly graduated college students don’t always have the work ethic to support their ambitions.”

I completely understood that. I remembered how many of the kids I'd gone to college with had dropped out or ended up getting jobs that had nothing to do with their majors. Sometimes, it'd been financial issues or a change of focus, like the one girl who'd left halfway through her third semester to go with her girlfriend doing humanitarian work all over the world. I suspected many people who intended to go into some form of art or entertainment fizzled out because it was harder than they'd expected.

"I had some investors who helped keep me afloat, but I should've read the writing on the wall. I had bands breaking up, people getting engaged and married and pregnant, delicate egos that only wanted to be told how talented they were. None of my research had prepared me for all of those aspects of the job." He rubbed the back of his neck. "By the time I was twenty-three, everything had fallen apart. I had no artists, no backers, nowhere to live. I couldn't go back to my parents and admit that I'd failed, so I lived on the streets."

I frowned, partially because I didn't like the idea of Nate having been homeless, but also because I felt like he was skipping over something. I let it go. We'd had a hard enough night, and he was already sharing with me. The next time an opportunity presented itself, I'd ask for more details. Right now, I just listened to him finish up what he was willing to talk about.

"I managed to get into shelters sometimes, but far from every night, and there were a lot of times when I didn't eat. Looking back, I know I could've gone to my family, but back then, I felt like I had something to prove. Telling them I'd failed would only fulfill their worst opinions about me."

He lapsed into silence for a few minutes, coming back to himself only when I put a hand on his arm.

"I'd been out there five or six weeks, long enough for me to start thinking about some

realistic options of what came next. One rainy, miserable night, all the shelters were full, and I wandered into a diner, one of those twenty-four-hour things. The man at the counter told me I had to order something or leave. I didn't have any money, and he knew it. By the way he was eyeing me, I was convinced he was going to suggest an...alternate method of payment."

I squeezed his arm, unable to put into words how much I hated the thought of him being forced into making that sort of decision, how much it hurt me.

"Before he could, someone in one of the booths spoke up. This guy who was older than me, but not as old as my parents, waved me over and told me to order whatever I wanted." He laughed softly. "I never did ask Finley how much that meal cost him, but it had to be more than a hundred dollars. Anyway, he introduced himself, and we started talking, me trying to remember not to talk with my mouth full but too hungry to follow through with etiquette. Before the night was over, he'd offered me a guest room in his place and said he had an idea he wanted to run by me in the morning."

I couldn't imagine how hard it would've been for someone as untrusting as Nate to put his faith in this stranger.

"I still half-thought that he was going to ask me to have sex with him to pay for the food or the bed, but I was so tired of being dirty and hungry and scared that I went anyway. But Finley isn't like that. He's a good man who happened to be in the right place and time to save my life, and he's never once held it over me."

I wasn't deluded into thinking that Finley was perfect, but I knew he was good, and that was more than enough. But I hadn't realized just how good he was. Not only feeding and talking to a stranger off the streets, but taking him home...

It was no wonder Nate practically worshipped the man.

I'd already been in Finley's fan club, but now I was struck by the fact that I wasn't just some random employee who was admiring her boss's benevolence. This man was my father. I'd never dreamed that I'd not only find my dad but that I'd find a man like Finley Kordell.

I was truly blessed.

Forty-Seven

Nate

I did it.

I told her about where I'd been when Finley had first found me. I'd seen no disgust or embarrassment in her eyes, heard no pity in her voice. Maybe soon, I could tell her the rest of the story. Not tonight, though. Tonight, I had other plans in mind.

Specifically, fulfilling a promise I'd made her regarding another virginity I wanted to take. This one required a little more prep than a condom and foreplay, which was why she'd taken longer in the shower, following instructions I'd given her, while I'd gone straight from my shower to the playroom to set out what we'd need so there'd be no fumbling around.

Now, I took a few seconds to admire her curves. She was stretched out on her stomach, cheek resting on a pillow that her arms wrapped around. Her hair was braided and out of the way, giving me an unobstructed view of her back and down to her ass. As if she could feel where my gaze rested, her entire body tensed.

"I'm going to help you relax," I said as I climbed on the bed, straddling her thighs without putting any of my weight on her. I put some sandalwood-scented lotion on my hands, rubbing them together until everything was comfortably warm.

The moment my hands moved to her shoulders, my thumbs digging into the tight muscles, she moaned, and my cock twitched in interest. I was already half-hard from

the sight of her and the anticipation of what we were going to do. If she kept this up, I was going to end up reciting football stats or something like that to keep myself from coming before I was inside her.

I made my way down her arms, then to the small of her back, my thumbs working their way up her spine to her shoulders. I continued the circular path, not rushing, not thinking about anything but taking care of each and every knot. Once her back was done, I moved my hands lower, going over her ass to her thighs and calves. I lingered at her feet, enjoying every sensual sound she made as I paid attention to every stress point I'd learned.

A couple years ago, Club Privé had offered workshops on a variety of different things that people could do with or to their partners. One of those had been a massage therapy class. I'd used some of the techniques before, but none of those times had been even half as enjoyable as this.

When I was satisfied that she was thoroughly relaxed, I leaned over her and kissed her shoulder. "If it's too much, say the word, and I'll stop."

She nodded, smiling up at me in that dazed sort of way that told me she was deep inside that part of her head commonly referred to as subspace. She'd use her safe word if she needed it, but she wasn't going to panic at the first touch or twinge. Perfect.

Now for step two. Orgasms.

I didn't speak as I maneuvered us both around until I could get my head under her. I wrapped my hands around her thighs as I pulled her down onto my face. She gasped as my tongue teased her clit, hips jerking but kept in place. Back and forth, then circling before sliding along her folds until I came to her entrance.

I dipped inside, dragging the gathering moisture out and to her clit. I kept the rhythm slow and steady, easing her toward a climax that rolled over her like a wave. I held off as she came, letting her experience the pleasure without additional sensation. I needed her relaxed, not overwhelmed.

That would come later.

Forty-Eight

Ashlee

The second orgasm left my limbs limp and my breathing ragged. It wasn't too much, but it was enough that I could've gone to sleep right then and there if I hadn't known we weren't done yet.

As I came down, Nate moved me so that I was flat on the bed again, facedown so that my nipples rubbed pleasantly against the soft cotton sheets. The scent of sandalwood filled the air again, subtle enough to be enjoyed without being overpowering. When his finger ran down between my cheeks, I felt the slick of what I assumed was lube and knew it was time.

A few rogue butterflies fluttered in my stomach, but it was easy to ignore them and concentrate on what he was doing. The tip of his finger rubbed across that ring of muscle, like he'd done before, and the familiarity helped me not to tense up when he applied pressure.

He ran his other hand up my spine and back down again in a smooth, soothing motion, knowing exactly how to help me as his finger breached my ass deeper and thicker than before. The stretch and burn made me moan, my body not quite accustomed to the feeling...but not totally against it either.

“Breathe through it.” His voice was gentler than I’d expected, slipping over my skin even as he moved his finger in and out, twisting it as he went. “Remember how it felt, the first time I spanked you? The way you weren’t sure if you liked it or not? If you even should like it?”

His words struck something inside me, something that neither of us had put in such blunt terms before. The way the things we did could cause such conflicting emotions.

A second finger joined the first, and the sound I made was halfway between a cry and a groan, the intensity of sensation increasing. I squirmed but didn’t go anywhere, my determination to make him proud of me greater than the strange discomfort that I knew would eventually feel good. He didn’t have to tell me that much; I knew he wouldn’t do anything that wouldn’t eventually bring me pleasure.

“Ready?” He kissed the small of my back.

“If you say so.” I hoped my nerves weren’t as evident to him as they were to me.

I shivered as he removed his fingers, but the hand he kept stroking up and down my back grounded me. How he managed to open a condom wrapper and put the condom on with one hand, I didn’t know, but he must’ve done it because I could feel the cool latex as he pressed the head of his cock where his fingers had just been.

My eyelids fluttered as he eased forward, slowly opening me, stretching me. He muttered a curse, and his fingers dug into my hip.

“Right there with you.” I barely managed to get the words out, but they seemed important to say.

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He chuckled, the vibration traveling from me to him, emphasizing just how intimately we were connected. His hands slid up my ribcage on either side, fingers teasing along the sides of my breasts even as he sunk deeper into my ass. My muscles were trembling, entire body shaking as each inch threatened to be too much.

“Fuck, le soleil.” His body stretched over mine, and he bit my shoulder, sending a jolt of sharp pain to join the rest. “Are you okay?”

I opened my mouth to say something but couldn’t get a word out. I fisted the sheets and nodded, hoping he’d take the small movement for the consent it was meant to be. He did, taking me with slow, deep strokes that pushed the air from my lungs and made my body quiver with pleasure.

I tried to push back against him, to have some sort of control, but he gave up none. Each thrust drove a whimper from me that I couldn’t quite hold back, and judging by the way Nate was saying my name, he liked the sounds. It was burn and stretch and the way our bodies fit together and the heat between us...

His fingers found their way underneath me, brushing my clit with quick circles that joined with everything else I was feeling until the pressure threatened to make me explode.

“Come, le soleil, please, fucking come...” The strain in his voice was in his body too. “I need you to come.”

That was enough, knowing he needed that of me. In this moment, in this space, it was him and me, and this was what I could give him.

I let go of the last little bit of control I'd been holding onto and let myself soar.

Forty-Nine

Nate

I wasn't sure what pulled me out of sleep, whether it was noise or the sudden realization that I was alone in bed. When I opened my eyes, it was dark in my room, and it took me a minute to remember that after Ashlee and I had recovered, we'd taken a shower together before going back to my bedroom. I'd fallen asleep with my arms wrapped around her and her head on my chest.

She wasn't in bed with me anymore, though, and when I touched the sheets, they were cool. I sat up, frowning into the darkness. Was she in the bathroom? If so, why had she been gone long enough for the sheets to cool off? When I listened, however, I didn't hear anything coming from that direction. No water running, no moving about.

Then I realized I could hear something. Not water, but other sounds that seemed to be coming from down the hall. I climbed out of bed and grabbed a pair of pants, putting them on as I walked. I'd gone only a few steps into the hall when I put a name to what I was hearing.

Fucking.

Male and female sounds. Moans and curses.

Was Ashlee watching porn in my living room?

Something in the back of my mind told me there was something I was missing. Something that would've explained what I was hearing. But I couldn't quite figure it out, my mind still muddled with sleep.

I was also a little preoccupied with thinking up the ways I was going to punish her for what she was watching without me. Preoccupied enough that I stood in the entryway, watching the television screen for several minutes before processing what I was seeing. What she was watching.

A tall, slender blonde was bent over a bench, her berry-colored nipples pinched between metal clamps, joined by a thin steel chain. A line of men stood behind her, all naked and stroking themselves while the guy at the front of the line fucked her. Another man stood in front of her, his hand on the back of her head, holding her in place as he fucked her mouth.

I should've known who it was before I saw the man's face. I should have remembered. What sort of man hires escorts to fuck his girlfriend, one after the other, while she sucks him off...and then forgets that it ever happened?

Apparently, I was such a man.

As I realized what she was watching, I saw other things too. The doors of the cabinet under the television were open, cases on the floor and on the coffee table, some closed, some open. Each one had a name and a date, both of which corresponded to files on a server where I kept digital copies of the same encounters.

Fuck.

Fuck!

This couldn't be happening. Ashlee wasn't sitting on my couch, watching me getting a blowjob from a woman whose name I couldn't remember while conveying all the passion and interest I might've had in watching paint dry.

This wasn't what I wanted to be explaining this early in the morning.

Not like this.

Fifty

Ashlee

Everything was dark when I woke up, and it took me a couple seconds to remember where I was. After we'd finished, we'd cleaned up, and Nate had brought me back to his room, but my memories of that part of the night were blurry at best. I was fully awake now, though.

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One of Nate's arms was draped across me, his hand on my breast so casually that it might've fallen there in his sleep. His breathing was slow, and even behind me, his body was relaxed.

I would've stayed there even if I couldn't get back to sleep, but there were certain things that required me getting out of bed. I managed to extricate myself without waking Nate and grabbed some of his clothes from a basket of folded laundry. Everything was far too big for me, but the air chilled me enough that I didn't want to even go to the bathroom without putting on more than a shirt.

When I came out of the bathroom, I was awake enough to know that I wouldn't be getting back to sleep any time soon. I didn't suffer from insomnia like this often, but when I did, it hit hard. This was one of those nights.

Not wanting to bother Nate, I headed for the kitchen to get myself something to drink, and then to the living room. Watching movies was generally my fallback for the times I couldn't sleep, and I didn't think Nate would mind. The table under the television had a DVD player on the top, which made me think the movies would be in the cabinet underneath. When I opened it, I saw stacks of cases, but none of them looked like the usual movie cases. These looked more like CD cases. Curious, I knelt down to get a better view.

The stacks went nearly to the top of the cabinet and were in rows three deep. I didn't take the time to count them all, but simple math put the number at a hundred, easily. I pulled out a few from the middle stack and saw that each one was marked. It took me until the third one to understand what I was seeing.

Helena R. 11-3-17, 11-7-17

Jacinda P. 10-12-17

Lucinda P. 9-4-17, 9-12-17, 9-14-17, 9-20-17

Women's names and dates. I took some from another stack.

Iris K. 3-7-17, 3-12-17, 3-20-17

Maddie L. 2-9-17

Helen W. 1-1-17, 1-2-17

My stomach sank, as if it had already accepted what my head and heart were still trying to deny. I had to see. I had to know for certain before I let my imagination accuse Nate of something I couldn't take back.

I put the one marked Iris K in the player and stood up to watch. I didn't recognize the room as one I'd been in, but I definitely recognized the set-up. It was a playroom of some kind, maybe at a club or someone's home, but it wasn't Nate's. Then again, the DVD wasn't that recent. He could have made changes.

Then a man entered the room and it no longer mattered where this was being filmed because I knew that figure. I moved to the couch, not trusting my legs to hold me. I should have turned it off before I saw anything else...before I could no longer pretend that these weren't what I knew them to be.

There was a phrase – watching a train wreck – that I'd never been able to understand fully. Yes, I understood what the phrase meant, but the fact that it alluded to people watching something as horrifying as a train wreck because they were unable to look away hadn't made sense. I understood that a little better now, though I wished I

didn't.

I wasn't jealous of the tall blonde or any of the other women represented by those DVDs because I'd already known Nate had been with other women. He never lied and tried to pretend he'd only had a couple girlfriends before me.

Granted, seeing him with another woman was different than just knowing about it, but that wasn't why my stomach was churning or my vision blurring with tears. It wasn't even because of the men getting in line to take their turn. For all I knew, it'd been the blonde's idea. The thought of him wanting to share me wasn't an appealing one, but he'd already said he didn't want to do that. And if he changed his mind, we'd talk about it.

No, it was the stacks of DVDs he'd made with the women he'd been with...and then kept. Not one or two of Roma that he'd forgotten about or a handful locked away in a box. Years of sexual encounters at his fingertips, all easily accessible for watching whenever he chose.

A thought hit me, a sharp pain straight through my heart: did any of those cases bear my name? Were there cameras here, recording everything we said and did? Did he use his phone when he was someplace where he couldn't set up a camera? Had he recorded everything he'd done to me?

My face burned as I thought about everything he could have recorded. When he'd spanked me the first time. Taken my virginity. Oral sex. The things I'd said. The sounds I'd made...

"Ashlee."

It took me a second to realize that his voice wasn't coming from the screen. I jumped up, turning to see him standing behind me with that blank expression on his face. I hated that mask. Hated that he shut me out even when he required me to trust him.

“I’d like...” I shook my head, changing my phrasing. “Will you explain this, please?”

The muscle in his jaw clenched, as if my question aggravated him. “They all knew, if that’s what you want to know. They knew I sometimes recorded us fucking to ensure there were never any issues of consent. No he-said-she-said. The last thing I ever needed was a pissed-off ex making accusations, either to get a pay-off or just to smear my name.”

That made some sense, but I still had questions.

“I can see that,” I said, working to keep my voice calm. “But it bothers me—”

“It wouldn’t have bothered you if you’d minded your own fucking business.”

I stared at him, wondering if I’d misheard him since he’d said it with all the inflection of commenting on the weather.

“You knew who I was when you threw yourself at me,” he continued. “Your eyes were wide open, so don’t pretend to be some high moral authority.”

This couldn’t be happening. Not like this. But I knew it was happening. Again.

“If you can’t handle this, you can leave. Have the front desk call you a cab.”

A beat of silence. Two. Three.

My purse was next to my shoes, and it was easy to pick it up as I slipped them on. I didn’t care that my clothes were somewhere else or that I was wearing something of his. All I wanted in that moment was to get as far away from him as possible.

He was right that I’d known who he was. I’d just been foolish enough to think that he wanted to change. I wouldn’t make that mistake again.

We were done.