



Kayla's List

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Description: Kayla Jones is about to get something very special for her twenty-ninth birthday, but she never could've dreamed just how much it would change her life. After spending all of her twenties being purposely invisible, she decides to make a list of thirty things to do before thirty. With the help of her two best friends, Kayla ensues on a yearlong adventure that has her doing, seeing and loving things that she never thought she could. However, when her escapades lead to her waking up in a stranger's bed, will she go back to being stuffy and invisible? Or will she take a chance on life and love?

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Birthday Surprise

KAYLA

Tomorrow is my twenty-ninth birthday, and to say I'm excited would be an understatement. I feel like I'm finally in a stable place in my life. I have had my nose to the grind since I was a little girl, and things are definitely looking up for me.

I grew up in a foster home when my parents died in a car accident when I was eight. I miss them every day, but I try my best to keep their memory alive by being the best person I can be. I've heard horror stories about the system and even witnessed some atrocities committed against some foster children, but I didn't have a bad experience. I'm very thankful for that.

I learned early to keep my head down and mouth shut. When you're quiet and don't cause any problems, people tend to forget about you. I was well-read on how to be invisible. It worked for me in the long run. Mr. and Mrs. Singleton had operated a group home full of kids, so it wasn't hard for me to go unnoticed. When I was younger, I thought my talent to go unseen was a gift. However, now that I've lived most of my twenties, I have come to regret my "gift."

I became a bookworm to escape the day-to-day goings on in the group home and I spent most of my free time in the public or school library. Reading helped me live in an alternate reality that allowed me to cope with my parents' deaths.

Judy and Paul Jones were the most loving, caring, and responsible parents anyone could ever ask for. They doted on me constantly. I miss them. Still, I often dream that

the accident never happened and I wake up crying. It was a devastating loss that I still haven't completely gotten over. I don't think I ever will.

However, I do my best not to dwell on the hardships in life, which is why I am so excited now. Every birthday that I can celebrate is a blessing. And this year will be extra special because I'm sure my boyfriend is ready to pop the question.

Although I am still as quiet as I was when I was a kid, I have managed to come out of my shell—at least a little. I made a few good friends who have become my chosen family, especially since I don't have any living relatives to speak of. It makes my relationships with my girls much more special. My chosen family...

And although Warren isn't my first boyfriend, he is my most serious relationship to date. I was pleasantly surprised when he approached me at work. At first, I thought he just needed help with the technology in his department, but he asked me out on a date.

I had worked in the IT department of Technology Resolutions Incorporated or TRI for five years, and I was one of the best in the department when Warren approached me. Everyone always came to me with their computer and technical issues, and I have a horrible habit of trying to please everyone, so telling people no is not really something I'm good at. So, I assumed he was coming to me for help because everyone else was busy. Instead, he complimented me on a dress that I had worn several times and asked me to lunch.

I assumed Warren was just buttering me up for something, but he turned out to be a really good guy. At first, I thought he was another arrogant playboy trying to see if the computer geek was a freak in the bedroom. I had seen him around the office and at some of the holiday parties in the past. He always had some model-thin Barbietype hanging from his arm.

I, however, am nothing like any of those women. Nobody has ever mistaken me for a model, and although I love my skin, my deep, dark brown complexion is not for everyone. I didn't think Warren had anything against dark skinned women, but I never saw him with one. The women were always the same color as his light, toasted walnut complexion with light eyes that displayed his mixed race heritage. Even with my apprehensions, I have to admit that Warren is one of the most attractive men I'd ever laid eyes on.

His low-cut hair was always lined to precision and his clean-shaven face displayed his cheekbones' sharpness and chiseled jawline. His long eyelashes surrounded hazel-brown eyes that I could drown in. His six-foot frame and deep voice had my resolve not to get involved with him, melting away in an instant. Warren's intelligence and confidence had me falling in love with him on that first lunch date, and I've been head over heels for him ever since.

Now, it is the night before my twenty-ninth birthday, and I am preparing myself to become his fiancée. I'm doing my best to prepare myself for dinner at the fancy restaurant and look like a woman Warren can be proud to have on his arm.

I have never been a fashionista, so I had my friends, Shelby and Emani help me pick out a dress for the occasion. They both tried to get me to change my hairstyle from the low bun that I always wear to something flirtier, but I wanted to still feel like myself. The fitted boat neck dress that was tighter than anything I had in my closet, was already way out of my comfort zone. And even though it was considered conservative, I thought it was still sexy. I don't wear makeup, and since Warren and I have been going strong for a year, I don't think he minds. My skin is blemish free and soft, so I decided to wear tinted lip gloss to spruce up my look. I have never walked in heels, but I chose to wear a pair of low wedges because I'm only five-four to Warren's six-foot stature.

I check myself out in the mirror and I smile. My dark brown eyes hold an excitement

that I can barely contain. I am such a lucky girl to have a man like Warren Barnett love me.

* * *

When my doorbell rang, I had to keep myself from running to open the door. It was a good thing that I had on these wedges because I was still a little wobbly. So, instead of breaking my neck, I decided to walk as gracefully as I could to the door.

Warren's signature, bright white smile greeted me when I opened the door. His tall frame was draped in a black, designer suit that hugged his body magnificently. I stood for a moment, taking in my boyfriend, hopefully soon to be fiancé, in awe. He was so gorgeous. I couldn't help the sigh that escaped my mouth. Warren kept me breathless.

"Hey, Kayla. You look... nice," Warren greeted me as he took in my appearance. The grin never left his face, but the tone of his voice let me know that he wasn't pleased.

Nice? That's it? Maybe I should've made more effort. I frowned at the thought. I've never been completely insecure in the past, but I can't say I've been the most confident woman either. Dating Warren has made me more self-conscious. I can't help but notice the stares and frowns of other women. I've even heard the whispers of, "What is he doing with her?" before.

Although Warren says he loves me and he's never said anything about my looks, he hasn't reassured me that those other women are wrong or that he doesn't agree with them. However, tonight is not about my insecurities. Warren has shown me with his actions how much he cares for me, and he assured me that tonight will be about us.

"Are you ready?" he asks, plastering a bright smile on his face.

I am once again lost in his twinkling eyes as I nodded. “Yes, I’m ready.” I smile. I grab my purse and keys and close and lock the door behind me.

Being the gentleman he is, Warren hooks my arm into his and leads me to his cherry-red Porsche Cayenne. Once he opens the door and I am settled inside, I can feel the butterflies in my stomach. The feeling only increases when Warren slides behind the wheel and gives me his most dazzling smile. The car ride to the restaurant is quiet, but I don’t mind. I am prone to awkwardness when I’m nervous, so I am happy for the reprieve. The silence gives me a chance to get myself together and practice saying yes in my head before Warren’s grand proposal.

In no time at all, we pull up to Three Forks, one of Dallas’ most expensive restaurants. It takes everything in me not to swoon at my thoughtful boyfriend. He had gone all out for my birthday, and I couldn’t be more thankful to have him in my life.

I couldn’t wait to tell the girls where he’d taken me. They’ll be super excited when I give them all the details of my fantasy night. I’ll finally, once again, be a part of a family. I almost wanted to skip the meal entirely and go straight to the dessert. I know that’s when he’ll ask me because he’s traditional in that way.

We’ve been seeing one another for a year, and Warren never pushed me into having sex. He was always the perfect gentleman and said he was in no rush. He wanted to make sure I was comfortable. I think he assumed I was a virgin because I’m so shy. Even a year ago, as a single woman, I was NOT a virgin. I assured him that I wasn’t completely inexperienced. I haven’t had a plethora of lovers, but I have had a few. Well, only one, but that’s neither here nor there.

“I can’t believe you brought me here.” I smile wide at Warren’s handsome face, and he shrugs as if it is no big deal. I love that about him. He makes the grandest gestures and will act as if it is just a normal everyday occurrence. Warren has such a giving soul. He’s definitely a keeper.

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We are led through the beautiful space. There are sheer gold baroque linens topped with shiny porcelain white china place settings. The lights are low and glow with warm candlelight. It is as romantic as I imagined it would be.

This night is already more than I could ever have imagined for myself. I have a handsome man who loves me, a career that is beginning to take off, and I'll soon be able to start a family. I can't wait.

Our meal is filled with wonderful wine, exceptional food, and a soothing atmosphere. I could almost ignore the butterflies that were wreaking havoc in my stomach. There was nervous energy surrounding us, and I couldn't tell if it was because of me or Warren.

I can sense that he is building up the nerve to get down on one knee. He keeps looking around the room and anxiously tapping his jacket pocket. I have a feeling that's where my ring is. I have to give myself an internal pep talk to calm down. It's not every day the man of your dreams asks you to be his wife.

"Kayla, we've been together for a year now. And you know how much I love you." Warren's deep voice washes over me, and I nod with a smile. I'm eager for him to get to the part where I say yes so we can live happily ever after.

"I do. And I love you, too." I giggle, and Warren smiles.

Warren gets out of his chair and rounds the table to face me. He stares deeply into my eyes before pulling out a blue Tiffany box. I hold my breath. Waiting. Tears begin to pool in my dark eyes, but I hold on to them until he asks. I don't want to miss

anything because I am a blubbering mess.

“I wanted to ask you—”

“Warren!” the angry voice interrupts his proposal, and although I have never been a violent person, I want to kill whoever has interfered with my fantasy come to life.

“Warren Barnett? I know you are not doing what I think you’re doing!”

I look around in confusion. I have no idea what’s going on or why. Warren is looking like he was just caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“Warren? Who is this?” I ask.

“You’re really going through with this? I thought you were joking.” The snide remark makes me bristle.

“Warren? Who is this man?” I trail off as I look between the two of them. My brain is having trouble connecting the dots. I know the confusion is shown all over my heated face. The loud man’s dark brown eyes are glaring daggers at the two of us. He is tall and lanky with caramel brown skin and a low-cut fade similar to Warren’s. His goatee is neatly trimmed, and he is dressed in a nice suit.

“So, you’re cheating on me after all we’ve been through?” The man glares at Warren, and I gasp in utter dismay.

“Cheating?! What the fuck?!” I yell out. I never cuss, but my shock can’t be contained. My eyes go wide at the realization of who this man is.

“I can explain,” Warren starts, but I hold up my hand.

I am already humiliated enough. What a spectacle we must've made, yelling loudly in the middle of a peaceful restaurant. The other patrons are outright staring and whispering as they point. I could've died right where I sat.

Here I thought it would be a night that I'd never forget. Well, I guess it still is. It's not every day that you find out your boyfriend has a boyfriend.

"You told me you were done doing this to me. And yet, here we are!" the man yells as he waves a hand at me dramatically.

"You're gay," I say out loud, trying to get my brain to comprehend the shocking revelation. It is a realization and not a question because the man yelling at Warren is the proof standing right in front of me. I can see and hear him clearly. Hell, everyone in the place can. I can only stare. I'm at a loss for words. I don't know how I missed this detail, this very vital detail.

"I'm not gay, Kayla. Maurice is just a friend." Warren's exasperated tone laces his every word.

"Well, your friend just interrupted your proposal by accusing you of cheating on him. I just... I gotta get out of here." I stand abruptly, but Warren grabs my arm before I can get away.

"Maurice, wait outside," Warren snarls at the other man who is now wearing a smug look on his face. "Now!" Warren growls. Maurice purses his lips and turns to saunter to the front of the restaurant.

Warren pulls me back to our ruined dinner, placing me in my chair and sits down beside me. I am speechless. I should've been slapping his face or at the very least, cussing him out. But for some reason, I can't do either. I'm in shock.

“I’m not gay. Maurice is just a friend that I see from time to time. That’s all. It’s not that big of a deal.”

I sit back in my chair and stare at Warren. This man is a stranger. How can he be so nonchalant about something this huge? “A friend you see...naked?” I ask, but by the look on his face, I know the answer to my question. “Listen, I can’t do this.”

“Kayla, please.” Warren rolls his eyes as if I am throwing an unnecessary tantrum. “You’re not going to leave me. I don’t know why you’re behaving this way. We both know you’re still going to marry me. And I promise that Maurice will not be an issue. He will know to stay in his place.” The way that Warren is so certain that I will marry a gay man has me flabbergasted. I know I’m a people pleaser, but there’s no way in hell that I’ve given him the impression that I’m desperate.

I get up from the table and leave the restaurant without looking back. I can feel the tears running down my face as I hop into the back of a taxi. I wish I could be strong and not cry, but the broken pieces of my heart won’t allow me to be.

Wallow

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KAYLA

I cried all the way home. I still couldn't believe that my boyfriend has a boyfriend. For my life! How the hell does this happen to someone? I know that I will spend the rest of the night racking my brain for any red flags that I must've missed. There had to have been something that I had overlooked. I was so afraid of the next woman that I had never even considered the next man.

Warren and I waited to have sex, but that had been more of my decision than his. Our sex life seemed normal, but I've only had one other partner, so my opinion is based on limited experience. Me and the girls talk about sex, but I never go into details about my sex life. I've always been shy, and talking about that kind of stuff makes me feel extremely uncomfortable. My best friends know how I am, so they never push me. Now, I wish they would have. Maybe then I would've asked the right questions to figure out that I was being cheated on.

I mean Warren and I spent plenty of time together. He never took any suspicious calls or disappeared unexpectedly. He always checked in with me and invited me everywhere. Warren was perfect. At least he pretended to be.

I couldn't wrap my head around anything I'd found out last night. If Warren likes men, I just don't understand his need to be with me. Times are different now. There's no need to hide the fact that you're gay. Of course, there are still hardships, but wouldn't it be easier to live in your truth? I can't understand why he would do this. I trusted him. I let my guard down and loved him. I planned a future with him. He was supposed to have been my new beginning. He was supposed to have been the family I no longer had.

When the taxi dropped me off, I hastily made my way inside my apartment building. The last thing I needed was my neighbor, Mrs. Gilmore, to see me upset and confused like this. She always meant well, but I just didn't have the mental capacity and strength to explain to her why I was crying. She knew all about Warren and my expected birthday proposal. I shake my head dejectedly as I enter my apartment.

When tonight's events play on repeat in my brain, I become a blubbing mess all over again. I strip off my clothes and get into the shower. Hopefully, the scorching hot water will wash away the pain. However, I continue to cry as I try to wash away the memory of Warren's betrayal. I didn't realize my life was all an illusion. I thought I was living a fairy tale when in actuality, I was living a Shakespearean tragedy.

If Maurice hadn't unexpectedly popped up tonight, would Warren have let me believe that we were a happy, monogamous, heterosexual couple? Would we have started a family? Would he have let me believe that he loved me as I loved him? Yes. He absolutely would have. The thought both sobers and scares me, and before I know it, I'm crying all over again. I have never really been a crier. In the group home, kids were better seen and not heard. It was best not to show weakness, and tears were definitely considered weak in foster care. This is the first time in my adult life that I couldn't stop the tears from flowing. And honestly, I don't want to. I crawl into my big, comfy bed, pull the covers over my head, and cry myself into a pitiful sleep.

The next morning, I woke up hoping it was all some Matrix-type nightmare, but it wasn't. I had already taken the day off because I was expecting to be wrapped up in my new fiancé's arms, making love all day in celebration. Instead, I'm planted on the couch in bunny rabbit pajamas, watching Netflix. I never expected this. It wasn't in my plans, and although I should be angry, I can't get out of the sorrow-filled haze. This is not how I imagined my birthday.

The tears begin to fall again, and I'm angry at myself. How could I have been so

naïve? Why did he choose me? What had I done to deserve a man like Warren Barnett?

The questions haunted my thoughts for the rest of the day. I continued to wallow in self-pity and doubt. I didn't know how I would manage to go back to work and pretend as if nothing had happened. I know people deal with break-ups every day, but I didn't. I am a people pleaser by nature and I hate losing people out of my life. So, I know that I will continue to be friendly toward Warren although he has hurt me to my core. I will never be in a relationship with him, but I know that he will try to push his way in again and I can't let that happen.

Around six in the evening, my landline rings loudly, waking me up out of a deep sleep. I'm disoriented at first because that line rarely rings.

"Hello?"

"Girl! Where the hell have you been?" Shelby's panicked squeal comes through the phone, and I hold it away from my ear.

I should've known she would find a way to contact me. My best friend does not miss birthdays, and since I turned my phone off last night to avoid Warren, I know she'd probably left several scathing texts and voicemails.

"I've been at home." I try my best not to sound like somebody kicked my puppy, but each word is dripping with sadness that I can't hide.

"What's wrong?" I can hear the worry in Shelby's voice and I break.

"Warren and I broke up." I sob into the phone.

"Oh, no! Kayla, I'm so sorry. Me and Emani are on our way. Hold tight, sis." Shelby

disconnects the call, and I continue to cry as I wait for my best friends to come and save me.

* * *

“Girl! A man? Warren was out here fucking a whole man?” Shelby’s shocked vulgarity would’ve been funny if it wasn’t my life she was talking about.

“Yes,” I respond flatly, placing my head in my hands to hide my embarrassment.

It had been two hours since my best friends had shown up at my apartment. I told them every dirty detail of my horrible date. I thought purging all of the foolishness would make me feel better. It didn’t.

“Kayla, I don’t know what to say.” Emani’s soft words brought back the helpless feeling I was so desperately trying to tap out. Even my positive, easy-going friend couldn’t find the silver lining to my mess.

“Me either, Emani. I was just so... shocked. I mean he’s never done anything to make me suspect he was...”

“Sus... pect.” Shelby drew out the word to finish my sentence with a purse of her glossed lips.

I nodded, agreeing with her assessment. My whole life with Warren for the past year had been a lie. I don’t know what was real and what wasn’t. It feels strange to be back at square one. No love, no boyfriend, no future family, or promises. No...nothing.

“Sis, I think you dodged a bullet. I mean what if ya’ll had gotten married, had a house, a few kids, and then bam! Here this dude comes, popping up talking that

bullshit. It's best that you found out now," Shelby continued.

"I agree with Shell," Emani added. "It's for the best that you found out sooner rather than later."

In my mind I knew they were right. But my heart, my bruised and battered heart, I couldn't find the right in so much wrong. What did I do to deserve this?

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“I was supposed to be celebrating my engagement, not wallowing in self-pity.” I shake my head in frustration.

I thought that finally, things were going my way. Once I was out of foster care, I never looked back. Although Mr. and Mrs. Singleton were nice enough people, we didn’t have that familial connection. They did their part, put a roof over my head, and gave me food and clothing. Then when I turned eighteen, I was on my own.

I was smart enough to get scholarships to college and although I was painfully shy, I came out of my shell enough to make a few friends. I’ve had a plan since I graduated high school and I was finally on track to check some of the most important things off my list. Now, I have to start over with a completely new list.

“Stop wallowing. No matter what that asswipe did, it’s still your birthday, and we have some major celebrating to do!” Shelby’s mischievous smile told me that she was up to no good.

“I don’t want to celebrate anymore. How about we stay here and watch Netflix and have ice cream?” I gave them the saddest puppy dog eyes I could muster. Hopefully, my friends would take pity on me.

Shelby screwed up her face in disgust at my suggestion. “Girl, hell naw. We are not about to sit here and Netflix and chill with yo ass. We’re gonna put on some Meg and Cardi, and our best freak-em dresses and find somewhere to shake our asses.”

Oh well, so much for my plans to cry myself to sleep again.

“And that’s on period!” Emani said with a large smile, and I’m shocked that church girl Emani knows anything about the City Girls.

“Oh, so it’s a ratchet kinda night then?” I smirk at them.

My friends love to have fun and let loose on occasion. We go out and twerk to the raunchiest songs that are out. Well, Emani doesn’t twerk, and I can’t twerk. But I manage to two-step and hold the purses, but whatever.

“Hush. You love it. Now, it’s time for some fun. We are going to go out so you can forget all about Warren’s cheating behind.” Emani giggled as her brown eyes danced with laughter and her braids swayed back and forth.

“Fine. But I’m not wearing a freak-em dress. I don’t even have one of those.” I twist my lips and shake my head. I hardly ever wore dresses, but I definitely never wore any “club” dresses. When we went out I was most comfortable wearing jeans and a nice blouse.

“Kay, we know you don’t have anything like that in your closet although you should. I wish with all my might that I had your curves,” Shelby complimented.

I rolled my eyes once more.

Shelby Banks was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen. Her dark brown skin was nearly identical to mine, but somehow, her skin had an otherworldly radiance. No matter what style she wore it in, her hair complemented her round face and brown almond-shaped eyes. And although she only stood about five-two, her huge personality made it seem like she was ten feet tall.

“Shell, you don’t need my curves.” I waved off her concerns. Shelby has always had an athletic build, but with Instagram bodies being popular nowadays, everyone seems

to think a big booty and boobs made you attractive.

“Thanks. But I still want them.” Shelby smiled with a wink.

“You don’t have to wear a dress, Kay, but I’m not going to let you wear that librarian gear either,” Emani said, adding her input. I don’t know if I should feel offended or not.

“I don’t dress like a librarian.” I scoffed indignantly.

“Uh, I hate to break it to you, sis, but, yeah, you do.” Shelby shrugged.

I frowned and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Kayla, don’t get upset. How you dress is fine for work—the cardigan sweaters, the slacks, the bun. But, honey, we aren’t trying to check out books tonight,” Emani replied tenderly.

“No, ma’am. We aren’t checking out books, but maybe we can check out some D.” Shelby stuck her tongue out and did a shimmy with her shoulders.

I smacked my forehead and chuckled.

“I set them up.”

“And I knock them down.” Shelby and Emani high-fived as they laughed.

I shook my head and laughed with my friends. As silly as they are, I appreciate them being here to cheer me up. The least I could do is try and relax a little. I still wouldn’t wear a tight dress, but I guess I didn’t have to dress like the blackPenelope Garciaeither.

“Alright, let’s do this before I change my mind.” I sighed resolutely as my friends cheered gleefully. I really hope I didn’t regret my twenty-ninth birthday celebration.

“Great! Let me get my bag. I have a surprise for you!” Shelby cackled, leaving Emani and me to stare after her.

“I’m going to regret this.” I sighed.

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Who's That Girl

ANDERSON

"Come on, man. It's Friday, for goodness sakes." My best friend, Brady, sighs in frustration.

I try not to sigh because I know what's coming next. "I know what day it is, Brady," I respond in my usual no-nonsense manner.

We go through this same conversation every Friday. It's been five years since we started our own social media app, and Brady thinks we are in a place where we can finally relax and enjoy all the money that we've made. I don't see it that way.

We started Maniacal Sports at the beginning of all the social media craze. It took us longer to get our product out there because the market became saturated with applications. However, we stuck with it and now we have a gold mine on our hands. We learned that people want consistency and easy accessibility, and that's what our app provides. We established our company, TechX-us A&M, in support of our application.

We thought our company name was clever because we are Texas boys, and Brady's last name is Adams and mine is McNair. That's the only thought we put into naming our company because our main focus is on developing our applications.

We began with Maniacal Sports. Our biggest and most successful application is a be all do all sports application. There are sports stats for every game imaginable. We

even have stats for video games and E-sports. Our users can connect with other fans live during any sporting event. They can also connect and play virtual team sports as well as solo games. Once we were featured on ESPN, our downloads picked up and now we have over fifty million users in North America with plans to expand into Europe.

I can't slack off with all of our plans and go to a club on a Friday night like Brady wants me to. I have shit to do. Hell, he has shit to do as well.

"Anderson, dude, we have finally made it. We are multi-millionaires, not that you act like it." Brady pauses with a shake of his shaggy, blonde hair. "You need to live a little before you burn yourself out. You'll be no good to anyone if you're rocking back and forth in a corner somewhere."

"Brady, stop being dramatic. When have you ever known me to go crazy?" I shake my head. My best friend has always been the one to try to get me to relax more. But I didn't grow up in the same type of a home as he had.

Although I never wanted for anything materialistic, my parents were not the nurturing type. I had to learn from a very young age to do everything for myself, which is why I don't leave the coding up to our employees. Although they're capable, I would rather do the job myself so I'll know it will be done correctly. I also get completely obsessive when it comes to doing things the right way.

"Anderson, I'm not being dramatic. By the way, I hate when you say shit like that." Brady frowned before he continued with his rant. "I've known you most of my life. I know when you're on the verge of burn-out. We have too much shit going on for you to do that right now."

I stop typing on my computer to look at my friend. Brady's voice is laced with concern, and I see the seriousness reflecting in his worried green eyes. I have

been working around the clock for months to get the new features ready, but I don't feel like I've done anything more than what I usually do. I may not have ever gone "crazy," but I've had my episodes in the past.

At the memory of my last "burn-out" episode, I pause to take in Brady's words. I can't remember the last time I'd had a decent night's sleep or the last day I'd had off. I frown deeply. I know my compulsions are taking over again. Maybe I do need a break?

Sometimes, I get so caught up that it's almost manic. But what Brady's talking about doesn't happen often and hasn't for a long while. I know I won't burn-out again. I sigh in regret because I know that Brady is right. I definitely need a break. However, I know that I will regret going to a club tonight. I hate going to clubs, but if it will get him off my back.

"Alright, I'll go to the damn club tonight." I almost snarled the words, but Brady nods with a smirk on his face.

"Great! You can relax this weekend, and I'll let you work until your heart's content at TechConnex weekend," Brady smiles.

"Damn! I forgot all about TechCon." I rub my hand down my bearded face. I must be working too hard if I forgot about the most exclusive technology conference of the year.

I look forward to going to that every year and I blanked. Damn.

"Yeah, I kinda figured you did. But no worries. I'm here to make sure your workaholic ass relaxes."

"Uh-huh. I'm the one you're worried about relaxing." I shake my head as my face

breaks into a grin.

Brady is genuinely concerned about my mental wellbeing, but I also know my oldest friend loves a good party. And he will absolutely, without a doubt, reap the benefits from his mission to get me to relax.

“Listen, why don’t I bring Jason and Tobin, and we can do a proper hangout,” Brady suggests, rubbing his hands together. I can tell by the twinkle in his eye and his supervillain gestures that I will be in for a long night of debauchery.

“Alright, call the guys,” I say with a roll of my eyes. “But you need to remember, Brady, we’re thirty-year-old men, not children. Going out and getting shit faced and acting like assholes isn’t good for our company.” I couldn’t help the lecture that spilled from my lips.

Brady might be one of the smartest guys I know, but he still behaved like a child at times. And although I agree that I need to relax, the last thing we needed was to have any incidents that would cause us trouble.

“Dude, I don’t need your speeches. Like you said, I’m a grown ass man. You out of all people don’t need to remind me what’s at stake if we fuck around right now. We just need to go let off some steam before the conference. All work and no play makes for a dull Anderson. Besides, once we finish updating the new features, then we can have an actual vacation and party,” Brady responded with a slight frown on his face.

I know that I gave him a lot of shit, but I needed his reassurance that his old ways wouldn’t come back to haunt us because I am certainly not in a place where I can babysit him and get our investors to believe in our work.

“Okay,” I sigh, resigned. “I won’t bring it up again. You can vacation and act as wild as you want after the launch of our new features.” I look pointedly at Brady. He nods

his acceptance of my words, and I hope to hell that I won't regret this.

* * *

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I can't shake this nervous feeling that I have in the pit of my stomach. I didn't do anything spectacular to get ready. My short, dark brown hair is low maintenance, and I decided to leave my scruff on my face instead of shaving. My crystal blue eyes look tired, but only sleep and my project's completion will help with that. I dress casually in a pair of dark jeans and a black button-down shirt.

As I exit my Uber, I spot my friend, Jason, standing by the entrance. His six-foot-five-inch muscular frame and onyx colored skin is drawing a massive amount of attention from the women waiting to get into the club. I can already tell by the size of the line that I will not be a fan of this place. I hate crowds. Still, I try my best not to frown as I make my way over to him.

"Hey, man! Long time no see," Jason greets me as his face breaks into a bright smile. His dark brown eyes sparkle with their usual mischief.

"I know, man. You know how shit is." I shrug as we give each other the one arm man hug in greeting.

Jason Achebe is known for his smooth charm and his easy going personality. We met at boarding school. His parents were African diplomats, and mine, well... they were neglectful. My parents never wanted me around, so they used to send me off whenever they could. However, I was grateful that Dr. and Mrs. Achebe were so welcoming. I spent a lot of my holidays with them when I wasn't at Brady's house. Jason is one of my closest friends, and he was also one of the most responsible. I'm actually glad he came out, so I wouldn't have to babysit Brady and Tobin by myself.

"How long have you been waiting?" I ask Jason as I look down at my watch. We

were supposed to have met at eleven-thirty. It was early for a Friday night, but I really didn't want to be here. So, the sooner we went in, the sooner I could leave.

"Just got here," Jason responded, smiling at a group of women who openly ogled him as they walked past giggling.

Before I could grumble about Brady and Tobin being late, I see them strolling up the sidewalk like a couple of male models. Tobin's all-American style coupled with Brady's surfer dude aura made them look like they'd just walked out of an Abercrombie store.

"Hey! What's good, fellas?" Jason nodded, and we all gave the one arm hug and pat in greeting. We all have been friends for years, but since we are all knee-deep in our chosen professions, we rarely get to hang out.

Instead of heading to the back of the line, we go straight to the gargantuan mountain of a man guarding the door. We may look like a group of ordinary guys, but we're worth almost a billion dollars easy between us.

"What's up, Dez! How are the ladies tonight?" Brady asks the bouncer, rubbing his hands together like he's about to partake in the world's biggest feast.

I shake my head with a low chuckle. It also comes as no surprise that Brady knows the bouncer's name. My friend loves a good party, and this place definitely looks like the hottest club on the block.

"Aww, man, you know I only let in the premium. It's all twenties in there tonight," Dez, the bouncer, responds with a little smirk. He stands to the side as he clicks his number counter and waves to a girl to stamp our hands.

Once we enter the establishment, Brady is once again chatting with another club

employee who leads us up to a VIP section of the club. The balcony overlooks the massive dance floor and a large bar that lines the entirety of the space's back wall. There have to be at least ten bartenders working their asses off to fill the drink orders.

Although I shouldn't be surprised that the club is already packed because of the long ass line outside, I must admit that I am. It's early as hell, and this place is filled with bodies. The music is a mix of top forty with a little old school hip hop thrown in for good measure. The crowd is pretty diverse. There are all different kinds of people here, and even though, usually, I'm not too fond of the club atmosphere, this place is alright.

I'm relaxing on the large sectional sofa, babysitting a beer, when a group of women comes into the VIP. My eyes follow one of the women without my permission. I can't take my eyes off the sway of her hips in the sexy, red, off the shoulder dress. She's a short, little thing, probably only five-four or so, but damn did she have curves for days.

"Damn!" I heard another voice exclaim, but I didn't dare take my eyes off the beauty to see who said it.

My eyes traveled over her voluptuous, full figure. Her breasts were large and plump, and although her waist tucked in slightly, it wasn't a caricature. She definitely wasn't a stick. She had meat on her bones and that meat was round and succulent. Her thighs were thick, and her calves were pronounced by the little wedged heels she wore.

I'm not going to lie and say I skipped her face and went straight to her body, but in my defense, her beautiful breasts were calling me. My eyes finally made it back to her face, and I was not disappointed. Her dark brown eyes were framed with long, dark lashes, and I could tell she didn't have on a lot of makeup, if she wore any at all. Her full lips were wide with the top one slightly larger than the bottom. They were shiny, and I couldn't tell if she was wearing some kind of gloss or if it was because

she kept nervously running her tongue over them.

I almost groaned at the motion of her tongue swiping over her mouth. I'm not a creep and I usually wouldn't openly ogle a woman, but it was something about her that made me want to know who she was. One question kept running through my mind. Who is that?

Party Girl

KAYLA

"I can't believe ya'll put me in this ridiculous outfit," I huff as I pull down the shortest dress I have ever worn in my life. I should've been more suspicious of Shelby when she insisted that she had a surprise for me.

I could've easily said no, but I didn't want to seem ungrateful. My friends dropped everything to rush over and cheer me up. The least I could do is put on a dress that Shelby got me for my birthday. Under normal circumstances, I would have thanked her for the dress and buried it in the back of my closet.

"Girl, please. That dress is bangin'. These dudes are drooling at all that ass," Shelby dismissed with a wave of her hand.

I did see them looking, but I'm pretty sure they were watching my friends. Although I am awkward in my off the shoulder bandage dress, my friends are killing their outfits. Emani pulled half of her long, waist-length braids up into a high bun while the rest cascaded down her back. Her bright orange ruffled romper had flowy bell sleeves and a peekaboo neckline that complemented her smooth, brown skin.

Shelby wore a deep purple tied crop top with a matching thigh-high skirt and a pair of stilts that she calls heels. With those things on, her small five-two height sky-rocketed

to at least five-eight. I have no clue how she walks in those things.

“Let’s get a drink and sit in our section for a bit,” Emani yells over the loud music.

Shelby and I nod and head to the little bar that’s tucked into the back of the VIP.

I wasn’t shocked that Shelby was able to get us a table in VIP. She’s a junior executive at a marketing firm. Her job, most of the time, is to plan parties for their high-end clientele. If there’s one thing Shelby can do, is get you into a party. However, this place is beyond nice. It is extremely upscale, and here in the VIP section, I have already seen a few celebrities.

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As we give our drink orders to the friendly bartender, I feel the hairs on my arm stand up. I try not to make it obvious that I'm looking around, but I'm not graceful enough to pull that off. So, I casually turn and look around as if I'm admiring the décor. Although VIP is full, it isn't packed like it is downstairs.

My eyes run over the crowd, and nobody stands out. So, I blow off my feelings as my nervousness at being out of my comfort zone. Suddenly, I lock eyes with the most beautiful pair of bright blue eyes I have ever seen. I inhale quickly. It is as if I've fallen into a pool of crystal clear water.

The intensity of his gaze is enough to make me break out in goose bumps. I've never had this kind of a reaction to anyone in my life. I can't seem to break eye contact with the man. Time feels like it has completely stopped, and the only thing I can hear is my shallow breaths along with my increasing heartbeat.

After what seems like an eternity, the man turns away to say something to a guy beside him. I blink rapidly, trying my best to get out of the haze I've been placed in by a simple look. I look away quickly, but I can't help but steal a second glance while he's distracted.

The man has short brown hair and a scruffy beard. On anyone else, I would say it would look unkempt. However, on him, it's sexy. His strong jaw gives his face masculinity that you find in old Hollywood stars. He has dark eyebrows and dark lashes that make his eyes stand out against his olive complexion. I can't tell how tall he is because he's sitting, but it wouldn't matter if he were my height because I know fine when I see it.

When my eyes make it to his lips, they are plump. I bite my bottom lip as I study him. When the same plump lips I'm admiring turn up into a smirk, I feel my eyes go wide. I turn completely away from him in mortification. Oh, my goodness! He caught me staring. How embarrassing.

"Kay?! Dang, girl!"

I look up at Emani, who is looking at me with a raised eyebrow. "Sorry, Mani. What's up?" I lick my lips again, trying to get a hold of myself. I had just broken up with my boyfriend. Why am I looking at some random white man at the club? It is so unlike me.

"Yeah, I've been trying to give you your drink for five minutes. Are you okay?" Emani asks with a worried expression.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm good. Sorry, I was just lost in my thoughts." I give her a small smile, and she gives me a sympathetic smile in return as she hands me my drink.

I'm glad she thinks I'm just moping, and she didn't catch me staring at a random dude like he's a juicy steak that I'm about to devour. I would never hear the end of it.

"Let's go sit down." I motion to our section, but Shelby stops me before I can walk away.

"Not yet, sis. We're about to take this shot!" I roll my eyes, but I don't even waste my breath trying to protest.

Shelby hands a shot glass full of brown liquor to me and then to Emani. We hold our glasses up and clink them together. I just down it without asking what it is. I choke as soon as the hot liquid hits my throat. Emani pats my back as I do my best not to vomit. I rub my chest as tears pool in my eyes. I scrunch up my face in horror while

doing my best not to fall out.

“Shelby! What the hell was that?” I ask between coughs.

Shelby cackles loudly. “That was loosen the hell up juice. Here, have another one!”

Before I can think better of it, I take another shot and down it. The second one burns but not as bad as the first, and before I know it, I’m not feeling as awkward as I was when we first got here. As a matter of fact, I think I may need another one of those.

* * *

I wake up with a massive headache and the grossest taste in my mouth. I don’t even try to crack open my eyes because I can feel how dry they are. “What the hell did I do last night?”

“I wish you would’ve done me last night,” a deep voice replies.

“Ahhhhh! The hell?!” I scream and start swinging before I can become a statistic.

Somebody had to have broken into my house while I was drunk because there’s no other explanation for an unknown male voice to be answering my questions.

“Wait! Wait! I’m not going to hurt you, Kayla!” the stranger yells as he dodges my wild swings. I finally stop when my movements make the pressure in my head unbearable.

“Wait! How do you know my name?” I question dumbly.

The guy drops his arms to where I can see his face. His blue eyes are filled with curiosity and... worry? He seems familiar, but I know that I don’t know this man. I

look down at myself and instantly feel relief. I have on clothes. Not the clothes that I went out in, but at least I'm not naked with this stranger.

I look at him, and although he's shirtless, he still has on jeans. I start to ask what he's doing in my house and who he is, but as I take in my surroundings, I notice that I'm not at home.

"My gawd, what in the world? Where are my friends... ex-friends?" I amend out loud. If those heffa's let me go home with some stranger while I was drunk, then we can't be friends anymore. I know I'm a grown woman... but still.

"Your friends are in the other room. Nothing happened, Kay. We just talked. That's it," he says in a deep, raspy voice that sends chills all over my body.

"Ohkay. So, ummm..." I look around awkwardly. "I uh... sorry I tried to hit you."

He chuckles and ruffles his sleep-roughened hair. "It's okay. I didn't realize just how drunk you were last night. I mean you were pretty talkative and friendly, but I didn't suspect that you were drunk."

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I furrow my brows in confusion. He couldn't be talking about me. I have never been called "talkative" in my entire life. Not once, by anyone. I had to be more than drunk. Somebody must've slipped me a mickey.

"I was talkative?" I point to myself and look around the room as if someone else will appear.

"Yeah. Extremely talkative." He gives me a lazy smile that makes his eyes twinkle. He really is a cutie.

His brown hair has a sort of wave to it that gives him a boyish look. However, that chest of his is all man. The bulk and muscles staring at me unashamed make me want to lick my lips. This man is fine.

"So... uh, what's your name?" I ask, completely embarrassed. I just woke up with a shirtless man, and even though I've racked my brain, his name does not come to mind.

"Anderson. Anderson McNair." He sticks his hand out, and I shake it.

I probably shouldn't feel shy after we've clearly spent the night together, but when his large hand engulfs mine, I feel an instant connection like never before. I drop my eyes from his intense gaze and slowly pull my hand from his.

"Kayla Jones. But you probably already know that. Right?" I question, finally looking up.

“It’s nice to officially meet you, Kayla Jones.” He smiles wide at me, and I can’t help but return his smile.

The pounding of my heart and the fluttering of the butterflies in my stomach tells me I might be in more trouble than I bargained for. I want to regret taking those shots, but looking at this gorgeous Adonis in front of me...Regret is the last thing on my mind!

* * *

ANDERSON

I had no idea that Kayla was drunk. Her outgoing personality attracted me from the start. When I initially saw her last night, I couldn’t take my eyes off of her. She was glowing, but I couldn’t help but notice her apprehension. I thought maybe being at the club wasn’t her thing. I mean it isn’t mine, so it’s not hard to imagine that someone didn’t want to be in a club.

When her friends pulled her out on the dance floor, I could see Kayla relax and let go. I’m not sure what they were celebrating, but they were obviously out for a special occasion. When her friend, Shelby, came over to hit on Jason, I couldn’t help but pull Kayla into a conversation.

Kayla sat down and right away started asking me questions. Her questions weren’t invasive, and she listened intently to all my answers. I loved how her eyes lit up with excitement when I told her that I was the CEO of a start-up company that made social media apps. She told me how she worked in IT, and from that point on, we sat and geeked out over the latest technology. I thought our conversation was genuine, and maybe it was, but now I’m sure I had a heartfelt conversation with her drunk alter ego. I don’t know how I should feel about that.

“So, I’m pretty sure everyone is already awake. I heard voices earlier.” I break the awkward silence. I glance at my clock and notice it’s just after ten in the morning.

“Okay. Ummm...” Kayla looks around nervously, and it makes me cringe. I spent half the night talking to this fascinating woman, and it’s as if it had never happened. Disappointment wouldn’t be a strong enough word to describe the gut-wrenching feeling I have in the pit of my stomach.

I guess the only thing that was left for me to do was to make her remember.

That Was Awkward

ANDERSON

“So, your girl didn’t remember anything from last night?” Brady asks shortly after the girls left. I knew one of my friends was bound to ask. When we came out of my room, Kayla’s behavior was a one-eighty from how she’d acted a few short hours before.

“Not a thing.” I can hear the regret in my own voice, so I know the guys could hear it, too.

I still can’t believe that Kayla didn’t remember me. If she was that drunk, I’m kind of surprised that after only a few hours of sleep that the alcohol had worn off.

“Damn, dude, that’s tough.” Jason shakes his head with a frown.

I normally would chalk it up as a one-night attraction and leave it at that, but it has been an extremely long time since I felt that kind of a connection with a woman. I was confused as hell, but damn I was willing to do anything to get to know her better.

“That must’ve been awkward as fuck when she woke up,” Brady responds with a grimace.

I nod my head, but I don’t respond. Awkward was definitely a correct descriptor. Here, I thought once we woke up, we’d get food, relax, and talk more. I was even going to ask Kayla out to dinner tonight. I was still going to ask her, but she ran out of here so fast that I thought her ass was on fire.

“Well, I’m glad that sexy Shelby wasn’t drunk. Not that she could forget me anyway.” Jason smiles, showing all his teeth.

“Man, please. Shelby just likes to flirt. She wasn’t really interested in you,” Tobin says with a scowl.

I feel like I missed something, but with those two, who knows? I wouldn’t exactly call Jason and Tobin friends, but they are cordial. At least, they usually are.

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“She does like to flirt, but she wasn’t flirting with you. Is that why your panties are in a bunch on this great morning?”

“Fellas, cut the shit. It’s too early, and you’re both too old to be arguing over a chick you just met. Let the shit go. She wasn’t interested in either of you,” Brady says, shaking his head with a little smirk.

I definitely missed something.

“I don’t even want to know what happened,” I tell them both as I go into my kitchen and get a bottle of water out of the fridge. I smile at the fact that we are in my large high-rise apartment. I’m not quite in the penthouse yet, but I’ll be there soon.

I purchased this place with my own money. I was proud as fuck when I was able to write a check and pay for it outright without asking anybody for shit, especially my parents. It was a magical day when I signed the deed. I wanted this place for the location and proximity to our downtown Dallas office.

“Man, you know those two are always in competition!” Brady yells. I roll my eyes. I don’t know what started the unnecessary bullshit between Tobin and Jason, but I’m glad that they’re not often in the same vicinity of each other.

“Ya’ll have been fighting since you met. Aren’t ya’ll tired?” I ask as I walk back into the living room with my water.

The guys are sprawled out on the large, gray sofas and matching chairs. The décor in my apartment is classy, but it’s still a bachelor pad. I don’t have a lot of knickknacks

or a ton of pictures, but I have a few art pieces and framed vintage posters. The interior designer I'd hired was very good at her job and she stuck to my specific requests. I have money, but I didn't want some over-the-top gaudy bullshit in my home. I grew up with that and I will never live like that again.

"So, are you going to try to see Kayla again?" Tobin asks as he stretches lazily.

"I don't know. You saw how awkward that shit was," I reply, but I know the words are a lie as soon as they leave my lips.

I know for a fact that I'll be chasing Kayla down. The connection we had wasn't a fluke; I know it wasn't. And the only way to prove it to myself is to date a sober Kayla. The only thing left to do is to figure out how to get a sober Kayla to talk to me without running away. The only problem was, I didn't have any clue how I would get that to happen.

"You got her number, right?" Jason asks, and I groan because of course, I didn't get her number. We were too busy laughing and talking and enjoying our instant chemistry. I never even thought to ask her for her number because I was already making plans for us to go out for brunch.

"Shit!" I run my hands through my hair in frustration.

"Don't worry about it, man. I got Shelby's number and I know she won't mind giving up Kayla's number," Jason replies, smirking at Tobin.

"And if Shelby doesn't answer, Jason, I'll be happy to text her myself since I got her number, too." Tobin smirks back, and Jason sneers.

Again, I shake my head at the idiots. "As long as one of you morons can get Kayla's number, I don't care who. And neither of you better fuck this up for me with your

dumbass game,” I can’t help but warn.

If their stupid competition gets in the way of my getting to see Kayla again, I’ll kick both of their asses.

“Hey, you’re the moron who talked to a girl all night without getting her number. Don’t give us shit,” Tobin responds, laughing.

Even though it’s funny, I don’t laugh. I scowl at him because I know he’s right. It was a mistake that I won’t make again. Kayla will be mine as soon as I get her phone number. Even if I have to hire a private detective to find out what it is, I will.

* * *

KAYLA

“I can’t believe you heffa’s let me sleep with a stranger!” I groused at my two ex-best friends.

“Girl, please. Your ass is grown!” Shelby dismisses me with a loud cackle.

“No, really, Kayla, you were adamant about going back to Anderson’s apartment,” Emani tries to soothe me, but I still can’t believe I would insist on going back to some random guy’s apartment.

“But you guys knew that I was drunk.” I know I sound whiny, but I’ve never done anything like this in my life.

The awkwardness and tension that cloaked the room once Anderson and I entered this morning was something I had never felt before. I was so embarrassed that everyone else seemed to be so well acquainted, and I had amnesia.

Granted, I'm not much of a drinker. And come to think of it, I have never been drunk. But I didn't expect to forget everything that I had done.

"We were all drunk," Shelby replies to my whine. "Besides, Andy took good care of you."

"He doesn't like to be called Andy." My eyes go wide because I remembered something. Flashes of his handsome face frowning when Shelby called him Andy pops into my head.

"So, I guess Bucky Barnes does remember something," Emani says, smiling.

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“Who the heck is Bucky Barnes?” I ask with my brows furrowed.

“He had amnesia in the Captain America movie.” Emani gives me a look as if I’m supposed to know what she’s talking about.

“Emani,” I say, exasperated.

“Mani. We’ve gone over this. Your obscure movie references only make sense to you, honey.” Shelby chuckles.

“Hey! Captain America is not obscure. Anyways, Kayla is an IT nerd. She should know all about comic book stuff,” Emani defends herself with a pout.

“Just because I’m a computer nerd does not make me a comic nerd. Please don’t group us all together.” I scoff, and both of them chuckle.

“Anyway, let’s get back on topic,” Shelby says, before sipping on a mimosa she made.

Once we got back to my apartment, we all got cleaned up and made brunch. Although we hadn’t planned to stay out all night, we did plan on having a sleepover, so we were prepared with breakfast food and drinks.

“Uhh...” I stall, not wanting to talk about my embarrassment anymore.

“So, did you wake up naked? I mean I know you say you don’t remember, but at least, do you feel a little bowlegged?” Shelby asks, and I roll my eyes.

“And just how does one feel bowlegged, Shelby?” Emani asks with an arch in her brow.

“Don’t act like ya’ll are virgins up in here. You know if you get fucked down really good, you wake up sore and walking funny,” Shelby answers with a mischievous glint in her brown eyes.

I wish I could say I know what she’s talking about, but I don’t. I’ve only had two lovers in my life, and neither of them had caused me to become sore or walk funny. I begin to wonder if I have missed out. We talk about sex all the time. Well, my friends talk. I normally just nod and smile and pretend to listen. Maybe I should pay more attention while my friends are talking about sex. I might just learn something.

“Well, I guess with your explanation, I have felt bowlegged before.” Emani giggles as she and Shelby high-five again.

Once again, I shake my head at my friends’ silliness, but I smile. These two women are the only people I can count on to lift the clouds from my sour mood. Not only had they come and saved me from my depression after the shock of having a cheating boyfriend, but they stayed with me.

“Well, I haven’t ever felt bowlegged,” I finally admit with a shrug.

Two sets of wide eyes looked in my direction. Before they say anything, I know what’s coming.

“It’s okay. I knew Warren’s good looks were a waste.” Shelby shakes her head with a suck of her teeth and a deep frown.

“Let’s not bring up ‘he who shall not be named.’ He doesn’t deserve our acknowledgment.” Emani’s voice is serious, but the twinkle in her eye lets me know

that I can talk about my ex with her anytime.

Surprisingly, though, I don't want to talk about Warren. I don't want to dwell on him at all. If I do, I know I will fall into a dark pit that I'm not sure I can get myself out of. I put so much of my worth into him and our relationship, and now that it's over, I'm afraid.

I'm deathly afraid of what's next for me and I would rather focus on anything else.

"So, are we going to talk about how Andy looked like he might have had you walking bowlegged if you let him hit?"

I lied. I don't want to focus on that either.

"No, ma'am, we are not." I fold my arms over my chest, shaking my head.

"Let it go, Shelby. Why don't we talk about your fast behind? I saw you give your number to Tobin and Jason." Emani turns the conversation to Shelby.

"Well, you weren't paying close enough attention cause I gave it to Brady, too." Shelby cackles.

I'm relieved that the conversation is off of me and onto Shelby's shenanigans. Because I was afraid that if we kept talking about the gorgeous stranger that I just might remember something else from last night, and my mortification just wouldn't let me do that. I am awkward at the best of times. I can't imagine how I behaved when I was inebriated.

The fact that my girls hadn't said too much about my behavior has me even more anxious. They know me better than anyone, so the fact they're not teasing me means one of two things: either I made a fool of myself, and they don't want to embarrass

me or they didn't see me make a fool of myself. Either way, I'm not ready to face the truth of what happened last night. Hopefully, my friends will let me hide my head in the sand and forget about the beautiful stranger named Anderson McNair.

Memories

KAYLA

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:00 am

I've slowly regained my memory of what happened on Saturday night, and from what I can remember, Anderson and I seemed to have a lot in common. We spent the night laughing and talking about technology out of all things. Warren and I hardly ever had conversations about technology because he never wanted to talk about work. And I wanted to please him, so we didn't discuss techy stuff. But I really enjoyed sharing my thoughts on the process of how to develop and launch a social media app. It was fascinating. I feel bad that I didn't immediately remember all of the interesting things we'd spoken about.

Remembering everything that had gone on this weekend made me realize the rollercoaster of emotions I've been on since Friday night.

Now, it's Monday, and I have to go to work and pray that I don't run into Warren. Going through a break-up is bad enough, but the way we broke up was a complete mess. I just want to do my best to forget all about the humiliation.

I nervously enter the building. I'm looking around like I stole something. I nod at the security guard and swipe my badge. I look at the elevator and the stairs. I bite my lip in indecision. If I take the elevator, I will get to the fourth floor faster, but I might be stuck on there with Warren. If I take the stairs that nobody uses, then I won't run into him, but then my out of shape behind will be struggling to make it up the stairs.

I look behind me and see everyone filing into the building. I don't want to take the chance on running into Warren, so I take a deep breath and head toward the stairwell.

Once I finally get to the fourth floor, I inhale deeply. Not only because I'm out of breath, but because I didn't run into anyone while climbing the stairs. As I enter the

door, I cautiously look around. I get to my office and plop down in my chair, relieved. One morning down and a million more to go. I frown at the thought. It has only been a few days since my break-up, and although my friends were able to temporarily get my mind off of Warren, I still had to face the fact that my relationship and future plans went up in smoke.

My plans for a family were done. I'm all alone in the world again. I still had my friends, but there's nothing like belonging to someone else. Being a wife and a mother is the only way that I'll have the family I've always dreamed of. Now, it is once again an unreachable goal.

I spent most of the day drowning in my dark thoughts. By the time lunch rolled around, my emotions were going down like the Titanic. However, before I could get to the point of no return, my co-worker, Ken, knocks on my door. He comes in with a fake sympathetic smile plastered on his face, and I want to groan. There's no way he knows about Warren and me.

Warren would never in a million years, volunteer that he was gay to the people at work. Hell, he didn't even tell me. So, I'm not sure why Ken is giving me sympathy, even if it is fake as hell.

"Good afternoon, Ken. What can I do for you?" I ask, ignoring the look on his face.

"Afternoon, Kayla. I just came to check on you," Ken replies.

I frown. In all of the years that I have worked at TRI, Ken Snyder has never come to "check on me" for anything. As a matter of fact, Ken barely talks to me. He is in a not so secret competition with me for some reason.

"I'm fine," I respond.

I purposely didn't ask why he was checking on me. That would mean more conversation, and I really didn't want that with Ken of all people.

"Oh, that's good. I'm sorry to hear about Warren breaking up with you," Ken says, sitting down in the chair in front of my desk.

I shift my facial expression to neutral. I'm not at all surprised that Warren changed the narrative on our break-up. I am surprised that he'd volunteered the false information so quickly, though. I'm suspicious about what could've caused news about our break-up to come out. But by the look on Ken's face, he's all too willing and eager to tell me.

"Thank you for your...sympathy. But there's no need for you to be sorry about anything regarding my personal relationships, Ken. Now, did you need anything relating to business today? Because I really don't have time to engage in office gossip." I quirk an eyebrow in challenge.

I'm not normally this straightforward, but my personal life is off-limits. I have never spoken to anyone at work about my home life and I definitely won't start today with Ken. No sir.

"I just came to see if my co-worker needed some support. I'm not here to be accused of gossiping." Ken sneered with a huff as he stood from the chair.

I give him a blank stare. He wouldn't get a reaction out of me. Although I'm not particularly outspoken, I refuse to be run over anymore. There was a reason Warren thought he could cheat on me and I would stay. It is a lesson that I am learning the hard way.

"Thanks for the support. Have a blessed day, Ken."

I know he hears the sarcasm in my voice because he frowns then huffs once more before marching toward the door.

He didn't say anything else, and I am glad he didn't. I'm not sure if he had pushed that I wouldn't have caved. It is part of my personality to want to be a people pleaser, even to people I don't care for.

After the little visit from Ken, I stayed in my office to avoid the obvious gossip that was spreading like wildfire. Part of me wanted to know what lies Warren was telling, but the smart part told me not to entertain it at all.

I sigh in exasperation. I really wish that I could go back to being invisible. When nobody noticed who I was or what I was doing with my life. It was a much simpler way to live. Even if it was a little lonely and extremely boring, at least I didn't have to deal with public humiliation.

When I finally left work, I was thankful that nobody else felt the need to "show me support" or come by my office to be nosy. I was also glad that I hadn't seen or heard from Warren all day.

Warren called my phone all day Saturday, but by the evening, the calls went silent. He hadn't even bothered texting. The fight wasn't even there, and now he's telling everyone he broke up with me. What an ass!

As I was relaxing from a semi-stressful day and doing my best not to fall victim to my dark thoughts, my cell rang. It could only be one of three people, well two now, so I didn't bother looking at the Caller ID before picking up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Kayla. It's Anderson."

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I pulled the phone away from my face in shock. Did I give him my number? I thought I remembered most of what happened Saturday night, but I guess not.

“Hey. Umm, how are you?” I ask awkwardly.

“I’m great now that I’m talking to you.” The charm dripped from his every word, and I flush with embarrassment.

It’s not often that anyone gives me praise, not even when I was with Warren. The thought makes me frown. I shouldn’t be feeling starved for attention when I’ve only been out of my relationship for a few days.

“Well, I’m glad that you’re great,” I reply, trying to sound like a normal human and not some squeaky voiced teenager who seems to make an appearance every time I’m nervous.

“So, I was wondering if you would like to go out to dinner next week? I want to go sooner, but I’m going out of town and next week is when I’ll be available.” Although he’s charming and gorgeous as all get out, I’m not ready to go on a date with anybody.

“Uh, well, how about you text me when you’re available? We’ll make plans then,” I respond with my fingers crossed. Hopefully, if he texts me, I can turn him down in a text message instead of speaking to him and telling him no. I would never be able to say no to his face, even if it’s not actually in person.

“That sounds like a plan. Hey, I have to go, but I’ll speak to you soon,” Anderson

replies, and I say goodbye, relieved that he agreed so easily.

“I need to call Shelby and see how she handles rejecting guys,” I say out loud. Although Shelby is blunt, she doesn’t hurt guys’ feelings. As a matter of fact, whenever she tells them no, they chase her even harder. So, maybe Shelby is the wrong friend to ask.

* * *

The rest of my week was pleasantly uneventful. I didn’t hear any more rumors around the office, and nobody approached me, asking about my relationship. However, by Friday, I was a wreck.

My mind kept going back to all the things that I could’ve done differently in my life. Maybe I’ve been focused on the wrong things. My main motivation in life has been not wanting to be alone. Since I was a kid, I’ve only wanted to belong to a family. Somehow, I have lost myself in that need and I have neglected the rest of me.

I know what I needed to do. I need to make a list of all the things I want to do before I turn thirty. It will give me an entire year to accomplish my goals. I smile as I get my notepad and pen out and begin my list. Writing down these things makes them a priority for me. It also helps my need for control.

“A list is a brilliant idea! I don’t know why I haven’t done this before!” I say out loud, excited that I have something to focus on.

Before I can really get started, my phone rings again, and this time, I check to see who the caller is before I answer.

“Hey, Shell. What’s up?” I ask in a much better mood.

“Hey, Kay. Me and Mani decided to grab a bite to eat. You wanna go?” Shelby asks.

Normally, I would say no, but in lieu of my list, I decide that it’s a good a time as any to start now.

“Sure, tell me where you guys are headed, and I’ll meet you there.”

“We’re going to Sparelli’s on Greenville,” Shelby answers, and I can hear the shock in her voice. I know she’s surprised that I didn’t automatically say no. But I’ll explain myself when we have dinner.

It doesn’t take me too long to get ready because I keep my hair in my usual low bun, and I shower and change into a pair of loose fitting jeans and a plain blouse. The ride to lower Greenville Street doesn’t take long, and the parking is surprisingly easy. When I walk into the old style Italian eatery, I spot my friends quickly.

After we share hugs and greetings, we order our food and settle into a conversation. Shelby’s outrageous dating stories never get old, and once she’s finished with one that I know she has to be making up, the conversation turns to last weekend.

“So, what’s new? Did Anderson call?” Shelby asks, and Emani leans forward like I’m about to say something juicy, which I’m not.

“Yes, he called.”

“What did he say? Did he ask you out?” Emani asks in excitement.

“Yeah, but I think it’s too soon for me to be thinking about another man. Besides, dating is not on my list right now.” I frown at the thought of dealing with someone other than Warren.

Although Warren betrayed me, I was comfortable with him. I considered him my family even though we weren't married yet. I trusted him. I loved him. I miss him.

"It's never too soon to think about another man. And what is this list that you speak of?" Shelby questioned with interest flaring in her dark brown eyes.

I shrug my shoulders. I might as well tell my friends about the list. They would be happy to help me accomplish my goals. Plus, their feedback may help me. What could possibly go wrong?

Charming Bastard

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ANDERSON

After I got off the phone with Kayla, I knew it would be an uphill battle. Kayla was so self-assured when she was drunk, but speaking with her on the phone, I could hear uncertainty echo in her soft voice. It's amazing that she had such an open and free spirit while she was intoxicated. That uninhibited version of her was buried deep down, and I know I can bring it out of her. I just need a chance to make it happen.

But even with her obvious reluctance, Kayla intrigued the hell out of me. And that was potentially bad for her because I can be quite neurotic when I'm intrigued by something or in this case, someone.

My obsessive compulsions make me an excellent programmer and an even better developer. Being obsessive is also why I'm a multi-millionaire at thirty-one without my parents' wealth. When I'm determined, nothing can stop me, and my single-minded fixation on Kayla will get me what I want.

So, the first thing I need to make is a plan of action. It's the only way I'll be able to see Kayla again. I can't leave anything up to chance. Once I'm able to get her on a date, I will show her all the benefits of being the object of my affections. Maybe if I figure out what makes her tick, then I'll be able to leave her alone and refocus my attention on A&M.

"TechCon should be interesting this year. I heard Pearson Grant is the keynote speaker," Brady breaks my deep concentration, and I'm both annoyed and relieved. I can't spend all weekend obsessing over Kayla. I'm here to help my company.

I look up at him and nod, getting my thoughts back on track. Pearson Grant just became a billionaire after his company Media Tech Innovation became a household name with the opening of his new division. Grant's company helped revolutionize applications, and it also gave me the courage to start developing my own social media platforms.

Now that we are about to expand to Europe and maybe even Canada, hearing Pearson Grant speak on how he became a billionaire is even more exciting news for the conference.

But even with the prospect of meeting one of my business idols doesn't begin to put my mind at rest. Kayla Jones is doing laps around my thoughts. I keep replaying the first time I saw her over and over. The way she laughs with her head thrown back without a care in the world. I want to experience that again without her being drunk. I know Kayla will be even more fascinating once I get to know her.

"Hey, are you okay?" I hear Brady ask.

I zoned out again. It has been happening for the last week. Initially, I didn't think anybody noticed, but now I can tell by Brady's narrow eyed stare that he knows something is up.

"Yeah, I'm good, man. I was just thinking about how we can get a meeting with Pearson Grant. It would help us get into the Canadian market. I heard his wife has some connections."

Brady nods, but his eyes light up with hope. Because Monique Grant is a well-kept secret in the technology world, she's the best at what she does, and it would be beneficial to A&M and me personally if we could get on her client list.

"It would be handy to have a woman like that on our team. She's a beast. I heard

about all the shit she helped Grant with behind the scenes after his episode on that one TV show,” Brady responds with a nod.

I nod in return. Only a select few knew about what Monique actually does for a living. We only know because our friend, Tobin, is Keifer Swanson’s cousin, and Keifer is now the Vice President of Operations at Media Tech Innovation.

In this industry, it’s good to know people, especially a billionaire tech guru. We don’t know him yet, but when I put my mind to something, I make it happen, which leads me back to Kayla Jones.

Kayla works for TRI. I pulled some strings and found out a little more about her. No matter how charming both Jason and Tobin thought they were, Shelby wouldn’t give Kayla’s number to either one of them. But, I’m pretty savvy when it comes to finding out information, so it wasn’t hard for me to get her number. It might have been slightly illegal, but I don’t care.

If Kayla would’ve turned me down, I wouldn’t have become a stalker or anything. I’m just determined when I want something. At least, that’s what I tell myself.

Once we get to the private airstrip, I can brood without interruption. A few of our senior engineers, one of our Public Relations Specialists Bethany Lester, Brady, his assistant Julia, and my assistant, Vance, are on the flight. We didn’t always travel private, but for a conference like this, it was more cost effective.

Although to outsiders, TechX-us A&M is new, we have the luxury of having backing from other millionaires. Of course, we struggled to prove ourselves, but once we made it, the connections we’d made in boarding school and college came in handy.

When we’re flying at a safe altitude, everyone starts moving around the cabin, laughing and talking. This may be a work trip, but it’s still taking place in Vegas, so

everyone is in party mode. It would usually bother me that everyone isn't focused on the company, but even I can't focus so I won't complain.

I start thinking of the many ways that I can get Kayla to go out with me without seeming like I'm a pushy bastard. I would suggest a group thing, but I don't want her to hide behind anyone else. I don't want to share her attention with anyone else anyway, so a group date is out. I may not be pushy, but I can admit that I'm definitely selfish.

It's too late to invite her to this conference, but maybe I can get her to go to another technology summit. Of course, that would have to be a third or fourth date. I don't think I could get her to go to a restaurant with me. I'm pretty sure she wouldn't go on a trip out of town.

However, if I find a conference in Dallas, she might be willing to go. That's what I'll do! I smile as a plan forms. I will find a Dallas tech conference to take Kayla to, even if I have to organize one myself.

* * *

When we touchdown in Vegas, my mind is set, and I am able to focus on getting a meeting with Pearson Grant. Brady has been talking nonstop, and even his overly enthusiastic chattering doesn't dampen my mood.

We all get checked into the Bellagio hotel where the conference is being held, and I get settled into my suite. I agreed to meet my team for dinner and drinks in a nonworking capacity for once. I'm looking forward to relaxing before we have to network.

Talking to people about my company has gotten easier over the years, but the tediousness of small talk with potential investors still irks my nerves. I've never been

a very social person, and it has always been a struggle for me not to be awkward. I've always said whatever was on my mind without taking into consideration how it may come across. Even though I've gotten better over time with my "bluntness," some people consider me rude. Even though I won't lie to please anyone, I don't want people to think I'm an asshole.

Even though I don't want to be purposely ill mannered, I've learned that my personality isn't for everyone. That's why I believe that Kayla and I could have something special. We laughed and talked for hours with me being my prickly self.

It's not that I can't be charming because I can. I can be the most charming bastard anyone has ever seen. Again, I just choose not to be. It's too much work, and it reminds me of my childhood. I hate pretending to be interested in things and people that I couldn't care less about. And one thing I hate more than anything is being fake. My parents are fake. When I was at home, they wanted me to be fake. It's bullshit, and as an adult, I do my best to stay away from fake shit.

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However, in my quest to be my most authentic self, people tend to take that as some sort of slight against them. I'm not unwilling to be polite. I just feel like politeness gets misconstrued as weakness. People often think they can negotiate with politeness. They can't.

My thoughts are interrupted by a very voluptuous black woman who taps me on my shoulder. I look up into her pretty face and smile. She smiles back and motions to the seat beside me. I've never had someone be so bold. It intrigues me, so I nod for her to sit down.

We've had dinner, and now we're at a loungy type bar. Of course, I was being antisocial while everyone was drinking and dancing. I instead chose to sit in some comfy chairs away from the action.

"You look like you need some company."

I skeptically raise my brow. My face, even in deep thought, never gives the impression that I want to have company. "And what about my look says that?" I question with a smirk.

She simply shrugs with a chuckle.

She sits back and crosses her shapely legs. Her brown skin glows, and it looks smooth to the touch. The berry color on her lips accentuates their fullness when she smiles, and the twinkle in her dark brown eyes tells me she's being mischievous.

"My name is Monique."

“Anderson.” We shake hands, and I notice the gigantic rock on her finger. I don’t know how I missed it, but it definitely gives the impression that she is very taken.

“You remind me of my husband. Brooding in a corner instead of relaxing like a normal human.”

I quirk my head to the side and really look at the woman in a nonsexual manner. It hits me all at once, and I feel like a complete idiot. Although she’s not a celebrity, I should’ve immediately recognized her.

“Wait. Monique... Grant?” I question, trying and failing to keep the awe out of my voice.

It was like I manifested her presence by talking about her with Brady. I never thought I would randomly see her in a bar, though. I thought I would have to schmooze and bribe a few people to get close to the Monique Grant.

Pearson Grant is known to be a tyrant, and I heard if you even look at his wife wrong, he would whoop your ass then bury your body, never to be seen again. Now, I’m not afraid of any man and I can hold my own in a fight, but I’m smart enough not to make unnecessary enemies, especially not one as successful and rich as Pearson.

“Yes. I’m Monique Grant. How’d you know that?” She quirks her head to the side with a curious expression on her face. And I can tell right away that she’s not being facetious. She really doesn’t know how well known she is.

“I... uhh... I own a technology firm. TechX-us A&M. You’re kinda famous in the tech world around Dallas.”

“Oh yeah! I’ve heard of you guys. You have a sports app, right?” Monique questions with a nod of recognition.

I smile and puff out my chest a little. “Yes! We own Maniacal Sports. How’d you know that?” It was my turn to ask. Even though we’re making our mark on the tech world, we’re still not well known.

“My husband is Pearson Grant, remember. If it has to do with technology, he knows about it. And in turn, so do I.” Monique smiles her beautiful smile at me, and I can’t help but return it.

“Speaking of your husband...” I say, looking around as if he will jump out at any minute.

“I’m surprised that you’re out in Vegas alone.”

“Yeah, well, just because I’m not surrounded by people doesn’t mean I’m alone.” Monique chuckles with a nod toward a wall behind us.

I turn and glance over my shoulder, and I’m shocked to see a very scary Asian man. I have no idea how I missed him. He’s a lot of things, huge, menacing, deadly looking, but inconspicuous isn’t one of them.

“Right. I guess someone in your position should have a bodyguard.”

“My position as what? A wife to a lunatic?” Monique chuckles again.

I nod my head because I’ve heard the stories.

“So, Anderson, are you going to tell me why you’re sitting in a corner by yourself brooding?”

“I’m not brooding. That’s just my regular face setting.” I smirk at her. But I can tell by the twist of her lips that she doesn’t believe me.

The last thing I'm going to do is tell my idol's wife about my woman problems. No matter how easy it is for me to talk to her, Monique is still a stranger. How would it look for me to drop all of my personal issues on her?

“Well, I can tell a stubborn man when I see one.” Monique shakes her head.

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Monique and I spend a few minutes talking about the future of our sports app and what all we would like to see accomplished as a company. With every word, I am more and more impressed with her technology knowledge.

“It was nice talking to you, Anderson.” Monique digs her hand into her clutch purse and pulls out a card. She hands it to me with a bright smile. “I’m a fixer. So, if you ever need my services, don’t hesitate to call.”

Unexpected Connections

ANDERSON

After Monique left, I stayed for a little while longer and actually socialized with my team. I could tell they were surprised, but nobody said anything. I know I have to make more effort not to get stuck inside my head.

I even made plans to meet everyone and treat them to breakfast the next day. Again, they were shocked, but I took it all in stride. I get obsessed with things sometimes so I know that I have to handle my standoffish behavior.

Although I was thinking about Kayla until I fell asleep last night, I vowed to myself that I would focus on work this morning. I have to prioritize my compulsions or I can spiral. Nobody wants that, and it hasn’t happened since I was a teenager.

I get off the elevator with confident strides. Now that I have a solid plan on how to deal with my focus issues, I am much more relaxed.

I see Bethany and I wave. Our PR specialist is a nice woman, and like me, she stays singularly focused on one thing. Her focus just happens to be the growth and marketing of my company. Because of that, we get along splendidly.

“Hey, Anderson!” Bethany greets with an excited wave and a bright smile.

Her blonde ponytail bounces with the movement, and she reminds me of a cheerleader. I know that something must be going on because although she’s very good at her job, I wouldn’t necessarily describe her as the bubbly type.

“Hey, Bethany. What’s going on?”

“Pearson Grant is here!”

I nod because we all know that he’s the keynote speaker.

“He’s asking for you!” Bethany is practically jumping up and down. I’m just waiting for her to break out a backflip or something.

“Really? Why? Where?” I can’t get all of my thoughts together to figure out how Pearson Grant is asking for me personally.

“The organizers of the conference called the hotel, and they just gave me the message. He wants to meet at Spago in...” She looks down at her watch before continuing. “Ten minutes.”

“Spago isn’t open for breakfast.” I furrow my brows in confusion.

“Pearson Grant is a billionaire, Anderson. And if you want to get on his level, I suggest you high tail it over to Spago.” I frown because she’s right, even though I should feel offended.

“Tell Brady where I am,” I throw over my shoulder as I head in the direction of the restaurant.

“He’s already on his way over there!” Bethany shouts behind me.

I quickly make my way over to the restaurant. By the time I get there, I am a nervous wreck. It’s not every day that you meet someone that you’ve admired from a distance. But I’m a grown man and I refuse to fall all over myself like some type of fan. I take a deep breath and adjust my face into a cool unbothered expression. When I walk in, I spot Brady and Pearson right away because they are the only two in the restaurant.

“Anderson McNair, I heard you met my wife last night,” Pearson greets. His face is a stone mask, and I try to keep the smirk from taking over my face. I heard he was possessive, but if the meeting is about his wife, I underestimated his crazy.

“Yes, I did. She’s a lovely woman,” I reply in a calm tone.

“I heard you had an interesting conversation. Monique doesn’t often get excited about technology, but she raved about you and your company. She called you guys the “golden boys.” I know a little about your company, but why don’t we talk in more detail?”

I hide my surprise at his words. I’m not sure why she would call us the golden boys, but I don’t care. My excitement is overwhelming as I break into a bright smile. I nod my head and shake Pearson’s hand as I sit down beside a grinning Brady.

We look at each other with elation dancing in our eyes. This is a big deal for our company and it’s coming without us having to beg and barter our way in.

“So, Monique tells me you all are trying to break into the European market,” Pearson says then takes a sip from his coffee mug.

“Yes, we’ve had some initial success in minor markets there, but we need connections to be able to offer some of our paid for services. As you know, laws in other countries can be difficult to navigate.”

“Yes, they can be tricky.” Pearson rubs his chin. His green eyes are sparkling, and I can tell he has an idea.

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“I’d need to see some numbers, and of course, we would have to meet in a more official capacity. But I like your confidence.” He nods again. “Plus, Monique likes you.” Pearson scowls, and again I hide my smirk.

“Umm, so what are you saying?” Brady is sitting at the edge of his seat, and by the look on his face, he’s about to explode. I can’t help but try to tamp down my own excitement.

“I’m not saying shit, yet. I’ll be honest because I don’t do bullshit well. I did my research on you guys. You’ve been on my radar. Monique just sped up the process.”

Brady and I look at each other and then back at Pearson Grant, who is way better at hiding his emotions than either of us. I can’t tell what the man is thinking. His words are positive, but the deep frown he’s wearing has me confused.

“What process?” I finally ask.

“You guys have potential. Your company is groundbreaking, and if done correctly, Maniacal Sports can be worldwide within the next two years.”

My mouth drops open in shock because I can no longer hold my expressionless façade. Two years! That was on our ten-year plan. I can tell that Brady’s thoughts are the same as mine because he has the same wide-eyed expression as I do.

“What kind of witchcraft are you practicing to make that happen?” Brady asks, breaking the awe-inspiring silence.

Pearson chuckles with a smirk, “I don’t practice anymore. But I do know what I’m doing, so what do you guys say to a meeting when we get back to Dallas?”

“Yes, that sounds like a plan,” Brady answers with a smile. He’s gotten a hold of his excitement, but I can tell he’s still ready to burst.

When we exchange cards, Pearson finally relaxes. “I’ll have my assistant, Kelsey, get in contact with you next week.”

“Awesome! Thanks!” Brady and I take turns shaking Pearson’s hand as we stand to leave.

“I’m having a small celebration after the gala tomorrow night. It’s at Houston’s at eleven. Your names will be on the list. Don’t be late.”

We nod our goodbyes, and Pearson is gone. Just like that, we are on an entirely different playing field.

* * *

KAYLA

“I’m so glad you guys talked me into coming to TechCon!” I say excitedly to Emani and Shelby.

Although my company has a booth here, I wasn’t planning to come to TechCon this year. I’ve been in the past, but this year the conference has grown so much that it’s almost unrecognizable. There are so many people here and new technology. I don’t know where to look.

While I’m geeking out, I can see that my best friends are only slightly interested. I

shrug because this is the one place where I can be myself and not be stared at. I can ask a million and one questions, and nobody bats an eye. Almost everyone here appreciates the innovations that haven't been released to the public yet.

"I'm glad you're excited, Kayla. But I need you to keep that same energy tonight when we go to the party at Houston's," Shelby replies, looking at the newest virtual assistant.

I've told her several times not to have one of those in her house. It's so easy to hack those systems, but she thinks I'm overreacting. I'm not one for conspiracy theories because I rely on facts. And the truth of the matter is people can and do hack those systems.

"When have you ever known me to be excited about a party?" I question as I roll my eyes at her.

Emani snickers, but Shelby just frowns at me.

"Listen, Monique isn't going to keep giving me all these hook-ups. So, you better be thankful and excited," Shelby says, finally putting down the virtual assistant.

"Monique is the sweetest, and your cousin will not stop giving you hook-ups. You just have to stop asking for so many," Emani says with her hands on her hips.

"Man, she's married to a billionaire with a capital 'B.'" I'm going to keep asking until she tells me no." Shelby contradicts herself with a wave of her hand.

"Well, I'm just glad you asked her for this favor. Even though I've been here before, I've never had special guest passes." I feel so giddy that my words come out rushed and bunched together.

Emani and Shelby laugh loudly. Neither of them has ever really seen me act this way. I can't control how excited I am to have an all-access pass to the newest inventions. I've seen mockups of the tech behind self-driving cars, a pair of voice activated eyeglasses that turns into shades at a simple voice command, and the coolest of all, a smartwatch that can take both your temperature and blood pressure. It's all amazing!

I'm so impressed by everything that I can almost forget about what's happening at home and how Warren called me nonstop while I was out with the girls. I didn't answer, but my anxiety got the best of me. Shelby noticed right away and suggested we get away. I thought she'd meant drive to Houston or something. I had no inkling that she meant hop on a plane and go to Vegas.

It would've normally taken me no time at all to say no, but with the reminder of my list and my promise to accomplish my goals, I easily said yes. So, as soon as we got here, I took out my list and made a slash.

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#14. Go on an unplanned trip.

It felt liberating to cross off some of the things that I never would've considered in the past. With every number I marked through, I imagined myself getting lighter. Who knew how different I would be at the end of my twenty-ninth year.

I was excited for myself because I'm considering my feelings for the first time in my life. Although it is a hard habit to break, I'm not worrying about what anyone else thinks. It's a hard thing for me to do, and it takes a lot of self-reminders. But I'm making a conscious effort.

"The least you can do is pretend to be excited about the party. Maybe you can cross some more things off of your list," Emani says encouragingly.

I sigh heavily, but she's right, so I nod my head in agreement. If I want to complete my list, I actually have to go out.

"Well, I might as well cross out a few more things since we're in Vegas. Think we can find a black hair salon? I think I'm ready to get rid of this bun." I swallow hard. Now that I've said it out loud, I know my friends will make me go through with it.

"Finally!" Emani surprises me because she is the least outspoken about my looks.

"Hey!" I slap her playfully with a mock frown. "My bun isn't that bad."

"If you say so," Shelby mumbles, but I hear her smart remark.

“When was your last perm?” Emani asks, looking at my hair like she’s the one who will be doing it.

“It’s been four months. It’s time for a new one.”

“Have you thought about going natural?” Shelby asks.

“I don’t want to go through the big chop. My head isn’t shaped right.” My friends laugh, and I shrug my shoulders. I can feel the lumps and bumps in my head, and I’m not trying to look like I got beat up.

“You don’t have to cut all of your hair off. You can wear braids or weave until the perm grows out, and cut a little as you go.” I get what Shelby is saying, but I’m still apprehensive about the whole process of going natural.

Even though she wears wigs, braids, and weaves most of the time, Shelby went natural over six years ago. However, I just don’t want to learn the maintenance of natural hair care. I watched YouTube for an entire day, and once I was finished, I was shook. The versatility with natural hair is endless, but I’m woman enough to admit that I’m too lazy to even want to try.

“I’ll stick to the creamy crack for now. I need something low maintenance.” I stand my ground. If not, I’ll be going natural to please Shelby, and then I’ll be miserable and resentful.

“I know exactly what you need.” Shelby puts her hands up in a surrendering motion when she looks at the deep frown that I feel on my face. “It’s for you, not me. I promise.”

I reluctantly nod. As much as I want to stand up for myself, I still trust Shelby. But, Lord, I hope she doesn’t have me looking crazy.

The Makeover

ANDERSON

Since my meeting with Pearson this morning, I've been on cloud nine and I haven't come down. Walking through TechCon this year has been eye opening. The vast improvements in technology from one year to the next is miraculous. It gives me the kick in the ass that I need. I can't afford to slack off, or Maniacal Sports will be a thing of the past before we even get started.

Both Vance and Bethany trailed behind me all day, taking notes, talking about marketing strategies, and peppering me with questions. Brady and his assistant worked the booth. We had large screen TV's set up, showing a continuous loop of the Maniacal Sports app from a user's perspective.

Luckily, we were one of the few sports apps at the conference this year. A lot of companies are going toward social interaction such as dating apps and video sharing platforms. Our company is unique for now, and we need to make sure we get out ahead of the copycats that will surely follow.

My entire day was filled with useful information and ideas. The positivity of the day carried me through Pearson's keynote speech as well as the networking event. For the first time in my life, I didn't feel like I was pasting on a persona just to talk to potential clients.

It was such a great day that it took me no time at all to get ready for Pearson's shindig at Houston's. In fact, I was a little pumped up. My brooding the night before got me a meeting with Pearson Grant, so maybe I would take a night off from thinking about Kayla.

As soon as my party pulled up to the entrance of the club, I saw the line. It was déjà

vu all over again. Only this time, I knew we wouldn't be standing in line or fighting crowds. We would be hanging out with a billionaire tech guru.

Once we were escorted to the VIP, I got a chance to really take in my surroundings. Houston's was the stereotypical Vegas nightclub. It had go-go dancers, both male and female, dancing in cages high above the crowd. Along with the strobe lights, the loud top 40 hits were playing, and people dressed in their best attention getting outfits. It was definitely the quintessential club scene.

"Man, I bet Jason and Tobin are sick right now!" Brady raises his voice to be heard over the music. Even though it's somewhat muted in the VIP section, it's still loud as hell.

"Yeah, we told them to come, but you know they think it's a big geek convention." I shrug, laughing.

Jason swears he isn't into all of the same things Brady and I are, even though he spends more time at our offices than he does his own. I'm not sure he can call us geeks when his diplomatic ass works as a mathematical engineer for fun.

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“I bet their salty asses will try to come next year.” Brady and I nod.

If there is one thing I know about my friends, once they miss out on something once, they’ll never do it again.

“I see a sweet thing by the bar. I’ll be back,” Brady says, fixing his clothes and heading toward the bar.

I’m settled into the vibe when Monique and Pearson arrive. I admire them as they greet everyone. I have to admit they make a very nice looking couple. It makes my mind drift back to how Kayla and I would look.

Kayla is about a foot shorter than my six-foot-two-inch frame, but she fits perfectly tucked underneath my arm, just like Monique is with Pearson right now. His arm is possessively wrapped around her, and I can’t help but feel a pang of jealousy. I want to feel that affection with a beautiful woman, with Kayla.

“Hey, Anderson. Why are you sitting over here by yourself?” Bethany flops down beside me on the large sofa, and I smile at her.

“Just taking everything in. It’s still hard to believe that we’re here, ya know? Pearson Grant is a big deal,” I reply.

“I know! A&M is about to be bigger than anyone ever imagined. You ready?” she questions. Her bright eyes are sparkling with excitement.

I nod my head because I’ve been ready for this day since Brady and I started our

company. I've been ready since my parents disowned me for not following in my father's footsteps and becoming CEO of Nouveau Capital Investments. I've been ready since my father told me I would never amount to anything without his backing. I've. Been. Ready.

"You have no idea how ready I am," I finally respond.

Bethany's smile grows wide, and she bounces her head up and down. Her blonde hair swings into her face, and for the first time, I notice that she's not wearing a ponytail. Bethany looks completely different. Her hair is in big bouncy curls, and her face is packed with makeup. I give her a quick once over and notice she's wearing a tight-fitting red sparkly dress that matches her red painted lips.

"You look nice, Bethany," I comment.

I've never seen her so dolled up before. Even at our company Christmas parties or client dinners, she doesn't dress up this much. I can only assume it's because we're rubbing elbows with billionaires in Vegas that she made an extra effort.

"Thanks, Anderson." Bethany blushes as she looks down at the floor. I tilt my head to the side and study her a little longer. I'm not sure what's up with her, but I don't think I've ever seen Bethany act demure.

Bethany is the outgoing, outspoken, life of the party type of woman. I've never seen her in club attire because she's usually in a power suit and heels. She's always the epitome of "career woman" chic.

"I didn't think you would notice." Bethany begins, but she cuts off her words when Monique waves and starts making her way over to us.

"Hey, you two. Are you guys having a nice time?" I can hear the genuine excitement

in Monique's voice and I smile at her.

"Yeah, of course! Thanks again for inviting us," Bethany responds, but the way she says the word us, has me quirking an eyebrow at her.

"My team and I appreciate the hospitality," I add.

Monique's eyebrows raise, but she simply smiles and nods. "Well, I'm glad that you all were able to make it. I wanted to introduce you to my cousin. She's from Dallas as well. Now, where did... Oh, there she is."

Monique waves and my jaw drops as I see Shelby sauntering in our direction. I can't believe she's here.

"Shelby?" I say when she's standing in front of us.

"Well, well, if it isn't Andy." Shelby smirks as her brown eyes dance with mischief.

"You two know each other?" Monique questions, but I'm too busy looking around to answer her question.

"Sort of."

"Is Kayla with you?"

Shelby and I both speak simultaneously, and it would be funny if I weren't so worked up.

My heart is beating fast at the possibility of being able to see Kayla again so soon. I thought I wouldn't be able to see her again until next weekend at the earliest. If she's here, then I'll take that as a sign. There's no way a woman I'm not supposed to be with

keeps popping up in my life unexpectantly.

“Who’s Kayla?” Bethany asks, but I ignore her as I continue to look for the woman of my dreams.

“Calm down, Andy. She’s right... Oh shit!”

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I can't even get mad at Shelby's use of the nickname that she knows I hate to be called because the fury I feel. I see Kayla looking good enough to eat with a new hairstyle and an outfit that shows off her thick thighs, and she's being kissed by another son of a bitch!

"Who the fuck is that?!"

* * *

KAYLA

"Whoa, there. I think you've made good on your word, sir." I pull back from a passionate kiss when I feel the man's tongue seeking entrance against my lips. He still has one hand gripped against my waist while the other is on the back of my head. Shy Bobby just kissed the hell outta me!

I was expecting a little peck, but all that pent up passion was a shocker. My hands are still against his chest as we stare at each other.

Bobby's eyes are slightly glazed, and he gives me a big shit-eating grin before nodding. "Wow! Thanks... uh... Right. Umm, sorry uh..." Unlike his kiss, his words aren't smooth at all, and nervousness is written all over his cute face.

"Kayla," I supply with a flush.

#12. Kiss a stranger.

I mentally cross another item off my list. That was one of Shelby's contributions. I roll my eyes to myself and smile. I never thought I would cross that one off.

When Bobby approached me at the bar, I had no idea what he wanted. In fact, I thought he was trying to get a drink so I moved out of his way. But when he introduced himself and then asked me to help him save face in front of his friends, I was completely confused. When he explained that he wanted a kiss. I was a little shocked but this is Vegas. Crazy things tend to happen here all the time, so instead of balking at the idea, I silently asked myself, why the hell not?!

"Right, Kayla. Uh... thanks! I swear I'm not a lunatic, but I talked a big game in front of the fellas. We're here for my friend's bachelor party." He motions his head behind him to a group of grinning guys.

I peek around Bobby's shoulder and give a small wave and a smile to the group before giving him my attention again. Bobby isn't a bad looking guy at all. Smooth tan skin, dark brown eyes, a nice smile with straight white teeth. I could do worse.

"You're welcome. Glad I could help." I smile as I untangle myself from Bobby's intimate hold.

Bobby blushes as he takes a step back. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"Sure." I continue to smile at him.

Before Bobby asked for his kiss, Emani and I were at the bar, and Shelby had ventured off to find her cousin, Monique. I was waiting to order my first drink of the night and taking in the atmosphere of the swanky club because I was doing my best to get into the party mood. I decided to get a little liquid courage to cross off a few things on my "before thirty" list. I don't want to become an alcoholic just to get through my list, but I'm finding it a lot easier to have a drink or three to help me

relax.

Turns out, I didn't need a drink to cross anything off, but after a kiss like that, I definitely need something to quench my thirst.

As Bobby and I wait for the bartender to notice us, I run my fingers through my hair and fidget. I haven't gotten used to my new hairstyle just yet. It looks like me, but not. I trusted Shelby's advice, and instead of getting a full sew-in, I decided to add a few pieces to make my hair look longer and fuller than it is.

I even decided to get it dyed, but not all over. I'm still not ready for that much change. However, the honey-blond ombre fits what I want to exude, confidence, and sensuality. Maybe if I fake it, I can actually become those things.

Although the girls tried to get me in another skin tight body contouring dress, I put my foot down. I opted for a cute black romper with bell sleeves and a low v-neck. Although the shorts weren't extremely short, they still were smaller than what I'm used to wearing. If I bent over, my cheeks would definitely play peek-a-boo. However, my "drop it like it's hot" skills are lacking, so I'll be standing upright doing my little two-step.

"It was nice meeting you, Kayla. Maybe, you and your friend would like to come to our table and I can get to know you better." Bobby is still smiling widely, and I feel compelled to take him up on his offer.

"Hey, Kayla. Fancy seeing you here." I've only heard that voice a few times, but it's one I won't forget.

Chills break out all over my body when I feel his breath so close to my ear. I can't believe, out of all places, Anderson McNair is here in Vegas. I turn away from Bobby quickly. I don't know why I suddenly feel guilty because Anderson and I have only

met once and I just got out of a relationship. I don't owe anybody anything.

"What are you doing here?" I ask him with surprise coloring my tone.

Our eyes meet, and I can see the fire dancing deep in his blue eyes. I've never seen eyes change color from crystal clear to dark and stormy before. It's one of the strangest things I've ever witnessed.

"I didn't realize you were going to be in Vegas with..." Anderson's words trail off, and I notice he's looking at Bobby. He also didn't answer my question.

"I'm here with my friends," I say, putting my hands on my hips. Even if I were here with another man, it's none of Anderson's business.

"Hmmm... It looks like you're here with another man to me." Anderson crowds my space until my back is pressed against the bar and his arms are placed on either side of me.

His long arms have me caged in, but instead of being scared or even mad, I'm curious. Anderson didn't give off the pushy asshole vibe. He seemed like a nice guy in our limited interactions. This is a side of him that I wasn't expecting.

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The possessiveness is radiating off of him, and I'm slightly taken aback. He seemed like a normal guy, but maybe he's crazy because there is absolutely no reason for him to be acting possessive over me.

"Uh... no, Bobby just..." I look around, but Bobby isn't at the bar anymore. As a matter of fact, his entire group of friends is MIA.

Bobby is average height and build, and although Anderson is tall and fit, he's not bulky with muscles protruding everywhere. But I guess Bobby wanted no parts of whatever this is. I shrug my shoulders. I wouldn't fight over some random chic in a night club either.

"Bobby didn't want that smoke." I hear Emani laugh. And I would have to agree. Shoot, the way Anderson is looking right now I wouldn't try him either.

"Bobby ran his scary ass away. So, why the hell did you let a coward kiss you?" Anderson is leaning right in my face, the fire is still dancing wildly in his eyes, and all I can do is gulp.

"To be fair, I didn't know he was a coward," I respond, trying my best to sound unaffected by Anderson's closeness. When he growls at me, my eyes go wide.

Who the hell is this man?

ANDERSON

I see Kayla swallow hard, and her wide eyes dilate. I have a feeling that she's never been the object of anybody's blatant desire before. Well, she better get used to it because of the way she has me feeling right now. I'm ready to rip her clothes off and fuck her on top of the bar.

Seeing her looking so gorgeous and kissing another man was more than I'm willing to sit back and watch. On the night that we met, she told me that she wasn't ready for a relationship. I didn't pry because Kayla didn't seem like she wanted to go into details, and I was ready to give her all the time she needed to get used to the idea of us dating, but now, not so much.

"I was just trying to help," Kayla tries to explain, but I can feel the frown growing deeper on my face.

I lean down and get completely into her space before whispering into her ear, "I need some help too. Don't you want to help me, Kayla?"

"Uhhh... he-help you how?" she stutters out her question. I lean back to look into her big brown eyes that are filled with both curiosity and lust.

"Help me understand how Barry got a kiss before I did?"

"Bobby..." she supplies, and I scowl at her.

"His name doesn't matter, doll face." I'm doing my best not to savagely press my mouth against hers to erase any other men who have touched those luscious lips before me.

However, Kayla's breathless replies to my questions are both turning me on and

pissing me off. I don't give a damn what that fucker's name is. If he were still here, I would slap the shit out of him for even daring to kiss someone who doesn't belong to him. Not that she belongs to me either... yet.

"I didn't know you wanted to kiss me," Kayla replies in a small voice. If I weren't so close to her face, I would've missed what she said.

When her shy words hit my ears, I can't help but caress her soft face. I know I'm taking liberties with a woman who isn't mine, but the pull I have for this woman is uncontrollable at this point. I've been thinking about her every day since we've met.

"Can I kiss you, Kayla?" I ask out of respect, but I was too impatient to wait for her answer.

I wrap my arms around her and pull her into my body. I know she can feel my erection because I'm hard as a rock, but it can't be helped. The way her body is filling out the little outfit she has on is doing things to my libido.

Her large breasts are sitting up high. It's like she's offering them to me as a tribute. I want to pull down the top and suck a nipple into my mouth. I wonder if the odds would be in my favor if I did that? Probably not.

Kayla sucks in a deep breath, and her nipples pebble. I can't look at her anymore or I will do something to get me put in a Vegas jail. I take advantage of her open mouth and kiss her with all the pent up frustrations I have.

Her small hands go to the sides of my face as I flick my eager tongue into her waiting mouth. Kayla moans as one of her hands snakes behind my head. I feel her hands in my hair, but when she gives it a little tug, I can't help the growl that bubbles up from the pit of my soul.

“Well, damn! Andy is about that life.” Shelby’s words make Kayla pull back, and it takes all of my willpower not to growl again. I’m not an animal, after all, and I need to control myself.

“Wow... ummm.” Kayla is looking at me with shocked doe eyes, and I want to kiss her all over again.

From the moment we met, I could tell that she had an innocence about her that I rarely see in people our age. Kayla isn’t necessarily naïve, but I can tell she has limited experiences with men. Especially after our kiss.

“Come on, let’s go get a drink so that I can calm down,” I say, lacing our finger together and pulling her toward the VIP section.

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“Where are you taking me? Can you slow down, please? My legs aren’t as long as yours,” Kayla says from behind me, and I slow my pace.

What I really want to do is throw her over my shoulder like a caveman and rush back to my hotel room. All of my plans for going slow and taking my time are thrown out the window. I should feel bad, but I don’t. Her kissing another man in front of me just sealed her fate.

Once we get into VIP, I lead her to the bar and order a shot and drink each. We down the shot and I grab the drinks, and we sit at a vacant booth.

I once again take in Kayla’s appearance, and she is a beautiful woman. But I can tell she doesn’t realize just how intriguing she is. Her leg is bouncing up and down, she’s wringing her hands, and her eyes are darting around the room as if she’s about to make a run for it.

I place a calming hand on her bouncing knee, and she looks at me with apprehension written all over her face. As much as I don’t want to, I remove my hand from her leg and sigh. I probably scared the hell out of her with my behavior, and it has been a long time since I’ve lost control like that. So, I understand.

“I’m sorry if my behavior made you uncomfortable.” I pull my hands down my face and lean forward in my seat so that I can look Kayla in her eyes without touching her.

“It’s okay. It was just a surprise. That’s all.”

“Is it really okay? Because you look like you’re about to tear ass out of here as soon

as I turn my back.” I raise my eyebrows, and Kayla chuckles and sits back in her seat.

“No, it was okay. As I said, you just shocked me. But my bodyguards won’t let you do too much harm, so I’m not that worried.” Kayla nods toward Shelby, Emani, and Monique, who are not even trying to hide the fact that they’re watching us.

I smirk at the women and wave. They wave back without any shame, and I shake my head with a laugh. I wish they were watching that closely when the other asshole was trying to make his move.

“I promise I will be calmer on our date tomorrow night.”

“Why wait until tomorrow? How about we go do something right now?”

Now, it’s my turn to be shocked, but I must say I’m pleasantly surprised. I didn’t take Kayla for the spur of the moment type of woman, but I definitely won’t miss the opportunity.

“You’re absolutely right. Why wait until tomorrow for something we can do today? Let’s go!”

After Kayla told her friends I was taking her out on a date, we left the club. Of course, I was threatened with castration and decapitation if anything were to happen to Kayla, so I had to promise to be on my best behavior and my firstborn before the girls would let us leave.

Before I left Dallas, I had a whole night planned down to what I would say to get Kayla to kiss me. Now, all of that is null and void, and I’m just flying by the seat of my pants. From what Kayla told me on the first night we met, she always wanted to be more adventurous, but she’d never gotten the chance. So, tonight, I’m going to do my best to bring out the adventurous side of Kayla Jones.

“Have you eaten already?” I ask because even though it’s almost midnight, what kind of gentleman would I be if I didn’t feed my date?

“Yes, but maybe we can get something later.”

I nod my head. That will give me time to think of a special place to take her.

“So, is there anywhere particular you would like to go?” I have some idea of where I want to take Kayla for our first official date, but I want to make sure we’re doing things that she’s interested in.

“You know what? I actually have an entire list of things that I want to do. Would you like to help me with it?” A slow mischievous smile spreads across Kayla’s face, and I’m instantly curious.

“Sure. One question first. How much have you had to drink?”

* * *

KAYLA

I can’t help but burst out laughing at Anderson’s question. Bless his heart. I probably scarred him for life with my drunk amnesia. I know my limits now and I know that dark liquor is not my friend.

“No worries. I am in control of all of my faculties.”

“Yeah, no offense. But, the last time I asked if you were drunk, you gave me the exact same answer.”

“Did I really? Wow! Well, I promise, Anderson. I am not drunk. I’ve only had the

shot that you gave me and half a drink. As long as I don't have brown liquor, I should be fine," I respond with a grimace.

I remember most of the dreadful drunken night now, but obviously, I don't remember everything. I'm embarrassed by my behavior and I definitely won't be getting black-out drunk again.

"I'll hold you to that promise." Anderson smiles, and his pretty white teeth and slight dimples greet me. I don't remember his smile being so attractive.

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Since we are already on the strip, we decide to do the tourist thing and walk to different casinos. We passed street performers and the guys handing out flyers for parties. I can't say that I've ever enjoyed the nightlife that Vegas had to offer.

I came for TechCon, and I worked most of the day, went to dinner, then turned in for the night. Warren didn't like clubs, so we didn't go. I never cared for them because I wasn't comfortable in tight dresses and high heels. It never dawned on me that I could wear something else and still be sexy.

However, I was so busy comparing myself to all of Warren's ex-girlfriends that I didn't feel comfortable in anything. I was so insecure and unsure that I was happy not to have to get dressed up for anything. And because he never complained or asked me to change, I assumed he didn't mind how I looked.

Now, I know where assuming gets you. It's a reason that the old saying "if you assume, you make an ass out of you and me" is so popular. It's true as hell.

"Hey, let's go in here!" Anderson's excited voice pulls me out of my negative thoughts. He intertwines our fingers together and leads me to the Parishotel.

Anderson doesn't let go of my hand, and I have to say I'm not opposed to the feeling of his touch. His large warm palm engulfs mine, and although the connection I feel towards him is strong, at least I know that first night wasn't a fluke.

It's something about this man that makes me want to know more about him. I'm not sure why yet, but I feel crazy because I can't wait to find out. I should feel more guilt about having these feelings about another man so soon after my break-up, but I keep

pushing down that feeling to enjoy the moment.

#28. Be more spontaneous.

Anderson stops and buys tickets to the Ferris wheel, and I'm excited. The last time I went on a ride like this was when I was a kid in foster care, and Miss Louise took me to the state fair. She was one of the few homes that I truly didn't want to leave, but she was an older lady and could no longer care for me. I was sent to a new home full of nightmares.

I shake off the morose feeling and get back in the moment. Live in the moment, Kayla. I find that I have to remind myself of this over and over again. It takes work to break bad habits, and I am proud of myself for not automatically slipping back into my comfort zone.

When we arrive at the opening of the Ferris wheel, I'm amazed. This isn't some rinky-dink fair ride. The entrance looks like something that belongs on a spaceship. The ceilings are round and tall, with different color lights illuminating the space. The pods have large windows that have a clear view of the strip.

We were able to get our own pod because it was so late, and I can't say that I mind. Anderson sat so close that his fresh citrusy scent surrounded me. He placed his arm around me, and I snuggled into his chest.

"I've never gotten to see Vegas like this before," I break the comfortable silence. I could hear the wonderment in my voice. I never even thought of doing something like this. Maybe I should expand my list.

"Yeah, it's a great way to see the strip all lit up," Anderson replies.

"It's beautiful," I say, relaxing even more into my date.

“You’re beautiful.” Anderson’s voice is low, and the raspy sound makes me shiver.

I look up into his beautiful sparkling eyes, and my breath hitches at the truth that I see in them. Nobody has ever looked at me the way he does. Nobody.

“Thank you,” I whispered shyly. But I don’t look away because I can’t.

Anderson’s eyes have me hypnotized, and it’s like I’m falling into the deepest part of the ocean. I’m drowning in emotions that are unfamiliar to me with just one look from this man. Anderson licks his lush lips, and I’m eager to experience his kiss again.

“Can I kiss you, Kayla?”

I nod before the question even fully comes out of his mouth.

Anderson leans over and places a soft kiss against my lips. He slowly moves his mouth over mine. It’s not rushed or aggressive like our first kiss. I get lost in the tenderness, and I sigh when he pulls back.

Again, I’m surprised by the kiss. I was expecting a savage overtaking, and instead, I got a gentle whisper against my lips. I don’t know what to expect from Anderson, and for the first time, that doesn’t scare me.

In the back of my mind, I know that I should be afraid of him because he’s so intense, but he doesn’t scare me. And for the life of me, I can’t figure out why. Maybe this letting go thing is easier than I thought.

#2. Let go of things you can’t control.

Push

ANDERSON

I couldn't stop kissing Kayla. I knew I was in trouble the moment my lips touched hers at the bar. I couldn't control the possessiveness that bubbled up in me. I had no claim to her, but no matter how hard I tried to convince myself, my heart wasn't hearing it.

As the lights from the strip danced across Kayla's gorgeous face, I couldn't help but take in all of her features that I missed before. The small beauty mark on the corner of her upper lip, the smooth brown skin interrupted by the tiny scar by her right eye, full cheeks that dimple just slightly when she smiles.

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When she catches me staring, all I can do is smile like an idiot. I can't help that she has me mesmerized without doing the slightest thing. I can't take my eyes off of her.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Kayla whispers as if she's afraid of what the answer might be. The more time I spend with her, the more I want to know her story. I want to know why she's so shy and why innocence radiates off of her.

"Like I said before, you're beautiful." I can tell by the way she dips her head and looks away that she's blushing.

"Thanks," she says simply, but I know she thinks it's just a line.

I gently place my hand under her chin and turn her face towards me. I look her in the eyes so she can see the sincerity, "You are a beautiful woman, Kayla Jones."

Kayla's shy smile turns into a wide grin, and her brown eyes twinkle. The look on her face alone tells me that she's not used to getting compliments. I intend to change that.

"Thank you, Anderson."

Instead of telling her, she's welcome, I pull her to me and kiss her lips once more. It's not the rough savage kiss like in the bar or the sweet touch of lips like on the Ferris Wheel, but something more.

I can't explain why she makes my heartbeat speed up or why, from a simple touch of her lips pressed against mine, I feel like a teenager ready to explode.

I thought I was fixated before, but now I know better. Now that I've tasted Kayla...I'm obsessed.

"Are you hungry?" I ask as I tear myself away from her delicious lips.

When I look down into her face, Kayla's eyes are still closed, and her expression is one of pure bliss. Suddenly, I wish we were alone in my hotel instead of standing in a crowd on the Vegas strip.

"Umm, what did you say?" Kayla finally opens her dazed eyes.

I chuckle because the look on her face is exactly how I feel... deliriously happy. "I asked if you were hungry."

"Oh... umm, I could eat. Are you hungry?"

I smirk because what I'm hungry for, I'm sure she's not ready to give me yet. "Come on, doll face, let me feed you." I lick my lips because her eyes dilate once more, and I know she caught my double entendre.

Kayla shivers when I place my arm around her, and I smile knowingly. Although the weather is mild, we're in Vegas. It's nowhere near cold. However, I can't help but want to tease Kayla.

"Are you cold? Do you need me to warm you up?" I drop my voice low and seductive just to see her reaction.

Kayla rapidly blinks in surprise, "I-I'm okay. Thanks."

I do my best not to laugh because Kayla is so fucking cute, but as I suspected, she has limited experience with someone like me. I've been doing my best not to be outright

vulgar and say the nasty shit that's really on my mind, but to see her eyes go wide and blush turns me on.

It's after midnight, and all of the fancy places that I would've taken her to on a planned date are unavailable, so we walk to a little place that sells deep dish pizza. I order a couple of slices and bottles of water for us to drink because Kayla will not be getting drunk on my watch, and we sit down on a bench overlooking a glowing water fountain.

We sit in companionable silence as we eat and people watch. I do my best not to stare at my beautiful date, but I find my eyes drifting in her direction without my permission. And it seems every time I look at Kayla; she's looking back at me. I hope that's a good thing.

"You know I haven't been this relaxed in a very long time," I confess on a deep exhale.

"Really? Why's that?" Kayla turns her body toward me, and our legs brush together. She clears her throat and moves back, but I slide over and tuck her under my arm.

When she relaxes against me, I smile because I know I've won a small battle.

"I've been working for years to get my company where I want it to be. It takes up a lot of my time and energy."

"That's understandable. If you want to be successful, you have to work hard." Kayla nods.

That's not exactly my story, but I nod at her. I could've been successful off the backs of my parents. I didn't need or have to work for anything. Nepotism is real. And although I chose to go my own path, some people still see me as some privileged brat

rebellious against his parents.

That's one of the main reasons I work to have a successful company. I don't want people saying I was given shit. I work hard because I know that it isn't easy for everyone, and I'm lucky.

"I want to be successful and I'm willing to work as hard as I need to." I quirk a brow at her, and she flushes again.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:01 am

“Can I ask you something?” Kayla’s voice is sweet and uncertain.

“You can ask me anything, doll face.”

“Why are you interested in me?”

“The first night we met, you were so intelligent and outspoken. You could tell me all about the latest tech and you know how to code. You’re funny and goofy, but most of all, you’re genuine. You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever come into contact with. What I don’t understand is how in the hell could you ask me a crazy ass question like that?”

* * *

KAYLA

I couldn’t believe all of the things that Anderson listed about me. I was floored. I know he believes that I’m all of those things, but I’m not. He doesn’t know anything about me and he has the wrong impression.

“Anderson...” I sigh heavily. “I was drunk that night. That wasn’t me.”

“Kayla, it was you. You may have been a little more uninhibited, but liquor doesn’t make you know how to code a website from scratch or how to design a game using an algorithm. You told me about both of those things and more.”

“I know that, but—”

“No. No buts.” Anderson shakes his head. A lock of brown hair falls into his face. He takes a deep breath and slides his hands through his hair like I’m the most frustrating person on Earth. I give an equally frustrated sigh; I hate when people don’t listen to me. But I hate conflict, so I know I’ll just hold it in.

“Kayla, I can’t convince you of who you are or what I saw in you that night. But the person who intrigued me is here right now and she isn’t drunk.”

Anderson’s words are so sincere, and his facial expression is so genuine that I’m almost convinced. However, I know myself. I’m not that person. I’m not outspoken and bold like Shelby or free-spirited and funny like Emani.

However, I want to be all of those things that Anderson thinks I am, not for him. For me. Nobody wants to be insecure, and uncertain and when I take a good look at myself, I regretfully admit that I am both of those things.

“So, did you get to enjoy any of the conference or did you have to work the entire time?” I question in hopes of changing the subject. I don’t want to delve into my lack of confidence, especially while I’m on a date.

“I actually got to enjoy the conference for the first time in a while. Plus, Pearson Grant!” Anderson smiles at me, and I can hear the excitement in his voice.

I’m relieved that he took the subject change in stride. There’s nothing worse than awkwardness when you’re trying to get to know someone. And even though I wasn’t expecting to be on a date tonight, I am genuinely enjoying myself.

“I know, right?! He’s a really great guy. Super smart.” I grin widely. I’ve met Pearson in the past, but we didn’t have a deep conversation or anything. I tagged along with Shelby to one of her family get togethers where I met him and Monique.

Anderson and I spent the next few minutes, gushing over Pearson Grant and his businesses before we decided to walk back to my hotel. We talked about surface things the entire walk, and even though I was comfortable with the conversation, I wanted more. I didn't want our conversation to end.

"Would you like to have another drink before you go back to your room?" I ask Anderson, wanting to extend our time together.

"Sure, as long as it's coffee." Anderson smirks at me, and I giggle.

He isn't going to let me forget our drunken meeting. I guess I will have to make him forget about it. My bold thoughts surprise me, but I smile to myself because I need to stop analyzing every single thing that I do and say.

#6. Stop overanalyzing.

"We can get coffee. I promise to never get drunk around you again." I put my fingers up in a scout's salute, and Anderson shakes his head at my silliness.

"I didn't say you couldn't get drunk around me. I just want you to know and trust me, so it's not a big deal when you get drunk around me, that's all." Anderson's sweet words have me swooning.

However, it will take more than one date and the right words for me to trust a man again. Even though he seems like a nice guy, I mean super nice; I refuse to be fooled again. I dated Warren for a year, and I was the biggest fool ever.

"Thanks. But I think staying sober is probably the safest bet for me."

Anderson slightly frowns, but he grabs my hand, lacing our fingers together before bringing the back of my hand to his lips and kissing it softly. He has a touchy feely

way about him that I'm not used to. Neither of my exes was big on PDA.

And I didn't have any outward affection shown to me after my parents died, so it never bothered me that my boyfriends didn't want to hold my hand or kiss in public. But now that I've spent just a few hours with a man who can't seem to stop touching me, it makes me wonder if I short changed myself by not demanding more love.

The thought is absurd, and I try to clear it from my mind. A person in my position can't demand anything. I am an orphan who tried my best to remain invisible so others wouldn't mistreat me. There's no way I could demand love or anything else from anyone. But maybe, just maybe, I won't have to demand anything from Anderson. Perhaps he's willing to give me what I crave without me even having to ask.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:01 am

“I didn’t realize it was already three in the morning. Let me walk you to your room.” Anderson leads us to the elevators once I give him my room number. We hold hands the entire way, and it feels so natural to be so close to him.

After Anderson walks me to my room, kisses me on the cheek, and promises to call me later, he leaves. I was expecting another toe curling kiss, but I’m glad he didn’t give me that. I might have asked him to stay, and I know I’m not ready for that. Hell, I’m not ready for him!

12

Cross Them Off Sis

KAYLA

“I still can’t believe you left with Anderson last night, Kayla. That’s so unlike you,” Emani says from the lounge chair next to me.

The conference is over, and it’s our last full day in Vegas, so we decided to go to a pool party. Actually, Shelby decided it was time for me to cross more items off my list since we were in Vegas, and “what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.”

I couldn’t help but agree because although Shelby can be a little pushy, she’s only doing what I asked. Besides, we all know that my list would collect dust if my friends weren’t by my side, encouraging me to put effort into accomplishing the goal of crossing everything off.

“Girl, whatever! After that scorching tongue down, I can’t believe she came back!” Shelby exclaims, then sips her fruity drink. I blush at her words.

I still can’t believe Anderson kissed me like that. It was our first kiss, and it left a lasting impression.

“So, what did ya’ll do anyway?” Emani asks.

I roll my eyes because I’ve already told her exactly what we did last night. “Mani, I told you all about our date. Anderson was a perfect gentleman, and I had a good time.”

“I believe you, Kay. I just... he was so possessive at the club, and after that kiss, I wouldn’t blame you if you slept with him last night. I mean... no judgment. Plus, it’s not like you haven’t slept with him already, so...”

I sit up and look at Emani while clutching my imaginary pearls. She said no judgment, but she sure is sounding like Judge Judy to me.

“First of all, I didn’t sleep with Anderson that night. Well, I didn’t have sex with him, and you know that. We had a whole conversation about it, or did you so conveniently forget while sitting up there on your high horse?” I ask with a quirk in my brow.

I know Emani is a little prudish, but we normally agree, so I hadn’t had to think about her views before, especially since they were usually directed at Shelby. I guess I’ve been pretty judgmental myself now that I think about it.

“Emani knows that you didn’t sleep with Andy, Kay. But I must say that I’m pretty shocked that you left with him. That is pretty wild for you,” Shelby says, humming her approval.

I swear my friends are the embodiment of the angel and devil on my shoulder. But I guess I've never agreed so much with the devil before now.

"I said, no judgment." Emani raises her hands.

"Well, it sounds like it. So, put down your gavel and pay attention. We're done talking about Andy for now," Shelby cuts in before I can start feeling bad for my choices. "What you need to do is take off that cover-up and show those curves in that bikini so you can cross that off your list," she continues with a devious smile on her face.

Shelby's dark brown cheeks lift, and her eyes twinkle, showing just how funny she thought my humiliation was. I can't believe I'm wearing a bikini in the first place. Well, actually, I can't believe I added that to my list.

I've never worn a bikini in my life. I'm a shorts and t-shirt or a one-piece if it's absolutely necessary for me to wear a swimsuit, but a bikini... Never!

"This isn't the beach, so technically, I can't cross anything out," I argue, not wanting to take off my tropical print Kimono.

"Whatever, heffa. This is a pool party, and it has sand," Shelby says, pointing to the manmade beach on the other side of the pool. "So, close enough. And I'm about to finesse us some passes to get into the VIP section."

"We don't need to be in VIP, Shell," Emani says with an exasperated sigh.

I'm not sure what's up with her today. Although we are all different, and Emani is usually Shelby's conscience, she seems slightly more uptight than usual.

"This trip is about helping Kayla and her bucket list, Emani. Number twenty and

twenty-three are crash a party and wear a bikini if I remember correctly.”

“You wrote them, so you should remember them,” I mumble indignantly.

I know Shelby heard me when she gives me a cheeky smile and a wink. I roll my eyes, but I smile back at her. They were her suggestions, but she didn’t force me to write those things on my list, so I might as well let her help me cross them off.

So, I stand up, take a deep fortifying breath, and strip off my Kimono. My girls cheer and whistle like I’ve done some sort of striptease, and I giggle at their foolishness. But I secretly love how they hype me up.

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:01 am

“Damn, sis! I knew you were hiding bawwdeee under those outfits!” Shelby snaps her fingers, and I feel my face heat.

Even though I’ve been wearing clothes, I wouldn’t normally wear, and they still aren’t body hugging or tight. I can admit that my clothes have been an armor that I use to hide myself. However, I will pretend that I am comfortable in this flimsy red material that barely covers my butt or holds up my breasts.

I place my large sunglasses over my eyes and give myself a pep talk so I won’t fidget, and put my cover-up back on. I sit down and sip on my orange juice. I decided that liquid courage isn’t the type of nerve I need. Being drunk isn’t how I want to complete my list.

“I think Kayla should get us into the VIP. With that little bitty bikini, I don’t think anybody would say no,” Shelby says with a thoughtful expression on her face. However, before she can finish, I’m already shaking my head no. I can give myself all types of pep talks, but I still don’t have enough fake confidence to get us into VIP. At least, I don’t think I do.

“Shell, stop pressuring Kayla. It’s her list. She’s the one that has to live with her choices!” Emani scowls at Shelby and me, and I can see that she’s not just frustrated... she’s mad.

“Emani, what’s going on with you?” I ask her directly.

She’s obviously upset about something, but I know Emani will take her frustrations out on everyone instead of just addressing the issue. I would usually soothe her, but

that's not a part of my growth, so asking outright is what it has to be.

"Nothing," she huffs, "I just think this is stupid."

"What's stupid?" I question, but Shelby interrupts Emani's answer.

"Well, nobody asked you. This is about Kayla, not you. Be a supportive friend, Emani."

"It's not about you either, Shelby."

Shelby and Emani glare at each other with frowns covering their faces. I've felt the tension between them for a few days, so I don't think their disagreement is about me, but I don't want my two best friends fighting for any reason, so I do my best to try to smooth things over.

"Ladies, it's not that big of a deal. Let's just relax and have a good time. It's our last day here before we have to go back to the real world. We shouldn't spend our time arguing over silliness."

Both ladies relaxed back onto their sunbeds, but I could still feel the tension. I've never been comfortable with arguments, and normally I would avoid the situation altogether. But I don't want my friends to be angry at each other. I know what I need to do.

"I'm going to the restroom. You two try not to kill each other while I'm gone," I say in the calmest voice that I can muster.

My nerves are on edge, but I'm going to put on my big girl panties and woman up. Instead of going to the restroom, I make a b-line to the VIP section where the champagne is flowing, and the girls are twerking. It looks like a rap music video is

being shot in the middle of the afternoon, but I'm trying to get in, so who am I to judge?

I channel my inner Megan and put on my "hot girl" persona. If I'm going to fake being confident, then I can't be myself.

"Here goes nothin'."

* * *

ANDERSON

"Hey, isn't that Kayla? Damn, she's stacked!" I hear Brady, but I'm so shocked to see Kayla in a little tiny ass red bikini that I can't even answer him.

I'm stuck on stupid looking at all of her smooth brown skin. Her curves are more pronounced by the tiny strings of the bright red fabric. I damn near swallowed my own tongue, looking at her. It's no secret that I'm attracted to Kayla, but I didn't expect this from her.

Kayla didn't strike me as the itty-bitty-tweeny-weenie-bikini type of woman. As a matter of fact, she was so uncomfortable in the dress she had on when we met that I gave her a t-shirt and shorts to wear.

Last night, she had on a cute outfit, but it wasn't tight or anything. I'm not going to say I'm not completely turned on by seeing so much of her glorious skin, but it makes me wonder if she was right. Do I even know the woman that I've become enamored with?

Before I can even think about what I'm doing, I'm heading toward Kayla and the bouncer that's guarding the VIP section like it's the opening to the holy grail. The

only reason we're even behind the velvet rope is because Bethany had gotten the company a partnership with Bella Vodka, who is hosting the party.

"Hey, man, she's with me," I say to the big brawny asshole who is eyeing Kayla like the full course meal that she is. He's a lot bigger than I am, but I won't hesitate to knock a bastard out.

He raises an eyebrow at Kayla, and she gives him a flirty smile and a shrug. I don't know what the conversation was before I got here, but I'll be a cockblocking son-of-a-bitch today. I already have to fight the urge to throw Kayla over my shoulder and run to the nearest room so nobody can see her body but me.

I don't realize I'm frowning until Kayla rubs the frown line between my eyebrows with her finger.

"Hey, you. What's wrong?" She smiles up at me, but I see a flicker of worry in her brown eyes.

"I'm trying to figure out if I should go caveman on you." I let my gaze slowly run over all of her gloriousness, and I lick my lips in appreciation. "You look fucking spectacular, by the way."

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Kayla's eyes go wide before she dips her head in an adorable blush. "Thank you, Anderson."

I pull her close to my body and hold her in my arms. I take in how her plush body aligns so perfectly with mine. I inhale her sweet fruity scent, and when she looks up at me with a hooded gaze, I know she feels the bulge in my swim trunks.

I lean down and give her a soft peck on her pouty lips. I groan in frustration when I pull back. Because if I keep going like I want to, they will kick us out of this party.

"Hi, to you too," I say after Kayla slowly opens her eyes with a dreamy smile on her face.

"You didn't ask me this time," Kayla says with a twitch of her lips.

"I didn't ask you what?"

"Every time you've kissed me, you've asked me first." She smiles.

I quickly think back to all of our kisses and Kayla's right. I've asked her permission every time. However, today, I'm staking my claim in front of all of these horny assholes who think they might have a shot.

"Are you offended that I didn't ask this time?" I whisper in her ear then I move to nibble on her neck. I feel her tremble slightly and I smile against her heated skin.

"Um-uh, no. I'm not offended. You can kiss me any time you want."

At her words, I pull back and look into her eyes. She's serious. I have no idea what possessed her to tell me something like that, but I would take advantage of her permission.

"Can I kiss you any time... any... where?" I seductively whisper as I move my hands from her waist to her scrumptious ass.

Kayla inhales sharply, but she doesn't pull away from me. Her eyes are downcast, so I reluctantly move one of my hands from her ass to lift her chin.

"I won't do anything you don't want me to do, Kayla."

"Actually—"

"Kayla! Hey! Is Shelby here?" Brady's loud ass voice interrupts what Kayla is about to say.

"Hey, Brady. Yeah, she is. I should go and get her and Emani. They'll be looking for me." Kayla pulls away from me, and I could spit fire at Brady's cockblocking ass.

"Come back," I demand before she can rush away. I kiss her once more, and she nods and walks back to the entrance of the VIP.

"I swear I'm going to kick your ass if you interrupt us again." I point a menacing finger at a laughing Brady. "Asshole," I mumble as I watch the sway of Kayla's ass until she's out of sight.

I almost had a breakthrough. Kayla Jones is opening up to me. But just how open will she get?

I Can Help With That

KAYLA

I scurry over to Emani and Shelby as fast as I can. I can feel my ass and boobs jiggling like crazy and I would be self-conscious if I weren't in such a hurry. I can't believe I almost gave into Anderson's charm.

I wanted him to take me back to his room and make good on the promises his kisses gave me. I've never felt an urge so deep in my core in my entire life. A shiver runs through my whole body just at the thought of what he could do to me.

I've only had two lovers and I wouldn't consider myself a "sexual" person. But there's something about Anderson that makes me curious about what sex with him would be like. My first boyfriend was an "I'm going to get mine, whether you get yours or not" kind of guy, and it always seemed like Warren wasn't interested in sex. Turns out he wasn't interested in sex with me.

I shake my head with a frown. I'm in Vegas to forget about the past, not dwell on it.

#1. Stop thinking about Warren!

"Hey, Kay! I thought you got lost. You okay?" Shelby sits up and pulls her large shades on top of her head, giving me an intense look.

"Yep!" I pop the "P" and smile wide. "Grab your stuff, ladies. We are going to VIP, and I'm crossing off number twenty!"

Source Creation Date: August 15, 2025, 10:01 am

I'm proud of myself for even attempting to get into VIP, even though it's technically not crashing a party, and I got in because of Anderson, it's still as close as I'm going to get to cross off my number twenty.

Plus, I'm pretty sure the bouncer was feeling me. I might not be the most experienced woman on the planet, but I could see the lust in his eyes. I also recognized his flirtation when he asked me if he could do anything for me and licked his lips. I was just about to answer the tall chocolate mountain of a man when Anderson interrupted.

"I knew you could do it!" Shelby interrupts my thoughts with a loud squeal.

I giggle, and we high-five as she begins to pack up her things. Emani shakes her head with a frown, but she gathers her things as well. I refuse to let whatever is going on with her dampen my mood. I gather my things up, grab my phone, and cross out number twenty and twenty-three.

#20. Crash a party.

#23. Wear a bikini on a beach.

We approach the VIP section after we gather all of our things, and the bouncer smiles at me, showing nice white teeth and deep dimples on his handsome dark brown face. I can't help but smile back at him.

"Back with reinforcements, I see." He licks his thick lips again and I giggle. He has the wholeLLthing going on, but it's kind of sexy, so he doesn't look corny.

“Now, why would I need reinforcements?” I question with an arched brow, placing my hands on my hips.

His dark eyes rove over my body before he responds, “Cause that white boy looked like he wanted to eat you up. You might need backup. I can’t say I blame him, though.”

At his words, my entire face heats in embarrassment. I’m not used to men blatantly flirting with me. I don’t know what to say. I can act bold all I want, but I’m out of my depth when it comes down to it. Luckily, Shelby comes to my rescue.

“Aren’t you a big ol’ mountain of chocolate.” She bites her lip seductively, and the bouncer just shakes his head with a chuckle before stepping aside and letting us pass.

“You ladies have a good time and don’t hesitate to call Big D if you get into trouble.”

“Big D, huh? How big?” Shelby flirts, but I pull her away before he can answer. I hear his deep rumble of laughter behind us.

I admire Shelby’s confidence, but sometimes the things that come out of her mouth are outrageous.

“Shelby! I can’t believe you just asked him that.” I laugh, and Emani shakes her head.

Shelby smirks, but she doesn’t look back as we continue toward Anderson’s section. I think Shell gets a kick out of shocking people, and I’m pretty sure she’s all talk. At least seventy-five percent sure.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Shelby Shell. I’m surprised to see you here, especially since you claimed to be busy today.” Brady folds his arms over his chest and ticks his head to the side.

Shelby still hasn't told us what's going on between them, which is weird for her. She loves to tell us about her latest conquest, but there's something about how she interacts with Brady that makes me curious.

"I am busy. I'm hanging with my girls." Shelby shrugs nonchalantly, but by the frown on her face, I can tell she's annoyed.

Before Brady can answer, Anderson appears in front of me. My eyes connect with his broad, tan, muscular, oh so delicious bare chest. Earlier, he had on a t-shirt, so I didn't get the pleasure of ogling his magnificent body.

My eyes slowly make their way up his body until our eyes meet. For the millionth time today, I feel myself blush. Even with my brown skin, my cheeks will flush with undertones of red when I'm embarrassed.

"Hey." Anderson's deep voice washes over me like a caress.

"Hey," I responded shyly.

I completely forget about my "hot girl" persona and revert back to nerd Kayla with just one sexy greeting. I just might be a lost cause.

"If ya'll keep on, you're going to be able to cross out number thirty on your list." Shelby cackles from behind me.

"First of all, I did not add that to my list!" I widen my eyes at Shelby so she can shut up.

Having public sex is not and will not ever be on my list of things to do in life. That's one of Shelby's suggestions that I refused to add.

“What list?”

I look back at Anderson with even wider eyes. How embarrassing! Should I tell him?
Why the hell not?!

“So, I made this list...”

* * *

ANDERSON

As Kayla explains her “things to accomplish before thirty” list, an idea comes into mind about how I can spend more time getting to know her. Even though she hasn’t been as skittish this past weekend, I still don’t want to scare her off.

Although I can’t explain why my feelings for her are so intense, I won’t try to downplay how I feel either. I’m an all or nothing type of guy, and I don’t see me changing in the foreseeable future.

Once Kayla finishes her explanation, I nod, rubbing my chin. “I can help you with that.”

“Wait. What?” Kayla frowns with a shake of her head. Her curly hair bounces with the movement.

“I’ll help you with your list. Let me see it.”

“Ummm, but why?” Kayla asks. Her eyes are narrowed, and her plump lips are pursed. I’m not sure if she’s confused or suspicious of my motives. Either way, she’ll give in. I always get my way.

“Because I love the idea and I want to help.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. I mean—”

“Of course, it is. Don’t think so much, Kay.”

After a brief moment, Kayla nods and picks up her phone. I’m not sure what she’s thinking, but I’m glad she seems to be relenting to my request to help her or my demand, whatever.

Kayla scrolls for a second and then hands me her phone. I read the list, and it is some general things that most people want to do before they die, but then I get to some of the riskier numbers. “#9. Go to a strip club.”

I pause for a second and look at her with a raised eyebrow. She looks away in embarrassment, and I chuckle. I’m not judging her. It’s just hard to believe that a twenty-nine-year-old has never been to a strip club before.

I keep reading, and I frown because of “#12. Kiss a stranger” has been marked through. I figure that was the asshole from last night. I still wish I could’ve beaten his ass. Getting back on track, I continue reading the list.

Once I’m finished, I’m amazed at how inexperienced Kayla is. She gave off the naïve vibe, but according to her list, she’s got a lot of living to do. And I’m just the man to help her do it.

“Yeah, doll face. Not only will I help you with this, let’s cross a few of these off right now!”

I pull Kayla toward the bar located in the back of the VIP section. Her flip-flops slap against the concrete as her short legs try to keep up with my long strides. Once we reach the bar, I pick her up and place her on the top.

“Anderson!” Kayla squeals.

I chuckle. “Be still, so you won’t slip,” I say, holding on to her ample hips. The feel of her soft body is distracting me, but I shake it off.

I do want to help her with her list. And maybe while doing so, she’ll begin to trust me.

“Don’t let me fall,” Kayla says with wide brown eyes as she looks at me.

“Never,” I respond with conviction.

I rub my hand down her cheek and to the back of her neck. I never break eye contact with her. My bright blue eyes stare at her, willing her to feel the intense connection that I do. I pull her face toward mine inch by aching inch.

“I’m going to kiss you now.” I raise an eyebrow, asking nonverbally if she has any objections.

“Don’t talk about it, be about it.” Kayla’s sassy reply shocks me and turns me on.

I devour her lips, sucking and biting them until she gasps, and I take advantage by slipping my eager tongue inside her mouth. Kayla doesn’t pull back like I thought she might. Instead, she tangles her tongue with mine and draws my head closer to her face.

Kayla’s small hand tugs the back of my hair roughly, and I growl into her mouth. Fuck, this woman is sexy!

“Uhhum...” Someone clears their throat, and I reluctantly pull away.

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“Do you guys want to order something orrrr...” The tiny brunette smiles mischievously.

“Yeah, let me get two tequila shots, a lime, and some salt,” I order while helping Kayla lay down on the bar.

I can only attribute that nobody even blinks at our shenanigans because we’re in Vegas. Anything that happens here stays here, so I’m guessing that’s the reason the bar is big enough that an adult can lay on it comfortably.

Once the bartender has what I need, I place the lime in Kayla’s mouth, and I sprinkle salt on her breasts. I pour some of the shot on her belly and watch as chills break out on her skin. I look into her twinkling eyes and lick my lips.

“Bottoms up.” I dive in and slurp up the Jose Cuervo like it’s the last thing I will ever drink.

I kiss around Kayla’s belly button. Then I trail my tongue up to her breasts to lick the salt. I take my time licking up every drop before continuing to the side of her neck. I suck her sensitive skin into my mouth, knowing my mark will remain.

I finally make my way to her mouth where I take the lime with my lips and suck the juice. Kayla’s chest is heaving up and down, and her nipples are hard beneath her swimsuit top. I can’t wait to take them into my mouth. But wait is exactly what I have to do if I don’t want to end up in a Vegas jail cell.

I help Kayla sit up and pick her up off the bar. Her body slides down mine as I place

her on her feet. The feel of her body against mine is heaven, and by the look on her face, I know she feels just how excited I am.

“That was hot!” someone yells behind me.

I turn around to a small crowd cheering us on. I was completely in my own world and hadn’t noticed the wild party still going on around us. I smile at an embarrassed Kayla and kiss her lips.

“You can officially mark off number sixteen.”

“Doing a body shot was not on my list,” Kayla says with a shake of her head.

“Uh... yes, it was.”

Kayla slaps her palm against her head. “I’m going to kill, Shelby.”

“Well, I’m going to thank Shelby!”

14

More Shenanigans

KAYLA

I hop out of the shower humming City Girls, and I laugh to myself. I have never listened to so much raunchy rap in my life. But the music is very fitting for my first girls’ trip. We’ve had so much fun these past couple of days that I think the smile is permanently etched on my face.

It’s a change from my normal demeanor, and I’m not mad about it. I am not angry or

even a sad person, but I wouldn't classify myself as happy either.

Again, I have to shake off my negative thoughts to finish up in the bathroom. I walk into my bedroom of the large two-bedroom suite we rented. It's amazing what having a billionaire cousin can get you. It's another perk of being on vacation with Shelby.

"Hey, Kay, do you need me to do your hair?!" Shelby yells from the other room of the suite.

I check my hair out in the mirror. When I got my partial sew-in, the beautician permed my leave-out so it will all blend even when it gets wet and curls up. I like the "natural" way it looks, and I don't have to put much effort into doing my hair, but unlike before, I still look stylish.

However, I do want to impress Anderson. I don't want to show up for our night out looking like I didn't care. I want to get out of the habit of not looking my best. There's nothing wrong with wanting to look nice.

I spent so much of my childhood and most of my adulthood trying to be invisible that I feel guilty for wanting to look nice. I was always so thankful for having the basic necessities when I was a kid that, as an adult, I tended to live way below my means so that I wouldn't have to be without again.

I have plenty of money in my bank account, and I shouldn't feel guilty about getting things for myself. And although I will never be someone that spends my money without thought or be high maintenance when it comes to the way I dress, I will take more care of my appearance.

#18. Stop dressing like a schoolmarm.

"Can you put those wild curls in my hair?" I finally answer Shelby after some

consideration.

“Sure! Let me plug in my curlers, and I’ll hook you up!” Shelby hollers from the other room. I smile to myself because Shelby is the kind of friend you need when you are embarking on something new.

She will support you however she can, and will encourage you to step outside of your comfort zone. Shelby is a real friend to me, and I’m thankful for her. I just wish that Emani would tell me what’s going on with her.

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Emani has been acting weird this entire trip, and although she says she supports me, I can see the disapproval on her face. It bothers me that at a time when I need her, she's too busy judging me.

I'm not perfect, and neither is she. We are human. I am big enough to admit that I was in a bad place when I made this list. I was grieving the loss of my relationship and what I wanted my future to be. I made my list because I felt like I was missing out on life.

I have been waiting for someone to love me since my parents died in that car. I've been waiting since they never showed up to pick me up from the afterschool program when I was eight years old.

I am tired of waiting. I am tired of being invisible. I am tired of feeling guilty because I want to be proud of the way I look. It is not vain to want to look nice.

"I am not vain!" I say to my reflection with conviction.

"Who said you were vain?" Emani asks from the doorway.

She has a frown on her light brown face, and her eyes look sad. I honestly wish she would just tell me what's going on.

"Nobody," I mumble.

"What are you wearing to this strip club?" Emani asks with a roll of her eyes.

I smirk at her. It wasn't my first choice to go tonight, but it was on my list. And I added it myself. Ever since watching that show at the Pynk, I've been curious about what it would be like in a strip club.

"Why are you acting like I'm going to be one of the dancers?" I question with a chuckle. "You don't have to go if you're not comfortable, Mani. I know you think the list is stupid."

Emani sighs. "I don't think your list is stupid, Kay. And I'll go with you guys. I'm sure it will be entertaining."

I nod, but I don't call her on her negativity. Stupid is exactly what she said my list was, but maybe it is dumb to her. I don't care because it's my list.

"Well, all I have to say is we are going to have a good time. If you aren't up for it, then don't come."

"If you don't want me to go, then I'll stay here!" Emani is offended, but like I said... I don't care.

"I didn't say I didn't want you to go. I said we're going to be having a good time. If you're going to be a Debbie Downer, then stay here. You've had an attitude all weekend and you certainly did call my list dumb. I am trying to get over Warren and I have the right to do that. However, I see fit. You don't have to agree or even participate, but you also don't have to be negative or stand in my way."

"Is that really how you feel, Kay? You think I'm standing in your way?" Emani asks in a small, hurt voice.

I am trying my best to stand firm. I crumble to everyone's will with a snap of their fingers. I can't continue to do that. I have to be strong. It's okay to tell people how I

feel. It's okay to be direct and honest. Sometimes, feelings get hurt. I don't want to hurt anyone's feelings.

"No," I lie and instantly feel ashamed of myself. I crumbled like a saltine cracker without water.

Emani studies me for a minute, and I can't tell what she's thinking. But before she says anything else, Shelby comes bounding into the room.

"Hey, ya'll! Whatcha in here gossiping about? Did you get to feel Andy's garden snake?" Shelby bounces her eyebrows up and down, and I shake my head.

"You were with me the entire time." I say exasperated.

"I wasn't watching ya'll. Hell, I was watching Derrick with his sexy chocolate ass."

"Who is Derrick?" Emani and I ask in unison and then giggle at each other.

"The bouncer with the pretty ass teeth and muscles. Ya'll saw how fine that brotha was." We nod because Derrick was fine, and he did have a pretty smile. "Anyway, did you cop a feel or what?"

"No, I didn't cop a feel of Anderson's thing in public, Shelby," I roll my eyes and huff.

"Thing? Kay, you're a grown woman. You can say dick." Shelby shakes her head in mock disappointment. I scowl at her, but I don't comment.

My list does not include me being crude. I try not to cuss like a sailor. Mrs. Singleton did make us attend church when I was in her foster home. It always embarrassed me to swear anyway. Foul language coming from a black woman makes us seem angry. At least that's what I've always been told.

“I don’t want to say that, Shell. Anyway, no.”

“Well, public sex was on the list,” Emani pipes up.

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“Shelby added that after the fact. I erased that, by the way,” I say, pointing a stern finger in her direction. “After Anderson saw it.” I flush with embarrassment.

“That’s why he looked like he was about to rip that bikini off with his teeth after that body shot. Makes sense,” Emani says with a giggle.

I roll my eyes at her, but I’m secretly happy that she’s joking and laughing. Maybe she won’t be so negative for the rest of the trip.

“That body shot was pretty sexy. I’m surprised ol’ Andy has it in him.” Shelby smiles with a nod.

I don’t respond to their teasing because Anderson is sexy. And truth be told, I wanted him to rip my bikini off me. Heck, I was so hot after he licked my bellybutton and kissed up my body, I probably would’ve let him have me on top of the bar. Of course, I would’ve been embarrassed after that, but I can’t say that I would’ve stopped him.

“Let’s get ready, ladies. We have a date with a strip club.”

* * *

“This isn’t what I expected,” I say with my face scrunched up.

No offense to the dancers, but it smells like musty ass and glitter. Does glitter have a smell? I’m not sure, but it stinks. The girls look like they’re two blinks from falling asleep, and there’s so much fake smoke I can barely see. I want to cover my nose from the smoke and the smell, but I know I would look like a prude. And I don’t want

to be rude, so I keep my hands away from my face.

“What did you expect, doll face?” Anderson asks. His handsome face is neutral, but his crystal clear blue eyes are dancing with laughter. I narrow my eyes at him because he’s teasing my inexperience.

“Not this.” I look around, but everywhere I look, it’s the same tired dancers with bored expressions. Poor girls. I guess you gotta do what you gotta do, though. I’m not judging them, but they aren’t entertaining, and I feel bad because I don’t want to give them my money.

Uncle Clifford would not stand for this foolishness.

“Hey, guys. I know a better place we can go to. Derrick has a friend who hooked us all up,” Shelby says. She had just come back from the bar, but I suspect she was making arrangements to leave because she doesn’t have a drink.

“Who the fuck is Derrick?” Brady questions, glaring at Shelby.

Emani and I look at one another with a “girl what” expression. There’s not a lot of people who would dare to talk to Shelby Marie Banks like that. She would never allow it. But I see the anger light up her eyes before she cools her expression and waves off Brady.

“Grab your shit, people. We have places to be.” Shelby continues without looking at Brady again.

Our little group of five grab our things and head to the exit. We are waiting on rideshare when I see Brady pull Shelby to the side. It looks like they’re arguing, but I’m not close enough to hear what they’re saying.

“You look gorgeous tonight, doll face.” Anderson’s deep voice in my ear breaks my focus.

I look up at him and smile. He looks good himself. Anderson is wearing a baby blue dress shirt that brings out his eyes. His dark wavy hair is swept out of his bearded face, and he smells like he bathed in heaven.

“Thank you. You look gorgeous yourself.”

Anderson bites his bottom lip, and his eyes roam over my body. His gaze heats up my skin as if he stuck me in a fire pit to watch me burn. I feel sexy and flirty in my black, plunge neck, halter top. A-line swing dress. The cut accentuates all my best features. Perky boobs... check, cover my pudge... double check, and show off my killer legs... triple check.

I’m proud of my clothing choices, and I feel comfortable and confident. Even though I’m glad Anderson notices, I wore this dress for me.

#13. Dress for yourself.

The ride over to the Excalibur was short, and we were being ushered into a large room with stadium like seating. We are led to the front of the room, off to the side of the large stage. There is low music pumping, and I can feel the excitement in the air.

I know exactly where we are by all of the bachelorette parties that I see in clusters around the room, but I know for a fact Brady and Anderson have no idea what’s about to happen.

The lights dim, and the music gets louder. The crowd goes wild with squeals and cheers. The guys frown, and I laugh at their confused expressions. Shelby and Emani high-five and squeal right along with the other women.

The muscular gyrating men take the stage, and their outrageous showmanship tickles me. This show is definitely a step up from the sad ladies at Foxy's down the street.

As the night went on, Anderson and Brady got more comfortable. And instead of hightailing it out of there, they laughed, joked, and sipped drinks. They both cheered and yelled when the special lady was pulled on stage for a solo performance.

The night became more interesting when the dancers fanned out into the crowd and started picking ladies to give lap dances. One tall drink of Aussie dingo saunters over to us. When he's standing in front of me, my mouth hangs open, and I have no idea what to do.

"You can go shake it on someone else, Steve Irwin. I got this," Anderson says.

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The dancer laughs and holds his arms up in a challenge. I know daggum well these two are not about to battle dance in a strip club!

My mouth drops even more when Anderson stands in front of me and slowly unbuttons his shirt as he moves his hips in a side to side motion. Once his shirt is completely undone, he strips it off his shoulders and lets it hang on his arms. He turns, putting his back to me, and does a little twerk on my lap that has me cracking up laughing at his shenanigans.

Anderson turns to face me, stripping the shirt off completely and wrapping it around my neck as he slowly rolls his body into mine. His eyes twinkle, and he's smiling, but I can't smile because Anderson McNair is making my lady parts stand up and take notice, and it makes me nervous.

"Don't worry, doll face, I won't do anything you don't want me to." Anderson kisses my forehead and unwraps the shirt from my neck. He keeps dancing, but when he breaks out into the Carlton dance, I start laughing again.

The little crowd that I didn't notice was watching started cheering when the song ended. With a big smile gracing my lips, I give Anderson a standing ovation. I've never had so many people cheering me on before. And in one day, it's happened twice. Maybe I should've put that on my list.

Oh well, at least I can mark out another thing on my list.

#9. Go to a strip club.

I Just Can't Help Myself

ANDERSON

I know that Brady will never let me live down my striptease. I don't care. The way Kayla laughed and smiled at me was worth every swivel and pump of my hips. I never had to strip to pay my way through college or anything, but I know what women like. I was made to take formal dance lessons as a kid. Dancing to any music translates for some people. I might not be Magic Mike, but I can keep the beat and make it look sexy. Plus, there wasn't any way in hell that I was going to let a male stripper dance on my woman. Hell no! No.... Nope.

Kayla isn't exactly mine yet. But only because she doesn't know it. I have to give her time to get used to the idea of us being together. And I can't let some muscle-bound fool that she will never see again distract her.

I may not look like I live in the gym, but I have a nice body. My abs are defined, and my chest, arms, and legs are muscular. Besides, the way Kayla's face lit up when I took off my shirt made me realize that stripper had nothing on me. She didn't even give him a second look. It made me flex more and grind against her harder. I could tell she was turned on, so I backed off. The last thing I want to do is make her uncomfortable. The trepidation in her eyes when the stripper stood in front of her made me jump up and sacrifice my grumpy reputation to save her. Brady will tell the guys, and they'll rib me for years, but again it was worth having Kay's eyes on me.

I must say Kayla's attention made me feel like I was eleven feet tall. She strokes my ego, and it turns me on that she doesn't even realize it. She has no clue how fucking gorgeous she is. She looks so innocent in that flirty little dress that cuts low in the front and is short enough to make me want to lean down to try to catch a glimpse of

her panties. I hope she's wearing panties. Yeah... Kayla would never go out without panties. But what if she did? Damn, that's hot.

"Andy? Are you listening to me?" Shelby shakes my shoulder, and I roll my eyes.

No, I wasn't listening to Shelby. She's only talking to me so she can avoid Brady. I don't want to get involved in whatever is going on between the two of them.

"Stop calling me, Andy, Shelby." I give her a stern look that I often use in meetings, but she just flicks her manicured hand at me as if she's swatting a fly.

I noticed that she does that a lot. Dismisses people, especially if they say something to challenge her. I don't think many people question Shelby, but that's not my problem. She's not my problem.

"I..." Shelby doesn't finish what she says because Kayla and Emani come back from the restroom, and Kayla walks straight into my arms.

"Hey," Kayla shyly whispers as she hugs me around my waist. I look down into her big brown eyes, and my heart flutters in my chest.

"Hey." I lean down and kiss her lips.

There's just something about Kayla's lips. They're soft and plump. And they always taste like some sort of fruit. I wonder if it's the gloss she wears. Or maybe it's ChapStick. I don't know, but I'm willing to give money and thanks to whoever made what she's wearing.

"Thanks for helping me cross off a few things on my list. I appreciate your help," Kayla says as I continue to gaze into her pretty face.

Kayla gives me a warm, soft look that melts me, and I would do anything for this girl. We've known each other for two weeks, and I am already completely infatuated with her. My friends would tell me it's my OCD, so that's why I don't tell them how much I actually think about Kay.

My disorder doesn't have anything to do with Kayla. She's just interesting to me. I'm not obsessed with figuring out why she won't open up about her ex, who obviously hurt her. Or why she won't talk about her childhood, or why she made a bucket list at twenty-nine.

Kayla is not a thing that belongs on a shelf. I don't need to compartmentalize her. My disorder doesn't work like that. I don't obsess about people, only things.

"It's not a problem, as a matter of fact." I pull Kayla out the door and into the taxi line. "I'm going to help you cross off a few more."

Our little group makes it to the Parishotel in no time at all, and we pile out of the SUV. I lead Kayla to the place where I want her and I kiss her like we've known each other for a lifetime. I dip her low like we are in some old black and white romantic film, and I put my all into our kiss.

When I stand her up straight, Kayla is breathless with a look of pure lust on her face. She touches her lips with her fingers, and I want so badly to kiss her again.

"Number twenty-six," I say, and she gives me a girlish grin.

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“Kiss under the Eiffel Tower,” Kayla whispers before giving me a tight hug. “Thank you, Anderson. Really, I mean it.”

“I told you that I would help you. Stop thanking me. I want to do this.” I give her a peck on her lips and grab her by the hand.

It’s late, and we all have flights to catch in the morning, but I don’t want the night to end. I want to spend the rest of my life kissing her and touching her, just being around her. I don’t understand why, but I just can’t help myself.

* * *

Instead of just letting Kayla go for the night, I invited all the ladies to fly back with us on the private jet. It was another way for me to be close to her and to impress her. I don’t usually throw my money around, but in this instance, it is a necessary evil. I know it’s the company jet, but still.

The morning went fast, and before I knew it, we were meeting at the airstrip. I offered to have a car pick Kayla and her friends up, but she refused, saying they had already paid for a limo ride.

I’m doing my best not to check my watch or pace, but I feel nervous for some reason. I want Kay to know all of me, and although I keep a low profile, private jets and lavishness are sometimes part of my life.

Although I don’t communicate with my parents, my grandparents are traditional, and there are some things I have to be a part of as a McNair. She needs to know what

she's getting into, but I plan to ease her into my lifestyle a small portion at a time.

"Hey, Andy!" I hear Shelby yell as she strolls into the comfortable private lounge.

I don't respond neither do I chastise her because we both know that she antagonizes people for sport. It's a game to her, and I refuse to engage.

"Hello, Emani. Did you guys have a good morning?" I greet Emani as I ignore Shelby.

"Yes, we did. Thanks for asking." Emani smirks as she passes me. Kayla is walking behind her, and I move to help her with her things.

"Hey, doll face. How'd you sleep?" I question, taking the roller bag from her hand and waving over the concierge so he can load the bags with the rest.

"Okay. I'm always anxious the night before a flight," Kayla responds with a smile.

I lean down and kiss her lips, and she sighs and leans into me. Kayla presses her lush breasts against me when I wrap my long arms around her body, securing her to me. She looks up into my eyes, and I see the warmth swimming in her chocolate browns. I can stare into Kayla's sweet dimpled face all day.

"Well, there's a bedroom on the plane. We can take a nap once we take off," I promise her.

"Man, the other half really knows how to live," Kayla says wistfully.

I smile at her because I didn't know how she would react to flying on a private jet. She didn't seem opposed to all of the VIP treatment while in Vegas, but being on vacation is different from real life. I'll still take things slow.

“We do alright. Did you eat something? Are you hungry?”

“I’m fine. I get a little nervous before takeoff,” Kayla admits.

“Oh. Is my baby doll a nervous flier?” I tease her, rubbing my hands up and down her back as we sway from side to side.

I’m already addicted to touching her, and as long as she lets me, my hands will roam all over her. I must say that I’m having a hard time keeping my hands in PG territory. Kayla’s ass is so plump and firm. Just the thought of it makes my dick grow in my pants.

“Thanks for letting us travel with you. I had to adjust my list because flying on a private jet wasn’t even on my radar. So, number twenty-seven will be crossed off,” Kayla says happily, and I smile.

If being in the mile-high club was on that list, I would have her mark that one off too. I shake my head at my thoughts because I’m getting ahead of myself. It’s not just about getting Kay into bed. It’s about getting to know her and being in her life. But I would be a lying son-of-a-bitch if I said I can’t wait until we make that step.

I’m excited about being with Kay in all ways. She’s fucking fantastic, and I’d be a fool if I let a woman like her get away.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your entire party has arrived. You can board the plane whenever you’re ready.”

Everyone bustles around, getting ready to board the plane when I see Bethany giving me a funny look. I’ve been meaning to talk to her since the night after the keynote speech. But she’s been MIA. I haven’t seen her since I left with Kayla from the nightclub.

Bethany is usually at every event, but she didn't show up for brunch or the pool party with Bella Vodka. I make a mental note to talk to her.

"Wow, I never thought I'd be traveling private. We got discounted prices for the flight here, and now I feel like the queen B," Emani says as she takes in the jet.

I smile proudly because our jet is nice. It was one of the first things we purchased when our investors began to increase. Now with the backing of Pearson, we can actually use it more often. We were able to lease it out to offset the cost of having it, but now we won't have to do that. This weekend was a success in both my professional and personal life.

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Once we are all on board, I hold Kayla's hand and start toward the back of the plane away from everyone else. My assistant, Vance, raises an eyebrow in question, but I know he won't ask about Kayla. He is very professional and he's been with me since I needed an executive assistant, but I've never had a woman around, especially on the company jet or company time.

As we pass Brady, he is actively ignoring Shelby. However, his gaze kept bouncing over to Emani. Interesting. But not my business.

Bethany is sitting with Brady's assistant, Julia, and I noticed both ladies giving me the evil eye when I pass. I'm not sure what that's about, but again, I don't really care. Julia has it easy with Brady. I'm pretty sure they were sleeping together at one point, and she hardly does any work. But as long as their situation doesn't fuck with my company, which it hasn't, I don't care who screws who. Maybe I should, though...

When the captain comes over the loudspeaker for us to prepare for takeoff, Kayla nervously wipes her hands down her blue skinny jeans. I grab her small delicate hand in mine and bring it to my lips to kiss. Kayla smiles at me sweetly, and I kiss her cheek.

"No worries, doll face, I gotcha." As I watch Kayla relax into me at my words, I know that it's a promise that I will keep. I'll always protect her.

KAYLA

I didn't realize how one trip could change my life forever. I mean, I guess I really never thought about it. It was my first girls' trip, first time at a strip club, first kiss under the Eiffel Tower, even though it wasn't in Paris, and my first time on a private jet, which wasn't even something I thought would happen.

I guess if I continue opening myself up, anything is possible. I used to believe that only negative things would happen to me if I let my guard down. I was so cautious about not letting anyone close. It took Emani and Shelby ages to crack my hard outer shell. And there are still things I haven't told them. Even my two closest friends don't know me as well as

they should.

However, as guarded as I am or was, I still let Warren in, which was a huge mistake. I

told Warren things about myself that my best friends aren't aware of, and he used my brokenness against me. So, being cautious and closed off didn't help, so from now on, I will try to be more optimistic. I go to my phone and rewrite a few things on my list.

#10. Be more optimistic.

#11. Take risks without regret.

#27. Fly on a private jet.

Although I can't mark off numbers ten and eleven yet, writing them down is a good start. The whole purpose of my list is to remind myself of all of the things that I haven't done and to have the courage to do them. Every time I cross off another item,

I have a sense of accomplishment

that I didn't realize I needed.

I don't want to be that scared little girl who tries to be invisible anymore. Nobody wants to be hurt in life, and I used to feel like I was unfairly more hurt than others. Looking back, I know that's not true.

However, in a child's mind, it was unfair that both my parents were killed, and I didn't have any family to take me in. It was unfair that I was small and I was bullied. Everything was unfair.

As an adult, I recognize life is sometimes unfair, no matter how open or closed you are to other people. But how you handle things can make all the difference in your happiness.

However, as I stand in front of Three Forks for the second time in my life, I am doing my best not to ask God, why me? I know that Anderson has planned a spectacular night for us because since we've been dating, any time we spend together is spectacular.

We've gotten extremely close since we came back from Vegas, and I love getting to know him. He's been such a gentleman, and he hasn't pushed me into any uncomfortable situations. But being at the same restaurant, where I found out my boyfriend was cheating on me with another man, is not something I'm willing to do.

I probably should make new memories and all that, but I'm not ready. I can't stand the flashes of humiliation I feel just seeing the front of this place. I know there's no way I can sit through dinner and not think about Warren.

"Kay, baby, what's going on?" Anderson pulls me to the side of the entrance and

holds my face in his hands as he looks me in the eyes.

I did my best not to let my emotions get the best of me. I was able to get out of the car and walk all the way to the door without any emotions, but once I saw the same hostess from that night, my steps faltered and so did my confidence.

“I don’t think I can eat here,” I say in a whisper, but our faces are so close that Anderson definitely heard me.

“Okay, let’s go.” Anderson kisses my lips and grabs my hand. He starts walking back to the valet, but I stop him.

“Just like that? You’re not upset?” I asked, confused.

I was ready to give Anderson the explanation he deserved for ruining our date. But it doesn’t seem like he’s at all bothered by my abrupt change of mind. It’s not that I want him upset, but he has every right to be.

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“Baby, you are shaking. I know something isn’t right. We’re not eating here. We can eat anywhere,” Anderson responds with sincerity covering his handsome face.

His bright eyes study me before he kisses my cheek. I swoon at the scent of his cologne and the warmth of his body. His dark hair is shorter than he normally keeps it, but the new cut brings out his eyes and the sharp angles of his face even more than usual. The tailored dark grey suit and crisp white shirt he’s wearing show off his fit body in all the right ways.

Anderson looks so damn good tonight that I thought I could be distracted enough. However, that wasn’t the case. Now, I feel bad that we have to leave. Once the valet brings

his car around, he tips the young man and helps me into the passenger side. It’s quiet as he pulls away from the restaurant. We’ve spent almost every day together, and as much as I feel like I know him, I can’t get a read on his mood right now.

The last thing I want to do is go back to my self-blaming so I take a deep breath. Anderson deserves to know what’s going on with me. He’s earned the right with his consistency and patience.

“Where would you like to eat?” Anderson’s voice and face are held in a neutral expression. I may not know what he’s thinking, but he’s certainly hiding his emotions on purpose.

“Can we go somewhere to talk first? I want to explain,” I say, carefully watching his profile as he maneuvers through traffic.

“Sure, I know a place.” Anderson turns to me and smiles, and I relax just a little.

* * *

Anderson pulls up to his building, and I’m glad he brought me here. I haven’t been back to his place since the night we met. I think he was trying to keep me inside of my comfort zone. We hang out a lot. This is the most active I’ve been in my life. We’ve been to several restaurants around the city, museums, art galleries, hiking trails, and even an arcade.

The only intimate settings we’ve been to are the car rides to and from our dates and when Anderson walks me to my door. On the odd occasion, he has come inside my apartment for a drink. As soon as we start kissing and it gets hot, he leaves like his ass is on fire.

I know he’s as attracted to me as I am to him, but he’s holding back. I can’t say that I blame him, though. I can admit that I was afraid of Anderson. I felt an instant connection to him, but I was hurt. I’m still hurting, but I won’t let that stop me from seeing where this thing

between us can go.

Warren’s texts and calls became so frequent that I blocked his number. I don’t know what he wants from me, and I don’t care. He did his dirt, and I didn’t deserve the way he treated me. Nobody deserves to be lied to and cheated on.

When we walk into Anderson’s apartment, my anxiety comes back. I’m about to tell this man about my demons. I really like him, and I hope it doesn’t run him off, but if it does, he doesn’t deserve me anyway.

Be yourself. They will adjust.

“I’m surprised that you don’t live in the penthouse. I mean, you do have a private jet,” I say. It’s the first thing that comes to mind to break the awkward silence. But my statement comes out as judgy, and that’s not how I meant it.

“That didn’t come out—”

“I know what you meant,” Anderson interrupts me. He chuckles, and I dip my head in embarrassment. I still haven’t gotten used to my newfound outspokenness. I’m a little awkward at times, but at least I’m not holding everything in.

“The jet is a company asset, but this place is personal. I don’t think my investors would agree to pay for a penthouse for me no matter how much money I make them.”

Anderson leaves the room after I sit and goes to the kitchen and gets us drinks. He’s back entirely too soon when he places the glasses on the coffee table in front of me when he returns to the living room. I’ve stalled long enough.

I take a long sip of wine before I start my story. “Warren Barnett was my boyfriend. He took me to Three Forks, where he began to propose. He didn’t get to officially ask me because his boyfriend interrupted the proposal.”

“Damn,” Anderson breathes out, shaking his head. A deep frown covers his face before he takes a long drink of his whiskey.

“I know, right? Anyway, I thought I could trust Warren. I just wanted him to be my everything, but I was nothing to him.” I sigh and Anderson nods in understanding.

“I put my all into Warren because I felt like he was my only chance at having a real family. He even tried to convince me to stay with him after I learned that he was gay,” I say, shaking my head in disappointment.

“What. The. Fuck!” Anderson shakes his head.

“I know.” I shake my head. “I just wanted a family so bad, and he used that desire against me.”

Although neither of us have talked a lot about our childhoods, I told him about my parent’s accident. My time in foster care isn’t my favorite topic, but I have the distinct impression that Anderson’s family isn’t something he likes to talk about either. He’s only told me about going to boarding school, where he met Brady and Jason. He’s never mentioned his parents, and he doesn’t have any siblings.

“Kay, sometimes, family is whoyouchoose. It’s not always about blood relation. Believe me.”

“I’m learning that. Anyway, I’m sorry about dinner. Having flashbacks of a humiliating experience can be a bit traumatizing.”

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“It’s okay. You can always tell me when something is wrong, Kay.”

“Okay,” I say shyly. I can tell by the conviction in Anderson’s words that he means what he said.

“Are there any other restaurants that your bitchass ex took you to?” Anderson’s face is again blank, but his blue eyes are glowing with anger. The look is surprising, but I bust out laughing.

I’m not sure how I expected Anderson to respond, but what I didn’t expect was his anger. I continue to laugh as he stares at me with big blue eyes. I don’t thinkheexpected my laughter.

“I’m sorry. I just never heard anyone talk bad about Warren. Well, except the girls.” I shrug unapologetically.

“Fuck him!” Anderson is serious, but his eyes twinkle with mirth, and I continue to smile goofily at him.

I sense that he isn’t quite ready to delve into our pasts, so I think I’ve shared enough for one night. He doesn’t really need to know about all of my insecurities at once. Besides, I’m working on them, and that’s the first step. When I look down at my watch, I notice that we’ve been talking for almost an hour. And although it’s not late, I feel emotionally drained.

“Do you think we can just order something and hang here tonight?” I ask.

Initially, I was excited about tonight. I dressed in a purple wrap dress that hugged my curves and a pair of chunky heels. They aren't stilettos, but I'm making progress.

"Are you asking me to Netflix and chill?" Anderson's eyebrows dance up and down. His gaze roams over my body before he bites his plump bottom lip. His prurient thoughts are showing in his blue eyes.

"That's exactly what I'm asking." I stare at Anderson boldly. I concentrate on not dipping my head in embarrassment. I am a grown woman, and I have sexual desires. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

#15. Be bold.

I mentally cross off another number. It's a good thing I memorized my list!

"Well, doll face, you don't have to ask me twice," Anderson says. A wide grin breaking out on his bearded face.

I don't know what he has in store for me, but honestly, I can't wait.

17

In Trouble

ANDERSON

It was hard for me to hold my shock in at Kayla's boldness. She's always so embarrassed and shy whenever I do anything overtly sexual, so I'm mindful not to push her too much.

We've been dating for two months, and although I've had the worst case of blue balls

since I was a teenager, I can say that I don't regret it. Getting to know Kay has been an eye opening experience. She's such a pure soul.

Kayla thinks I don't know about her childhood and why she wants a family so bad, but I know. I hired a private detective when my fascination with her grew. When we started dating, and she didn't volunteer the information, I had my guy, Dominique look into her. Some people might call that an invasion of privacy, but I call it a necessity. I'm not only the owner of a multi-million-dollar company, but my family is worth billions too. Even though I don't speak to my parents and they've claimed to have disowned me, I'm very much still in contact with my grandparents.

I can't in good conscience put my grandparents' legacy in jeopardy because I was infatuated with a woman. I have to protect my family, well my grandparents at least. However, after the report from Dom, I know Kayla is only hiding her shame of being a foster kid. She told me about her parents' death, but she never told me who raised her or how she grew up. None of it matters because I know that she doesn't have a malicious bone in her body.

I considered telling Kayla about my research, but I figured in the grand scheme of things that it didn't really matter.

The knock on my door brings me back to the here and now. I kiss Kayla on her temple before getting up and answering the door. The TexMex food smells divine. I tip the driver before taking the food and spreading it out on the coffee table.

We eat, talk, and laugh like we normally do. I have never questioned the chemistry between Kayla and me. It's been there since I glimpsed her in that red dress. Every day we get more and more comfortable. I'm glad she shared with me what happened with her ex. It makes so much sense now why she was closed off.

Now that Kayla has opened up more, maybe we can move forward, and she'll begin

to trust me more.

We finally settle in with us wearing gym shorts and t-shirts. For as shy as Kayla is, she doesn't mind asking to wear my clothes. I smile because the reality is I'd rather have her wearing my clothes or nothing at all. Yeah, I think I would prefer her naked.

"Babe, are you watching?" Kayla looks over her shoulder with a smirk.

"Uh, yeah." I smile back at her, but she shakes her head with a chuckle.

"I doubt it. This is the good part. Look how he snatched her by the neck."

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I have no idea what she's talking about. We're watching a movie about a guy who kidnaps a woman to make her fall in love in a year. The only part I noticed is when he was getting a blowjob on a plane. Then I started to wonder if Kayla would add the mile-high-club to her list and I got totally distracted.

"Anderson, I picked this movie cause it's sexy." Kayla gives me a little pout, and I can't help but kiss her.

"You're sexy." I kiss her again, and she melts against me.

Kayla is snuggled against my chest with her back to me, so I can't deepen the kiss like I want to. I pull her so she will turn completely around. Kayla straddles my lap, and my dick is instantly hard. Her plump ass is resting on my thighs, and I can't help when my hips automatically push upwards.

I reluctantly pull away from Kayla's sweet kiss and ask, "Kayla, are you ready to have sex?"

Again she looks me boldly in the eyes and smiles. "Yes, Anderson. I want to have sex with you."

I try not to jump up and carry her to my bedroom as fast as my legs can take me, so I take a deep breath and relax my shoulders.

"Are you sure? We can go as slow as you want. No pressure." I say the words with a neutral expression, but they taste bitter as they leave my lips.

“Do you not want to have sex with me?” There’s a mix of horror and embarrassment covering Kayla’s face, and I regret putting the look there.

“Baby, of course, I want to have sex with you. Shit! I have to fight a fucking hard-on every time we’re in the same room. I just don’t want you to regret anything. I can wait as long as you need,” I explain, hoping she believes me.

I don’t want to rush her because she’s been hurt, and the heartbreak was recent. There’s no way in hell that I want to be the rebound guy. Fuck that!

“We’ve waited long enough. I’m ready,” Kayla assures me as she caresses my beard with her small hands.

I grab her by the face and take her lips roughly. I pull back just enough to pull the t-shirt over her head. Kayla’s not wearing a bra, so her beautiful breasts bounce free. I’m in heaven as my warm mouth engulfs her taut nipple. I suck and kiss her entire chest, making sure I alternate between both breasts to give them equal love and attention.

Kayla writhes and grinds on my lap as she moans and gasps for air. I don’t know what’s turning me on more, her movements or the sounds that she’s making. I can feel when she gets her rhythm because her groans become louder, and her body starts to shake.

“Take what you need, baby. Does it feel good?” I pull her down hard onto the bulge in my shorts as I grind my hips into hers.

“Ander... I... I think...” Kayla doesn’t finish her sentence as she tucks her head into the crook of my neck and bites down.

The move is so unexpected that I nearly cum in my shorts. When she relaxes, Kayla

looks at me with a lustful expression and a dazzling smile. I kiss her lips softly so that I can calm down. She came without me being inside her, and I refuse to cum until I'm inside of her.

"I can't believe you dry humped me into an orgasm," Kayla says, her eyes wide with awe.

"You dry humped me." I chuckle with a wink. "Besides, that was just the warm-up. Let me show you what I can really do."

I raise up, and Kayla wraps her shapely soft brown legs around my waist. I damn near run to my bedroom so I can do all of the nasty things I've been craving to do.

When I get to my room, I place Kayla down on the king sized bed and pull the shorts off. I lay her down and crawl over her. I begin kissing her temple and slowly make my way down her body. I graze my lips softly over her neck to her collar bone. I am giving just enough pressure so she can feel it. Her skin breaks out in goose bumps, and I smile.

I continue giving butterfly kisses down to her breast, where I kiss around her nipple but never giving it the attention I know she wants. I suck on the bottom, the side, in between, everywhere but the hardened nub that's begging for my attention. Kayla moans in frustration.

"Tell me what you want, Kayla," I growl at her.

I can already read her body, but I want her to be vocal. I want to hear her say what she wants. No, demand. I want her to demand me to give her the pleasure that she deserves.

"Suck my nipple. Please," Kayla begs. But before her plea can completely hit my

ears, I am sucking and tenderly biting her nipple.

“Pleeease, don’t stop!” Kayla lustfully pleads between breathless pants.

“Oh! I won’t stop. Please believe that.”

“Oh shit!” She screams as her legs begin to shake. I know she’s close, so I back off. I don’t want her to have another orgasm just yet.

I leave her breasts and make my way down to the sweet honey pot that will be my new favorite dish.

Kayla is soaking wet and so fucking gorgeous that I take a minute and simply stare at her. I open her legs wider and dive in. I lick around her clit and suck her lips into my mouth. Kayla moans, and I increase the pressure. I pull her legs further apart and continue to rub my entire face into her sweet pussy.

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She's going to have beard burns all on her thighs, and I can't say that I'm sorry about it. I want to mark her as mine like some crazed animal.

When I feel Kayla building up, I relax my tongue and begin to stroke her slowly, keeping her close to the edge. I raise up and continue to work her with my finger pumping slowly in and out of her warm wet canal.

I pull off my shorts and stroke my dick with my left hand. I have always been a good multitasker.

"You ready for me, doll face?" I ask.

Kayla's lazy gaze holds mine before she bites her bottom lip. "Condoms."

The one word breaks through my lustful haze, and I want to slap myself. I was ready to go all in, and protection never even crossed my mind. I pull my nightstand drawer open and get out a condom.

I rip it open and slowly roll it onto my sensitive manhood. Watching Kayla watch me is making me want to bust. I finish with the condom and place my large body over hers.

I kiss her lips as I ease myself into her tight core. Fuuuuuck! I want to shout the word, but I'm not a virgin, so I suck it up and continue to push in until I'm snuggly surrounded by warmth and wetness.

"You okay?" I ask, letting Kay's body adjust to mine.

“Only if you start moving soon.” Kayla kisses me, and I begin to move inside of her.

I begin to move slowly at first. Torturing us both for waiting so long to feel this feeling. I’m certain if we’d known it would’ve been this good, we would’ve done this on the first night. And every night following. I know that’s the plan going forward.

I roll us over so that I’m on my back, giving Kay control. She timidly moves until I help her out by gripping her hips and moving her body. Kayla catches on quickly and starts to move those voluptuous hips up and down, round and round, back and fucking forth. My eyes roll to the back of my head, and my toes curl. Her sensual ministrations have me taking over again and pumping into her from the bottom while I hold her hips still.

“Anderson! Oh, my God!” Kayla yells out, egging me on.

My hips buck wilder as I start to talk shit. “Is this dick good, baby? Huh? Promise me you won’t ever keep this pussy from me!”

“I promise!” Kayla loudly wails as I pump my hips harder.

I want her to feel all of me. Shit, I want to feel all of her.

“That’s it, baby! Cum on this dick. Fuck yeah!” I yell out when I feel Kayla’s pussy clamp down. My whole body shudders and I close my eyes tightly.

Kayla is magnificent, and I can’t get enough of her. The shy woman I first met slowly disappears throughout the night as I continue to ravish every part of her delectable body.

After the fourth time, I make Kayla orgasm, I follow her over the edge of bliss. My essence drained out of me so hard that I felt like I would pass out. We both moan our

completions and we lay holding each other and breathing hard. It takes me longer than normal to come back down to Earth. I've wanted Kayla since I've met her and now that I've had her I know that I'll never be the same.

Making love to Kay was worth the wait, but I knew that I was in big trouble.

18

Negotiations

ANDERSON

Everything is going so well, almost too well, that I'm beginning to feel paranoid. I keep feeling like I'm waiting on the other shoe to drop. But not just drop, fall from the sky, hit me in the head, and knock me unconscious. My therapist used to tell me that obsessing over what ifs and bad scenarios happening is almost willing them to come to fruition.

Dr. Landry would tell me; I was always right about bad things happening because I was looking for them. I would say to her even if I weren't looking, and the bad still would've happened. She would simply stare blankly at me and say, "Anderson, it's not what happens. It's how you react to them."

So, I'm sitting in the lobby, outside of Pearson Grant's magnificent office, waiting for our meeting. This singular meeting has the possibility to change our company, A&M, and my life forever. Brady, who is sitting beside me with his leg over one knee showing off his George Cleverly shoes, is as cool as a cucumber. His relaxed posture makes me want to punch him in the face because I'm a nervous wreck. I keep running the numbers, and even though they come out positive, I can't stop obsessing over the outcome.

I'm bouncing my knees up and down and biting on my nails like a lunatic. I keep rubbing my hand over my beard to keep myself from running my hands through my hair and messing it up. If it wouldn't draw so much attention, I would be pacing up and down the lobby.

"Anderson, man, chill the fuck out," Brady whispers at me through clenched teeth.

Anybody looking from a distance would think he was smiling with his nonchalant demeanor. But I can see that I'm annoying the hell out of my partner and best friend.

"Sorry. Damn, I just..." I shake my head and take a deep breath.

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“This deal is as good as done. Pearson smells fear. Cut that shit out. We’ve done the work: the numbers are where they need to be. Pearson will make even more money that he doesn’t need. We got this,” Brady scolds me, but I need his words.

I nod my head again. Knowing that what he’s saying is true. We’ve worked our asses off, and if Pearson doesn’t take the deal, somebody else surely will. Maniacal Sportshas increased in users since right after TechCon.

Bethany leaked to a technology blog that Pearson Grant was seen in a meeting with us, and that’s all it took to get interested in our company. I’m glad that Pearson wasn’t upset about the coverage, even though the deal wasn’t set in stone. Bethany took a risk and it paid off, but I made sure to tell her to run her plans on “leaking” anything else by Brady and me first.

Pearson’s assistant, Kelsey comes out into the lobby with a bright smile on her face, and I relax. Kelsey is an extension of Pearson, and if she’s smiling, that means everything is good so far.

“Hello, everyone. Glad you all can make it. Follow me, please,” Kelsey welcomes and we all nod and greet her in return.

Brady, along with myself and two of our lawyers, Mr. Billings and Mrs. Carey, follow behind Kelsey into a spacious conference room surrounded by glass walls. I give myself a pep talk and get ready for negotiations. I’m a businessman, and I know my shit, and so does Brady. Pearson would be crazy not to invest in our company. I rethink my statement. Pearson is crazy, but not when it comes to business.

“Gentlemen and ladies.” Pearson’s green eyes twinkle when he greets us even though his face is a stone mask. The VP and Tobin’s cousin, Keifer, is also here, along with two older gentlemen who I know are their lawyers. This deal has been in the making for two long months, and hopefully, we can sign the papers today.

After two hours of negotiations, we reach a deal. Media Tech Innovation, Pearson’s company, will be the parent company of any newly acquired technology from A&M. It will also be the third highest shareholder in Maniacal Sports, beating out all of our other investors.

That means that although Brady and I still own the controlling shares, we can fall under the umbrella of Pearson’s company. We can now operate in Europe and Canada without jumping through hoops. It also opens the doors to doing business in a multitude of other countries as well. This deal is potentially worth billions of dollars. And I couldn’t be prouder!

“Now that all of that bullshit is out the way...” Pearson starts, but Keifer clears his throat with a stern look on his face. “Whatever, man. Now, that business is done. We will have an official announcement and press conference set-up for next week. No leaks.” Pearson smirks at us, and Brady and I chuckle.

“No leaks,” Mr. Billings, our lawyer, promises.

The last time was a close call, and although we commend Bethany for doing a great job most of the time, leaking a story like that to the press was a big no-no. Bethany has been extremely focused on her job since we came back from Vegas, not that she wasn’t before, but something with her is different.

I stop thinking about our overeager publicist, so I can redirect my attention to signing the necessary documents for this merger. This business deal is so impactful that we no longer need the investors that were giving us the runaround before we went to

Vegas. Now, they are clamoring to do business with A&M.

Once we have all the documents signed, our belongings are packed up, and I breathe the first sigh of relief since my day started. Nothing went wrong. The numbers I ran were exactly what they were supposed to be, and Pearson, Keifer, and their company lawyers agreed to everything. I can finally relax. But for some reason, the ominous feeling is still with me.

* * *

KAYLA

My mood is lifted when I receive a phone call at work from Anderson telling me the deal he's been working on for months with Pearson Grant has gone through. I couldn't be prouder of him. Anderson and Brady worked so hard to get the deal with Media Tech Innovation. Now, TechX-us A&M will be a part of the world's leading technology conglomerate. Shoot, I might ask them for a job the way they will be rolling in dough.

After the call, I get back to my tedious work. I'm installing new software on our company network when I hear a knock on my door. I sigh because even though I'm busy, the program practically runs itself, so I don't have a valid excuse for not answering the door. I just hope it's not Ken. He's been a pain in the ass since I told him off a few months ago.

"Come in," I respond to the knock without getting out of my chair.

The door opens slowly, and in walks Warren. I can't help the frown that covers my face. For all the calling and texting he did, he never tried to talk to me at work. He at least respected those boundaries, but it looks like since I blocked his number, that respect has come to a crashing halt.

“Hi, Kay. We need to talk.” Warren’s voice is stern like he’s somebody’s daddy. He sure the heck isn’t mine, so I sit back in my chair and arch my eyebrow.

“So, you’re not going to say anything? You’re just going to sit there looking smug?” he questions, putting bass in his voice that I really don’t appreciate.

“There’s nothing that needs to be said. I’m busy. Please leave,” I state calmly. I will not be the angry black woman in this situation. I am a professional and I will not let my personal life invade my work space.

Warren sighs when he doesn’t get the reaction he was expecting. I know he wanted me to either get loud or crumple under his glare. I’m not the pushover that I was, but I’m certainly not combative either.

“You look... pretty.” The words are said almost begrudgingly.

I want to laugh as Warren looks at me for the first time in months. Hell, he probably never looked at me like he is now when we were together.

“Thanks. Again, I’m busy. If you need technology help, let Ken or Wendy know, and the team will be able to assist you,” I say, reiterating that I am not about to talk to him.

“Kayla... please, I just need you...”

I hold up my hand and shake my head. I refuse to negotiate with this man. There’s nothing left for us to say. I get up from my chair. Warren’s eyes nearly bug out of his head when he sees my clothes. My black pencil skirt and fitted blue blouse hug my body in all the right places. My outfit is professional yet sexy. The new black stilettos I’m wearing accent my shapely legs and makes me taller. I never realized how much shoes could change the way you look.

I pretend to ignore the lecherous way Warren is staring as I open up my office door. I give him a pointed look without verbalizing what I want him to do. I've already told him more than once to leave. It doesn't need to be said again.

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“We’ll talk later when you’re in a better mood. I do miss you, Kay.” Warren gives me a sad expression. His hazel eyes are filled with regret, and my heart cracks a little more.

I don’t respond as I softly close the door behind him. Warren was my everything for so long that now that I’m finally starting to get a sense of who I am, he’s trying to impede on that. I can’t let him bamboozle me into believing any more lies. It’s not just about his sexuality. I thought we were family. I believed it when he told me he loved me. It’s easy to remember the love, but it’s even harder to forget the pain that he caused.

When the day is finally over, I can’t wait to go home and get ready for tonight’s date. Anderson is taking me to an art showcase where the artist integrates digital and audio technology into his paintings. It’s like the pieces are alive, and I’ve been looking forward to the showing for months. I thought I’d be going as Warren’s fiancée when I first heard about it, but I find that I’d much rather be going as Anderson’s girlfriend. Wait, am I Anderson’s girlfriend?

The thought flits across my mind because as many things as we talk about, we haven’t had the talk. I don’t want to assume, and Shelby says never be the first to bring it up. A man will think you’re desperate to have him and he’ll try to walk all over you if he thinks you want to be his woman and he’s not ready to be your man.

After I soak in a warm bath, I take my time picking out tonight’s outfit. I want to look especially beautiful for the show. I know a lot of important people from our industry will be there, and I want Anderson to be able to show me off.

Although Warren and I dated for a year, we never went to big events like this one. I was hoping once I became his fiancée, that would all change. It changed but not in the way I expected. And even though I didn't particularly care about how I looked before, I see the value now in caring. So, I want to go the extra mile tonight. I want to take pride in the way I look.

As I slip on the sexy, long sleeved, deep v-neck, maroon satin dress with a short hemline and a long slit, I admire the way the dress fits me. I flat ironed my hair, so the golden hues of the ombre shine against my collar bone, and the chocolate color around my face highlights my brown skin and eyes.

I put on a dark red lipstick that accentuates my plump lips and dark eyeliner. The makeup, along with the lash extensions that I just got, makes my eyes look seductive. I can admit that I look damned good.

#17. Get comfortable wearing makeup.

I'm so excited for this date tonight that I almost run to the door when Anderson rings the doorbell. Calm down, Kay. Have some decorum, sheesh.

19

Promises Kept

KAYLA

"Damn! You look gorgeous, doll face!" Anderson stands in my door, his bright blue eyes taking me in from the top of my flat ironed hair to the bottom of my stiletto clad feet.

Normally, I would blush and dip my head in embarrassment at his perusal, but not

tonight. Tonight I stand tall in my sexiness and give my guy a flirty twirl so he can see all of me.

I discovered that I liked wearing short dresses because they make my thick legs look long, and standing at five-foot-four, I need all the help I can get. I make sure to do a cheek check with every outfit. I don't want to show all my goods when I bend over, so even though my hemline has crept up above my knees, my ass still isn't hanging out.

"Thanks, babe. You look damn good yourself." I take my own perusal over Anderson's tall, lean body. He gives me a dazzling white smile before stepping inside my apartment.

Anderson closes the door with his foot and pushes me against the wall. He cages me in with his arms and puts his forehead against mine. His large hand skims my face with feather soft touches. Anderson drags his hand down to my thigh, where he continues to caress my skin softly.

Goosebumps break out from the light strokes and a shudder that I can't contain runs through my body.

"I want to take you up against this wall right now." Anderson's voice is low and gravelly. I don't think I've ever heard him sound so... so...animalistic.

"Ummm, if you do that, then we will be late to the show," I breathe out as best I can because Anderson's closeness is wreaking havoc on my brain functions.

Anderson starts to kiss my neck as his hands continue to roam. He slips his fingers along the bottom of the satin material, and my breath catches. If his hands find what they're looking for, then going out is over.

Ever since the first night we were together, I feel like a nymphomaniac. I have never craved sex or been so horny in all of my life. It's another reason I should slap both my exes. I was deprived of something fantastic, and I swear I want retribution.

No woman should have to live through what I did. Horrible, boring, lackluster sex. The atrocities that I didn't realize I was being put through should be against some kind of law.

Anderson's bright gaze locks onto mine as his fingers make their way to my inner thigh. I know he's testing my willpower, but what he doesn't know is that I don't have any when it comes to his touch. When it comes to him, all Anderson has to do is look at me, and I melt.

"If I touch you, am I going to find your sweetness soaking through your panties?" Anderson's whispered words heighten his seduction, and I can only nod my head and lick my lips. My mouth is the only thing that's dry, and if Anderson's fingers explore any further, he's going to see for himself.

"I want you so bad right now, Kay. But I promised you." Anderson closes his eyes and withdraws his hand from beneath my dress. I don't know if I'm relieved or disappointed by his actions. I want to go to the art show, but damn I want him even more.

"Okay," I whimper, unsure. If Anderson changed his mind and took me right here where we are, I wouldn't dare stop him.

"Get your purse and jacket, baby. It's a little chilly out tonight." Anderson pecks my lips and takes a step back, running a hand through his perfect chocolate colored hair.

I nod again, and on shaky legs, I grab my things. The weather in Dallas is mild this time of year, but it seems to be getting colder at night. Once I lock the door,

Anderson wraps his arm around my shoulders and leads me to the car.

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The gallery at the West End is funky and new age. It is everything I expected for a show like this. Yohan Hobbs started his career as a photographer, but he's been incorporating technology into his pieces over the last few years.

"Wow, I am so impressed by Mr. Hobbs' work. It's spectacular," I say to Anderson as we stop at one particular breathtaking photograph. Even I can hear the awe in my voice.

"You can call me Yohan," a seductive voice says from behind me, and I look over my shoulder at the gorgeous man.

Yohan Hobbs has long blonde locs that he has tied back in a ponytail. His clear eyes twinkle, and his smile is bright. For a second, I awkwardly stare at the man. He looks nothing like I thought he would, but I guess you shouldn't judge a book by its cover.

"Yohan, your work is breathtaking!" I gush. I wasn't expecting to be able to meet or talk to the man. There are a lot of important people here, and I myself am not one of them.

"Thank you..." Yohan trails off, holding out his hand.

"Kayla. Kayla Jones," I supply, shaking his proffered hand.

"Stop being an asshole. Flirting with my girlfriend will get your ass kicked." Anderson's deep voice comes from behind me, and I turn to him with a sharp gasp.

"Oh, my God! Anderson that was completely unnecessary." I am both mad and

embarrassed, but before I can tear into who I guess is officially now my boyfriend, I hear a deep laugh.

“Andy, stop being so jealous. I was merely making conversation.” Yohan chuckles, and it dawns on me that they know each other.

“Whatever, with that Andy shit, you were using your Barry White voice. And I don’t appreciate that shit.” Anderson scowls, but then they both break out in laughter, giving each other a one arm man hug.

“Man, thanks for coming out,” Yohan says after they break apart.

“You know I wouldn’t miss this, especially since Kay has been wanting to come,” Anderson responds.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you knew him. What the heck!” I slap Anderson’s chest playfully. I have been going on and on about Yohan for the past two weeks. If I would’ve known he and Anderson were friends, I might’ve toned down my admiration a few notches.

“I wanted to surprise you, baby. A personal meet and greet with the man of the hour. It’s sure to score me some boyfriend points.” Anderson wiggles his eyebrows, and I shake my head at his silliness. He’s right, of course. Meeting Yohan Hobbs just scored him a lot of points.

We talk and laugh for a few more minutes before Yohan has to mingle with the other guests. It turns out that Anderson and Yohan know each other from college.

As we continue to browse the art and chat with a few people here and there, I notice that I am not at all uncomfortable. For the first time, I am comfortable just being myself. I don’t feel the need to hide or shrink myself because I’m in a room full of

people. I had no idea when that happened, but I'm thankful for the discovery.

Anderson and I are laughing and holding hands when I feel the air in the room still. I instantly recognize the tension, and I fear turning around.

"Kayla?"

I sigh in defeat.

Dang, this night was going so well.

* * *

ANDERSON

My hackles rise as soon as Kayla tenses beside me. I already know who the man is by her reaction.

"Warren," Kayla says in the driest tone I've ever heard from her.

I smirk.

"Who is this?" Warren questions, not taking his eyes off my woman.

My interest is definitely piqued. From the look on his face and how his eyes are eating up Kayla, I can't help but wonder if Kayla is mistaken about her ex's sexuality. Warren may not have been straight, but by the way he's looking at Kayla, I doubt if he's just into men.

"This is my boyfriend, Anderson," Kayla responds, and I watch as Warren's eyes go wide.

“Your what? You have a boyfriend already? We just broke up a few months ago!”
Warren’s voice is low but not in a menacing way. I’m pretty sure the man is in a state of shock.

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I can sort of understand his disbelief because Kayla has changed a lot since I first met her. She is no longer the shy woman who would blush at my teasing or say no before you even asked her a question. Kayla is blossoming and becoming more and more of the woman she swore to me she wasn't. I love her more and more every day.

My eyes rapidly blink at the thought. I know I can be obsessive, but I'm not sure I can be in love. I clear my throat and shake my head to rid myself of the errant thought.

"Warren, this isn't a conversation that I want to have with you. I've already told you that. Please leave me alone."

I smile at how firm Kayla's words are. I'm so fucking proud of her right now that my face splits into a wide grin. She would've never been so outspoken before. We've had many conversations about how she hates confrontation and how people would treat her like a doormat. I'll make sure to remind her to mark off number twenty-two on her list. I know it's crazy that I have her list almost memorized, but I've made it my personal mission to help her accomplish as many goals that I can.

"Kayla, please." Warren begins to beg, and I would feel sorry for the guy if I didn't know how bad he'd treated Kayla.

"Man, listen. Just leave her alone. She's said what she had to say," I finally speak up. I didn't want to impede on Kayla's independence, but I'll be damned if I let another man beg for my girlfriend's time right in front of me.

"You don't speak for her!" Warren puffs out his chest, and I smile.

We're close to the same height and build, but I'm no slouch. I will whoop someone's ass if I need to. The fact of the matter is, neither one of us will be caught fighting in a place like this. But if I ever catch his ass in the street, that's a different story.

"I don't have to speak for her. Kay is a grown ass woman. But she will never have to repeat herself while I'm standing here to defend her," I say in a calm voice that belies my true feelings.

Warren is frowning so hard that his eyes look like they're about to cross. I'm not sure why the man is so mad or insistent on talking to Kayla. He's the one who cheated.

"Kay, you just need to hear me out," Warren pleads again.

"Warren, I told you that I am not interested in anything you have to say!" Kayla's voice raises a little, but she doesn't yell. Her small hand balls into a fist before she relaxes it and turns to me. "I'm so done with this conversation," Kayla says.

I look from her hands into her face to gauge her mood. She gives me a small smile, and I bring the back of her hand to my lips and kiss it. "Okay, baby." I turn and give one last glare of warning to Warren because I'm petty then I lead Kayla through the crowd.

Kayla stops me from heading out of the door, and my eyebrows crease in question. "I'm not ready to leave just yet. I've wanted to see this show for a long time, and Warren is not going to ruin that for me," Kay says, and I'm again overcome with a sense of pride.

"You know that bossy tone you're using is turning me on." I bite my bottom lip and nuzzle Kay's neck.

"I am not... bossy." Kay sighs as I continue to rub my beard against her cheek.

“I don’t know, doll face. You put that douche in his place back there. I almost thought you were going to punch him,” I tease.

“Please, you thought no such thing,” Kayla replies in an exasperated tone, but the broad smile that shows her dimples tells me she likes my teasing.

We stay at the gallery for another hour before we decide to leave. We don’t run into Warren again, and for that small reprieve, I am thankful. Once I get the keys from the valet, we head to my apartment. There is no way we are going back to Kay’s apartment because if that bastard shows up, I will kick his ass. And I wouldn’t put it past Warren to pop up at Kayla’s because of all the harassing shit she’s said he’s been doing.

The drive to my downtown apartment is quick, and Kayla and I are on the elevator within fifteen minutes of our departure from the gallery. I can still feel the tension radiating off of her, and I know exactly what I want to do to make her feel better.

As soon as we enter my apartment, I take her purse and jacket and place them on the table by the door. Kayla gives me a curious look before I push her up against the wall.

“I need to keep a promise on fucking you against the wall,” I growl before I take her mouth in a deep kiss.

20

Secrets

KAYLA

Anderson pushes me up against the wall and kisses me so deeply that I’m almost too

distracted to realize that he has gripped my panties. When the thin material was torn from my body, I let out a shocked gasp.

I have never had anything like this happen to me before. It's sexy as hell, and I cream myself even more. To tell the truth, I was already turned on. The way Anderson defended me was also something that had never happened before. At least from a guy I was dating.

I guess that says more about my choices in men, but it doesn't negate the fact that Anderson stood up for me. I was proud of myself for standing up to Warren twice in one day, but he knows me. And Warren knows if he keeps pushing, eventually, I'll fold. I don't need saving per se, but I'm still a work in progress when it comes to confrontations.

"You're so wet for me, Kay. Damn, baby!" Anderson growls before he attacks my lips again. His fingers plunge in and out of my heat. The noises I make are obscene, but I can't stop them. I don't want to stop them.

"Anderson! I'm going to..." I yell out an indecipherable jumble of noises.

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My orgasm hits me so hard that my legs shake and my eyes roll to the back of my head. Before I can even move my limbs, I'm hoisted up.

"Wrap your legs around me, baby." Anderson's words bring me off my cloud slightly. I do as he says. My arms go around his shoulders, and his face is still buried in my neck.

"Where are we going?" I ask in a daze when Anderson starts moving away from the wall.

"The bedroom. We need condoms," Anderson says, his long strides eating up the distance.

When we get to his bedroom, he gently puts me down on the bed. He stands to his full six-foot-two height. I admire the way his suit clings to his body. Anderson slowly peels the jacket away from his shoulders. I can tell by the smirk on his bearded face and the twinkle in his crystal blue eyes that he's teasing me.

"Are you giving me a show, Magic Mike?" I question with a raised brow. I bite my plump bottom lip seductively to let him know I'm not at all opposed to the idea. The Vegas striptease comes to mind, and my mouth waters.

"Do you want another show, doll face?" Anderson says in that sexy low voice that makes my girlie parts drip.

"Hmmm." The low hum is the only noise that I feel comfortable making. If I try to talk while Anderson reveals his magnificent body to my greedy gaze, I might

swallow my tongue.

Anderson continues pulling off his tailored garments. I watch his every move like I've never seen him naked before. Every time is like the first, and I don't want to miss a thing. Once he's down to his boxer briefs, I lick my lips.

I can see the outline of Anderson's thick erection, and before I can overthink my actions, I reach out and tenderly grab him. I caress his growing manhood tenderly, admiring how hard he is. When I help him tug down his underwear, I get the full effect.

Anderson feels like hot steel wrapped in satin. I use both my hands to touch him just the way he likes. I move my hands up and down his shaft with enough pressure to have his pearly white essence leaking from the tip.

"Okay, baby, s-stop before I cum." Anderson snatches my hands away from him as if my touch is killing him. He straddles my body as he pushes me down on the bed, holding my hands over my head.

Anderson hovers over me with a look in his eyes that I can't quite name. It makes me want to touch his face, but my hands are trapped above my head.

"What is it?" I ask in a soft whisper, afraid that I will break the magic swirling between us.

"I'll tell you later." He gives me a shy smile that I've never seen, then kisses me with such tenderness that I melt into the fluffy bed.

Anderson leaves me for a second to grab a condom from the bedside table, he puts it on, and he's back hovering over me before I can blink. The shy smile is gone, and the predatory gleam that I've come to know and love is present.

As he pushes inside of me, the stinging pleasure of the intrusion is a welcome relief. My core throbs as it grips Anderson's pulsating rod. His dick feels amazing, but when he starts to move after giving my body time to adjust, my legs begin to shake once again.

"Baby, please... I! Oh! Oh!" I can hear myself screaming, but the sensations feel so good I can't stop.

Anderson swivels his hips as he gives me long, hard strokes that steal my breath. I wrap my legs around his body and thrust upward as our hips meet in a dance as old as time. Anderson lifts one leg up so he can stroke at a different angle. The move puts him in direct contact with my g-spot. I yell out a language I'm pretty sure I just made up, but English words are too hard to form.

I can't stop myself as the nonsensical words bubble up and out every time he hits that magical spot. It feels so freaking good and the words become a mix of noises between unladylike moans and weird sounding words.

"I didn't know you were bilingual, baby." Anderson gives me a seductive smirk as he continues stroking, hitting my spot. He knows he's making me feel good because my core is soaking wet, and I can feel the dreamy expression on my face.

"It... just... feels... so.... Oh...Shit!"

"There it is!" Anderson darkly chuckles as he keeps pumping his hips. I want to tell him to stop, but I'd lose this extraordinary feeling. I'd be lying anyway. I don't want him to stop, but I don't know what to do with all these sensations erupting inside of me.

"Oh, God!" I yell out as the rippling orgasm intensifies.

Anderson goes completely still when I open up my eyes. He's biting his plump bottom lip with a look of both agony and ecstasy dancing across his handsome face. The look is so sexy that I could come again from just staring at him.

However, I don't need to orgasm from looks alone because when Anderson starts to move again, I feel the blissful build up. When he flips us over for me to get on top, I know that he's ready to come.

I ride him like I'm a jockey in the Kentucky Derby. I swivel my hips and bounce my ass loving the sound of my body slapping against his. Anderson finally lets out a guttural moan, and I feel his dick harden even more, signaling that he's about to cum.

"You ready to cum, baby? You like how I ride this dick?" The words are so unlike me, but anybody getting sex this good has to let their freak flag fly. I don't know how they couldn't.

"Fuck, baby! That shit is so sexy!" Anderson raises up and holds me to his chest, pulling me down by my shoulders as he pumps up wildly. Before I know it, we are both screaming out in pure elation!

Best day ever! The thought drifts across my mind as I nestle into Anderson's strong arms.

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After such a wonderful end to a shitty day, Anderson got all the boyfriend points he would ever need with me. We made love into the early hours of the morning, and when we woke up, we made love again.

Even though our sex life is out of this world, our relationship is too. We laugh with one another like old friends, and we talk like an old married couple. I've even opened up more about my time in foster care, which led to Anderson telling me about his awful parents.

I can't believe someone as loving as Anderson was birthed by people who would disown their only child because of their controlling ways. It's really sad, but at least he's still in contact with his grandparents.

"Kay? Kay? Kayla? Damn girl!" Shelby's voice breaks into my thoughts.

More and more lately, Anderson crowds my thoughts. I'm not obsessed or anything. I'm just in awe that I found such an amazing guy on a drunken night. I can't believe I ever regretted that night.

"Sorry, Shell. What were you saying?" I ask sheepishly.

"Never mind." Shelby waves her hand at me.

"How was the Hobbs show? I heard it was huge," Emani says, her eyes lighting up.

As an Art teacher, she would've loved the show. However, the tickets for the opening weekend were, to my surprise, by invitation only. I was among the few "normal" people in attendance. I didn't realize the first night of the show was for invited guests because Anderson made the arrangements.

"The show was excellent! I even got to meet Yohan. He is so fine," I brag, wiggling my eyebrows up and down.

"Wait. Kay is noticing how fine someone is besides Andy? What's really going on?" Shelby asks with mock shock and wide brown eyes.

"I'm dating, not dead, Shelby," I say with equally mock exasperation. We laugh, but I notice that Emani is again quiet and seemingly sulking.

"Emani? Okay, what gives? You haven't been yourself since we went to Vegas," I huff out because she needs to get whatever she's feeling off her chest.

"You guys are out dating, and I'm so happy for you, but I feel a little left behind," Emani confesses sadly.

"Girl! You are full of shit. I know damn well you don't think we're about to believe some high school excuse for you being so bitchy. What's really going on? I'm with Kay. Lately, you've been acting foul." Shelby raises her eyebrow, and I have to shrug. I didn't believe Emani's excuse either, but I wouldn't have called her out on it.

"Okay, fine!" Emani huffs as she plops back against Shelby's soft couch. Emani bites her lip, but she doesn't speak.

Shelby and I look at each other curiously. We have no idea what's going on with Emani. She is notorious for keeping things to herself. Shelby and I call her the gatekeeper because Emani will never break your trust. She will guard a secret to her

dying breath.

“I had a one-night stand,” Emani mumbles.

“Holy shit!” Shelby laughs, sitting up.

I stare at Emani in shock. I’m not judging her at all. But Emani Jackson goes to church every Sunday and Wednesday, pays her tithes on time, and asks for forgiveness every time she swears. I didn’t think she would ever have a one-night stand. I’m surprised she even knows what it is.

“With who?” I finally blink away enough of my shock to ask.

“With a guy that I really liked and after we had sex, he never called me again. The jerk!” Emani purses her lips with a scowl.

“Oh, Mani. I’m so sorry. Men can be asses,” I console, getting up to sit beside her. I pull her into a side hug, and Emani lays her head on my shoulder.

“You know what? Forget that fuck boy!”

“Shelby!” Emani and I admonish as we call her name in unison.

“What? That’s what he is. Don’t defend some... boy.” Shelby rolls her eyes, but she amends her words. “Who can’t handle a woman like you. He will never deserve you. We’re not spilling tears over boys that don’t matter.”

“You’re right. And I’m sorry that I took my frustrations out on you guys. I didn’t lie when I said I felt a little left out. You guys got to have the ultimate millionaire hook-ups, and I get a dud.” Emani pouts, but her eyes twinkle, so I know she’s feeling better.

“I didn’t get a millionaire hook-up. Who said that?” Shelby does her best Porsha Williams impression, and we all start laughing.

“Whatever, Shell.” Emani rolls her eyes but I can see the relief in them.

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Emani, Shelby, and I spend the rest of our afternoon laughing and talking as usual. I'm so glad that the awkwardness and tension are finally resolved. It's unlike us to go so long being upset with each other. It always feels better to tell your secrets to your best friends. They really are my chosen family.

21

Deceiving Eyes

ANDERSON

Because of the deal with Media Tech, the launch of our new features for Maniacal Sports were put on hold. As a company, we decided to introduce the new features along with the expansion into Europe. Our engineers have been working tirelessly to work out all of the bugs for the new programs.

Even though I still work an astronomical amount of hours, I have managed to delegate some of my work to my employees, so I don't get burnt out. I have Brady to thank for that because he's constantly reminding me, and also Kayla because I'd rather be with her than working.

Everything is going so great between us, and I haven't been this happy in... well, I've never truly been this happy. I smile at the thought. I never imagined that a woman could give me the joy I didn't know that I needed. I thought proving to my parents I could make it without them gave me all the pleasure I wanted. I guess I was wrong.

"So, where are you going on your vacation when we finish our launch?" Brady asks

with a wide grin on his face. He hasn't stopped smiling since we closed the deal. Hell, neither have I.

"We have a few more months until we can safely take a vacation." I chuckle at Brady. I haven't even thought about where I want to go.

"I think I want to go to Bora Bora," Brady says with a thoughtful nod as he runs his hand through his freshly cut hair.

A few days ago, he showed up with his shaggy blonde hair chopped completely off. His surfer boy look was completely replaced by a Wall Street appearance that shockingly fit him. When I asked him about the change, he shrugged and said he needed to look the part of a multimillionaire tech company owner. I've always told him the same thing, but for some reason, I'm not convinced it was my encouragement that changed his mind.

"So, I know I have to ask you well in advance if you want to hang out with the guys this weekend. Tobin and Jason are feeling neglected." Brady shakes his head.

"Yeah, that's cool. We haven't hung in a while. Kay is busy doing a self-care night or some shit so I won't see her until Sunday." I scowl at the thought of not seeing my baby for almost two days.

I get her need to take some time for herself. Kayla is on what she calls a self-discovery journey, and I commend her dedication to finish her list. However, I'm still "salty," as Shelby says, about it. However, I won't crowd her because I made a promise to help her complete her list, and I want to be a supportive boyfriend. She's dealt with enough douchebag boyfriends for one lifetime.

"Well, then it's a plan. I'll text the guys," Brady says before he gets up from the seat in front of my desk. Our offices are exactly the same size and almost the same décor,

but for some reason, my co-owner almost always ends up in here.

“No need to text, Jason. He’ll be here in a few minutes for lunch. I’m surprised he didn’t tell you. Ya’ll gossip like teenaged girls,” I say with a chuckle, but Brady just frowns.

“Yeah, he’s salty right now. But it’s Jason. He’ll get over it.” Brady shakes his head before leaving my office.

My head ticks to the side, “Salty... interesting word choice.”

Before I can contemplate just how much time Brady and Shelby are spending together, my phone rings. I check the name that flashes across the screen, and I hit decline. I am not in the mood for whatever bullshit interview Bethany has set up today.

“Anderson, you have a call from Bethany on line two. She says it’s urgent,” Vance, my assistant, says from my doorway. I don’t know why he doesn’t just use the intercom on the phone because, more often than not, he comes to the door.

“I got it. Thanks.” I nod before I pick up the phone. It must be important if Bethany is blowing up my cell and office phone. “What’s up, Bethany?”

“Anderson, I’ve been calling,” Bethany’s words are dripping with impatience, but I ignore her tone.

Bethany calls me several times a day with nonsense that she can handle herself. As our lead public relations person, it’s her job to weed out the foolishness from a real threat. Around this time every year, my family’s name begins to trend. The McNair’s hold the Fall Charity Ball. It’s one of the largest fundraisers in North Texas.

My family is notoriously private, so I'm usually the object of the media because I'm more in the public eye than anyone else. I've been over this with Bethany several times in the past, but she seems hell bent this year.

Brady never has to deal with this shit because his humongous family has more famous members. He gets to enjoy his money and freedom from media scrutiny. When we were younger, he wanted to be in the spotlight, and although he's still wild, Brady has toned down his antics quite a bit.

"What do you need, Bethany? I'm working on a program."

"I just wanted to make sure that you are ready for the fundraiser? There are a lot of media outlets that will be there," Bethany responds, and I roll my eyes.

"Bethany, I go to this fundraiser every year. I know about the media," I say in an exasperated tone.

"I'm just doing my job, Anderson." Bethany's voice is equally annoyed.

"I got it, Bethany. Is there anything else you need?" I ask.

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“Will you be attending with a date?” Bethany asks, and I frown. “I just want to get ahead of the press release,” she continues.

“There’s no need to put my dating status in the press release, Bethany. Just put the same thing you always do. We will handle the rest of the night of the event. I have to go. Call Brady if you need anything else.”

I disconnect the call with a deep frown. Something is off with Bethany, but I don’t have time or patience to figure out what. It’s time for a much needed lunch break.

* * *

The week went by in a flash, and before I knew it, it was Friday morning. I woke up grumpy even though Kayla was wrapped up in my arms. We don’t often have sleepovers on a weekday, but I talked her into it since we won’t see each other again until Sunday.

I instantly know the antidote for my sour mood when I take in Kayla’s gorgeous sleeping face. Her long lashes are resting against her smooth brown skin. She looks so peaceful, like an angel sent down from heaven specifically for me.

I slowly pull back the covers and gently spread her legs. Kay moans, but when I peek up at her, her eyes are still shut. I maneuver my body between her succulent thighs. I dip my tongue into her sweet honey, and she groans. I take my time licking and kissing every part of her core.

“Anderson,” Kayla sighs, but she’s still asleep. I smile because even in a deep

slumber, her body recognizes me.

“Wake up, doll face,” I coax. I crawl up her body and slowly push inside.

Kayla wakes up on a low moan. Her sleepy brown eyes twinkle as a slow smile spreads across her beautiful face. She wraps her legs around me, and I begin to thrust.

“Good morning, sunshine,” Kay says to me before throwing her arms around my neck.

“Good morning, baby.” Those were all the words we managed to say before our bodies picked up and did all the talking for us.

After a round of good morning sex, we were showered and sitting at the breakfast bar. We were up early, so we both have plenty of time before we have to be at work.

“So, are you excited to go out with the fellas tonight? It’s been a minute,” Kayla says before sipping on her coffee.

I try to keep from frowning because I am happy to see the guys, but my addiction to Kay keeps me from wanting to be away from her for too long. “Ehhh, I’d rather be with you.” I smirk when she dips her head in an all too familiar move that tells me she’s blushing. “But I am glad I get to catch up with the guys,” I continue before taking a sip of my own coffee.

“Well, ya’ll have fun. I’m gonna head out. I have a million things to do at the office. The stupid program keeps updating with bug fixes that are interrupting our company downloads, it’s a freaking nightmare,” Kayla complains with exasperation lacing her words.

I can completely relate to everything she’s saying because I just finished getting our

features to converge with our app. Getting the bugs out took us forever. It can be a tedious process.

“I have faith that you’ll get it fixed, doll.” I get up and walk Kayla to the door, and I lean down to kiss her lips. “I love you.”

The words are out of my mouth before I can think better of it. But they’re out in the universe now, and I would never take them back. Kayla’s sweet face brightens, and I know for a fact that my slip wasn’t a mistake.

“I love you, too,” she says with a bright smile, and I let out a deep breath. I didn’t want to scare her off, but more than that I’m relieved that she feels the same way.

“I’ll text you later. I don’t want to call and interrupt your solo date.” I frown, but Kayla slaps my chest because she knows I’m teasing her.

“Okay, babe. Have a good day.” Kayla kisses me again, sweetly, and heads out.

I’m glad that was one hurdle we’ve gotten over without any major issues. I hate the big deal people make out of saying I love you for the first time.

After I arrive at the office and have fifty million morning meetings, I get to relax finally. The engineers worked out all of the interface issues with the upgrade, and we are officially ready for the launch.

Monique Grant is making all of the arrangements for the press conference and the launch party. Pearson likes to keep those things in house since his little issue he had a few years ago with the hot mic on a live set. It was a public relations nightmare, but he came out smelling like roses, and the host of the show ended up jobless.

It’s one less thing that we have on our plate, and I’m glad. I still have to prepare

Kayla for the fundraiser she doesn't know she's attending. I was going to tell her this morning, but I had much better things to do. I smile at the salacious thoughts. There's nothing I love more than waking up with a face full of Kayla.

Before I realize what time it is, Brady is knocking on my door. The day went faster than I expected, and it's already quitting time. Although I have complained since Kay told me she was taking herself out, I'm looking forward to seeing the guys.

A few hours later, I'm freshly showered and getting dressed. As I'm combing my hair out of my face, I notice for the first time in a long time that I don't have bags under my eyes. The blue is brighter than ever before, and I don't just look happy... Iamhappy.

I dress in a blue button-down and a tapered leg suit. We decided we would get something to eat before we head out to an upscale lounge. I was just happy they didn't want to go to a club.

When I arrive at Three Forks, I remember the last time I was here. Kayla had a major freak out. I shake my head in disappointment. That Warren asshole deserves his ass kicked for ruining such a great restaurant for Kay.

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“There’s a reservation under Achebe,” I tell the hostess once I enter.

“Yes, it will be another fifteen minutes, sir. Your party is at the bar.” I nod and head toward the bar, but I stop cold when I see something that I never thought I would.

Kay and Warren are sitting at a table not even a hundred yards from me. My eyes have to be deceiving me. There’s no way in hell my girlfriend is cheating on me with her ex at the same restaurant where he broke her heart.

“No fucking way!”

22

Self-Care

KAYLA

It took a lot of courage and one of Shelby and Emani’s super pep talks for me to make a reservation and then follow through with coming to this restaurant tonight. The girls wanted to come with me, but I needed to do this on my own. I need to take control of my life and stop letting bad memories rule over me.

I am determined not to let my past stop me from living my life. I’ve done that long enough and I know it’s just a restaurant. A simple place that one bad thing happened, and there are literally thousands of other restaurants in the Dallas area, but it’s the principle.

I have spent my entire life avoiding things and purposely being invisible so that I wouldn't have to face my fears. I'm almost thirty years old, and I refuse to hurt because I don't like conflict. Hell! Nobody likes conflict!

I have ordered the calamari appetizer, and I am crossing things off my list, feeling proud.

#7. Try different foods.

#19. Take yourself on a date.

I smile, but when I look up from my phone, the smile is automatically replaced with a scowl.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I growl out my words. I can't believe this man has the audacity to invite himself to sit down at my table.

I haven't seen Warren since the art show. He hasn't been by my office or sent me any emails. I thought he'd finally gotten a clue since he'd met Anderson, but I guess not.

"I told you we needed to talk," Warren says calmly, and I frown even deeper.

"How did you know I was here? Did you follow me?" I question, and my eyes go wide because I recognize the smug look on his face. "You followed me!"

"I did what I had to do." Warren shrugs, and I swear I have no idea what to think.

"Warren, you have to stop this," I plead. "It's over."

"I just need one last favor. I can't tell my parents that we broke up. You were the only girl they liked. I just need you to pretend once more."

I shake my head. I met Warren's parents once. They hated me. His mother looked down her nose at me the entire dinner. She would squint her icy blue eyes at me whenever I said a word. I thought maybe she didn't like me because I was black, but her husband is black, so I don't know what her problem was. Warren convinced me that his mother would warm up to me and not to worry about it.

"Warren. It. Is. Over!"

"You heard her, Warren." The deep growl sent the usual shiver down my back. I did my best to keep a neutral expression on my face. I didn't need saving, but I'm glad Anderson is here.

Then I look up and see the fury in his eyes. Oh shit!

"Kay, we've known each other forever. After all the things that I've done for you, this is how you treat me after one misunderstanding." Warren's expression is equally as furious as Anderson's, and I come to my own conclusion.

"Warren, I need you to seek therapy immediately. This is crazy. You are a gay man. I will not be a part of any ruse to keep you in the closet." I stare him in the eyes, not backing down.

This whole scene is ridiculous. In the past, I've seen Warren with plenty of women. I'm sure most of them would be happy to be kept in the dark about his sexuality. Hell, if he found the right woman, she would be happy to be his beard. But I know one thing, it won't be me!

Warren still has that determined expression on his face and that crazed look in his eyes. I really don't know what's going on with him. But it's no longer my responsibility.

“Kayla, you owe me!” Warren’s red face and clipped words tell me there’s no reasoning with this man. I get up from my chair and place my napkin over my half eaten appetizer.

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“I don’t owe you shit! Anderson, walk me out, please.” I leave an angry Warren at the table as I begin to walk toward the hostess stand so that I can pay my bill.

As we walk away, I see my waitress and flag her down. I tell her that I need to settle my bill, but before I can hand over my card, Anderson hands her his card and tells her we’ll be at the bar.

“Kayla, what the fuck?” Anderson questions when we’re alone by the bar. His face is still a mask of rage, and I’m not sure why. My newfound resolution to stand up for myself is dwindling fast.

“W-what do you mean?” I stutter out. I have no idea why he’s so upset with me.

“What do you mean, what do I mean?” Anderson runs his hand through his hair. “You had a damned panic attack the last time we were here, and now you’re on a date with your ex after you told me some bullshit story.”

“That’s not what happened. You heard me tell Warren it was over,” I explain in confusion.

“You could’ve told him that over the fucking phone. You didn’t have to meet him, and you didn’t have to lie to me, Kay.”

“Anderson, that’s not what happened! I was here by my—”

“Kay, I trusted you. I love you. Shit! I can’t believe you did this.” Anderson interrupts my explanation. But the longer he rants, the more pissed off I become.

If he loves me, then he would know that I wouldn't lie to him. He would let me explain without jumping to conclusions. He would have faith in me.

"You've made up your mind about this already. So, you have a nice life, Anderson." It's my turn to interrupt him. I turn and leave the restaurant. I deserve more than this from him. I deserve more, period. I refuse to be a doormat any longer.

#21. Stop being a pushover.

* * *

It's been a week since I left Anderson at Three Forks, and I have been miserable ever since. Nobody said standing up for yourself was easy, but I didn't think it would be this hard. I can see why Anderson was upset, I would be angry too if I saw what looked like him eating dinner with another woman, but I would've at least let him explain.

In these past few months, I have made so many strides at becoming a better me. I've even begun to see a therapist. I know losing my parents at such an early age contributed to me having issues that I didn't want to admit to until now, but seeing Dr. Peters is helping me.

Making my list jump started my self-discovery journey, but seeing a therapist is helping my self-care journey. And a major part of taking care of yourself is being aware of toxicity. I was depending too much on Anderson and my relationship. It was so new, and I fell so hard and fast that I was willing to fall back into my old habits.

So, every time I feel the need to breakdown and call him, I remind myself that I wasn't at fault for our argument. Anderson hasn't even tried to contact me since that night, so I guess his love was conditional anyway. Anderson trusted me as long as I was with him physically. But as soon as I was out of his sight, he accused me of

cheating without a second thought.

“How could he?” I ask myself the question out loud for what seems like the millionth time.

“How could who what?” I hear my co-worker, Wendy, ask from behind me.

“Oh, nothing. Sorry, just talking to myself,” I reply with a small smile as I continue to fix my coffee. I ventured out of my office to the breakroom after I ran out of my stash of Colombian blend.

I’ve been sleeping like poo, and this new program keeps developing bugs. I’ve been living off coffee and prayer since my break-up.

“Are you okay, Kayla? You seem a little out of it this week,” Wendy says with a furrowed brow. Her brown eyes hold a concerned light, and I smile at her genuineness.

“It’s just been a long week; after this coffee, I should be good. Promise.” I smile again, and she nods before I head out of the breakroom and back to my office.

Wendy and I have gotten closer since the new project started. We are two of the only women on our team, and we both have to deal with Ken, so we’ve bonded.

When I make it back to my office, I begin to work feverishly. I want to get my part of the software download finished, so that I won’t have to work on Saturday. I have plans to go to the event that Shelby’s company did the marketing for. It is one of her biggest clients to date, and I want to be there to support her.

I even have a day of pampering planned so that I can be relaxed and in a better mood. I don’t want to be in a sour mood, and I don’t want the girls to know that I’m two

seconds from falling apart over another man in such a short time. So, I keep the break-up to myself for now.

I feel embarrassed that I let myself get into this situation. I never considered myself the romantic type, but then I seem to fall for men who gave me the attention I told myself I never wanted. Maybe that isn't romance. Perhaps it's something else. Whatever it is, I don't like it.

It took me twenty-nine years to become who I am, and I know it will take more than a few months to become someone better, but oh how I wish to wake up and just... be better.

The lessons that I am learning suck. I now understand that these are things that I need to know, and I know that these lessons are necessary, but they suck nonetheless.

The ringing of my office phone takes me out of my zone, and I huff as I answer it, "Kayla Jones," I answer curtly. At times like these, I wish I had an assistant. I need someone to filter my calls while I'm deep into programming.

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“Kay! You were supposed to leave an hour ago! I knew you were going to be at work!” Emani yells in the phone, and I grimace. I glance at the clock, and it’s almost six.

“Shoot, Mani! Sorry. I’m almost done, but if I quit now, I won’t be able to go tomorrow night,” I say apologetically. I was supposed to meet Emani to shop for an appropriate dress for the fundraiser.

No matter how far I’ve come, my friends still don’t trust my fashion sense. Looking back on what I used to wear, I can’t say that I blame them. But I’m much better now.

“Kayla,” Emani whines because she knows I’m not going to stop working to shop.

“I know, I know. How about you and Shell pick me out something, and I promise not to complain when I wear it.” I’m hoping my words will placate Emani. Because any other time they have chosen my clothes, I have complained for all to hear.

“You better remember you said that, Kayla Diane Jones. Because I don’t want to hear a peep out of you if you don’t like what we pick,” Emani says in an excited tone that has me wishing I can take back my promise already.

However, I know I can’t stop working to go on some frivolous shopping trip for a party that I will only be at for a few hours. I want to look nice so I won’t embarrass myself or Shelby, but in the grand scheme of things, I have to get my work done.

“I’ll remember. I gotta go, Mani,” I grumble into the phone.

“Okay, don’t work too hard, Kay. I’ll bring what we pick by tonight to make sure it fits. See ya later,” Emani says before I hear the dial tone. She was way too excited about getting to pick my outfit without me. I probably should be more worried.

23

Charity Case

ANDERSON

I have been a miserable bastard since Kay walked away from me. I couldn’t believe she’d just left me like that. But after I told the guys what happened, they made me see how big of an asshole I was.

I just couldn’t see past my jealousy. Truth be told, it took a few hours for my friends to convince me that I was the one at fault. It took Jason telling me how lucky I was that Kay was such a sweetheart because another woman would have most likely slapped my face.

I’ve been so obsessed with Kay since the day that I met her, so seeing her with another man had me losing my mind. When I heard the conversation, I was slightly relieved that she was telling him they were over. But like I told Kay, she could’ve told him with a call or even a text message. Kay didn’t have to lie to me about wanting to be by herself. If she needed space to take care of her ex, I would’ve given it to her.

Okay, so I probably wouldn’t have, but she still didn’t have to lie. I tried to explain that to the guys, but they insisted that I should’ve let Kay explain what was going on. I didn’t need her to tell me shit. I saw it with my own eyes. And the sight gutted me.

We haven’t known each other long, but I know that I love her. My feelings go beyond

the initial obsession that I had with her. The deep connection that we have can't be faked or duplicated. I miss her, and it's only been a week. How the hell am I supposed to continue on like this?

"You need to smile, Anderson. If the photographers get a picture of you brooding, it could be bad for business," Bethany says from beside me.

We are at the annual McNair Fall Ball, and this year it's not just because of my last name. Our company was officially on the invite list because of our deal with Media Tech Innovation. I even heard that Shelby is the marketing director for this year's festivities. In business, it's always about who you know.

When I showed up alone, Bethany has been by my side the entire evening. It hasn't been a big deal because we have been in a group of A&M employees, but she's starting to irritate me more as the night continues.

However, I know that Bethany is right, so I fix my face into a less brooding expression, but I still can't bring myself to smile. I don't feel like being here, but I know it's important for both business as well as personal. My grandparents are in attendance tonight, and my presence was requested.

I managed to get through an entire dinner without any in-depth questioning from my grandmother about my personal life. I think she assumed Bethany was my date tonight. I should've corrected her assumption, but it was easier just to go along so my prying family would leave me alone at least for a few hours.

"You need to make sure you get photographed with the Grant's tonight as well. I'll make sure Brady is in the photo too. This function is great for exposure." Bethany is droning on, and although I'm annoyed, I can't be mad because she's doing her job.

This event has a lot of press here tonight, and there are cameras everywhere. The

event is a huge deal for the city of Dallas. The exposure our company will get from donating money to this particular fundraiser is unparalleled.

The McNair Fall Ball raises millions of dollars for children of domestic violence. The foundation gives college scholarships to children and victims of domestic violence who want to further their education.

“Smile,” Bethany whispers again as another photographer passes by and snaps a photo of us. When she leans in, I discreetly move away. I put a friendly distance between us and place my hands above the table. Bethany has been clingy tonight, and as many times as I’ve moved away, she’s moved to my side. I don’t want to give her the wrong impression, so I make sure not to touch or say anything in an unprofessional manner.

When the photographer comes by, I give a small smile, but I’m already over it. Brady is here with some bimbo that I’ve never met before, and Bethany hasn’t said two words to him about our “image” being tarnished.

The girl he’s with looks like she stepped off the pages of some pinup magazine, and not in a good way. Her dress is entirely too short and revealing to be at a fundraiser for domestic violence, and her gum chewing, and constant texting makes her seem like she’s a teenager and not a grown woman, which Brady assured me she was at least twenty-one, but I’m still not convinced. This leads me to ponder just why Bethany chose to be on my case all night when Brady obviously needs the most help.

“Bethany, you’re not working tonight. I think I can handle smiling for the photographers. This isn’t my first rodeo.” I give her my full attention so she can see that I’m serious.

“I’m always working, Anderson. Or haven’t you noticed?” Bethany snaps, and I

frown.

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Bethany has been extremely short with everyone lately. I know that she works hard, so I haven't said anything.

"That's why I'm reminding you that you're not working right now. I have noticed how hard you work. Brady and I both notice. We appreciate your drive and everything that you do." I'm not a complete asshole, and Bethany does work hard. But Brady and I could probably tell our employees more how much we appreciate them.

"Thanks, Anderson. I really appreciate you saying that." Bethany looks up at me with twinkling eyes and blush covering her pale skin.

Bethany looks nothing like Kayla. In fact, she's her complete opposite. But at that moment, her blushing at just the smallest compliment reminds me of Kay. I begin to frown again because I want to call her, but I've been restraining myself.

Brady told me to give Kay a minute and some space. I tried calling her, but it had gone straight to voicemail, and I was too big of a coward to leave a message. Then days had gone by, and she didn't reach out, so I text her, and again I didn't get a response.

I don't want to crowd her or become a crazed stalker. She wants her space, and I want to give her whatever she wants. But I miss her. I miss my doll face.

When I look up, it's like she stepped out of my thoughts and into the room. Kayla is standing by the bar with a burnt orange gown adorning her lovely body. The fall color complements both her skin and the theme of the party.

When our eyes lock, I smile a real smile for the first time in a week.

* * *

I move toward Kay with determination, but before I can reach her, she turns and walks in the opposite direction. I frown, but before I can follow her, my grandmother steps into my path. I sigh, but I manage to place a smile on my face.

“Grandmother, are you enjoying yourself?” I question politely. My grandmother is a spitfire of a woman, and she’s never agreed with my father, her youngest son’s treatment of me.

“I’m fine, dear. I was just wondering why you’ve been in such a foul mood all night?” She raises a gray brow at me, and I chuckle. Francine McNair doesn’t miss much, and I should’ve known she would clock my mood.

“I’m fine, Grandmother. You know I don’t like these events.” It isn’t a lie. I have never been a fan of black tie events, and everyone close to me knows that.

“Oh, Anderson. Relax, will you? You’ve been complaining about these things since you were a boy. You’re worse than your father.” She shakes her head, and her gray bun stays perfectly in place.

I don’t say anything. We usually don’t discuss my parents. When they basically disowned me, my grandparents were livid. But in true McNair fashion, we swept it all under the rug not to be dealt with. So while I’m obligated to come to these events, my grandparents usually forgo sending an invite to my parents. They still talk to my mother and father, but the relationship is strained.

In public, we’re the prestigious family with old money, close family ties, and an abundance of love. In private, we’re a family of disloyal, disowned, disinvited mess.

But we all have our shit to deal with. I've come to terms that it is something that will never be fixed.

"It's only a few hours out of your time to do something good for other people," my grandmother continues. "So, suck it up, buttercup." She pats my cheek with a wide grin, and I smile.

"Where's that woman who's dying to be by your side? She sure does talk a lot. I think you might have a problem on your hands with that one, son."

I look at my grandmother in her twinkling blue eyes that I inherited, and it's my turn to quirk a brow at her. "Bethany isn't dying to be by my side." The words taste bitter on my lips. Because that's the vibe she is giving off.

"Don't be silly, Anderson. If she batted her lashes at you any harder, I was afraid she was going to fly away." My grandmother shakes her head and tsks.

"Grandmother?" I give her a belly laugh. "Bethany is my employee. I'm not interested in her."

"Honey, take an old woman's word. Just because you're not interested in her, it doesn't mean she isn't interested in you." She gives me a serious look before patting my cheek once again. I nod my head in understanding.

"Enjoy yourself, honey. I have to go wrangle up your wayward cousins, and find your grandfather." Grandmother sighs as she strolls off into the crowd.

If my grandmother noticed Bethany's behavior, then I know I'm not making things up in my head. I'm not sure where this sudden interest in me came from, but I need to put a stop to it. I have never fraternized with my employees, and I never gave the impression that I would.

After my grandmother is gone, I can finally go after Kay, but I don't see her. I'm hoping like hell that I can catch a glimpse of the burnt orange material in the sea of black gowns. I'm doing my best not to look like a lunatic as I continue my search, but I feel the frustration building inside of me.

"Shit!" I mumble when I can't find her.

"You look like somebody kicked your puppy, Andy." I hear a raspy voice behind me, and I shake my head with a chuckle.

"Maybe they did, Shelby."

"I was wondering why Kayla hasn't said anything about coming to your family's fundraiser tonight without you. But then I thought that maybe she was still on her solo date thing. But now that I see your face..."

I grunt because obviously, Kayla didn't tell her friends what happened like I told mine. And I'll be damned if I tell her friends.

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“What did you do to my friend, Andy? And if you say some bullshit, I will kick your ass.”

I can see by the look on Shelby’s face that she means what she says.

“I made a mistake, and she won’t talk to me. I’m dying without her, Shelby,” I confess like a sap. I didn’t mean for the words to tumble out, but I don’t want to play any games or act like some tough guy. I just want Kayla back.

“Did you cheat on her? I swear to God, Anderson, I will cut off your di—”

“Whoa! I didnotcheat on Kay. I would never! So, there’s no need for the threats of bodily harm.” I take a step away from the crazy woman and try not to cover my goods with my hands.

Against my better judgment, I give Shelby the entire story of what happened at Three Forks. Her face remains carefully blank, but at least she’s listening to me.

“I hate it when people lie. Like anyone else, I guess,” I run my hand down my bearded face and blow out a deep breath. “I fell for Kay so fast, and I trusted her so much. I let my jealousy get the best of me, and I was a fool, but I don’t want to crowd her.”

“Andy... Andy... You let a woman that you say you love walk out on you, and you don’t even send flowers, call, text, nothing?” Shelby shakes her head and sucks her teeth.

“I called, and I sent a text. She didn’t respond,” I say lamely. I should’ve sent flowers.

“A text? One funky text? Boy! You cannot be serious!” My frown deepens because Shelby is right. I didn’t even try to win Kayla back.

“Shit!” I know I messed up.

“Shit is an accurate description. Do you really care about, Kayla? Not some stupid infatuation or something new you want to try. But really care about my friend?” Shelby looks me directly in the eye, and I pray to God that she sees my sincerity.

“Yes. I love her, Shelby.” I hold up my hand before she can interrupt me, “I know it’s been a short time, but it doesn’t matter. I love Kayla. I’m sorry I hurt her, and I want to make it up to her.”

“You better be glad I’ve had a few drinks to celebrate my accomplishments tonight, Andy. Or I wouldn’t even entertain your ass. But I believe you, so you better listen up. You will be my charity case for tonight since I’m in such a giving mood.”

I smile because the first step in groveling for forgiveness is getting the best friend on your side.

24

Misery Loves Company

KAYLA

I walk as fast as I can in the opposite direction when my eyes lock onto crystal blue orbs that I have been missing. I knew he was going to be here tonight, it is the McNair fundraiser after all, but I figured if I laid low, I wouldn’t see him.

I have plenty of experience with being invisible, but something within me just wouldn't let me hide this time. I didn't want to be invisible. I didn't want to go unnoticed. I wanted to stand out. I wanted Anderson to see me and miss me as much as I miss him.

But seeing him... I wasn't ready.

When Emani brought over the dress, I was pleasantly surprised. The burnt orange floor length gown has a low scoop neckline with a fitted silhouette. The rich satin fabric kissed my curves in all the right ways, and the color popped against my dark brown skin.

I wore a pair of strappy stilettos that made my legs look awesome when they peeked through the long thigh-high slit. I decided to do a braid-out on my hair, and I pulled the textured locs back with a gold braided headband. I felt and looked good. But I was still nervous.

I rushed into the hall and ducked into the women's restroom to give myself a minute. I pulled my nude lipstick out of my clutch and reapplied it. My pout is more prominent, and I feel like a petulant child hiding in the restroom.

I can see now that I overreacted slightly, but I have a right to be mad at Anderson. Although I miss him like crazy, I need to stand my ground. But will I continue to be miserable? Can't I stand my ground and be happy? I heavily sigh as I fluff my hair in the mirror.

"You're Kayla, right?" The woman looks familiar, but for the life of me, I can't place her face.

"Yes, I'm Kayla. And you are?"

“Bethany Lester. We met in Vegas,” she says with a smile.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, I knew I’d seen your face before.” I give her a small wince. I hate that she remembers me, and I didn’t remember her.

“No need to be sorry.” Bethany waves off my awkward apology. “It’s not like we spent a lot of time together or anything. I just know who you are because of Anderson.”

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“Oh, right,” I say, not knowing where this is going.

I hope that this isn’t some kind of other woman confrontation in the restroom. First of all, I hate confrontations, and secondly, if Anderson is sleeping with this woman, then he isn’t mine, to begin with. Well, I broke up with him, so he isn’t mine anyway.

“You’re a lucky girl to have his attention. You better enjoy it before he moves on to the next woman,” Bethany says cryptically, and she seems angry.

“Is that supposed to be a... warning or something?” I ask, confused.

“No. You don’t deserve a warning. I just want you to know how lucky you are to have him for now.” She gives me a nasty look before exiting the restroom.

Given the snarl of Bethany’s voice, I’m sure at one time she was the “lucky girl” in Anderson’s life, or maybe she wanted to be. I’m not sure what her little cryptic speech was about, and if I want to know, there’s only one person I need to ask.

I leave the restroom with a new resolve. I need to stop avoiding Anderson. I have questions that I want the answers to, and to be quite frank, I just want to hear his voice. I know that I have to let him know that what he said to me in the restaurant wasn’t okay and that I deserve the same respect that I give him. If he doesn’t agree, then I will have to let him go and move on. First things first, find Anderson.

“Hey, Kay! Where did you go? I needed someone to save me from a creeper, and you and Shelby disappeared,” Emani says with her hands on her hips, but a smile is dancing across her lips.

“I was just freshening up. Why didn’t you text me?” I ask, looking for my phone.

“I did,” she says dryly.

When I find my phone, I remember that I put it on silent while I was working. I slap my palm against my head when I see all of the missed notifications. I sigh at myself and turn the sound on. I will check all the messages later. I already see a few from Warren. He just never gives up.

“So, how’d you get rid of the creeper?” I ask Emani.

“I told him I had to go to the restroom,” Emani shrugs.

“That doesn’t sound like much of a creeper if he just let you go without following you.” I laugh at Emani’s pursed lips, but she knows I’m telling the truth.

Emani has been skittish since she had her one-night-stand. Heck, Emani has always been skittish when it comes to men. Although she’s had more dates than I have, I can say that her long term relationships are few and far between.

“You didn’t see the way he was looking at me,” Emani huffs. “He was dang near salivating.”

“Why wouldn’t he? You look gorgeous!” I say incredulously.

Emani is wearing a deep maroon floor length gown. It has a goddess look with a flowy A-line skirt. The soft chiffon material drapes over her in a meticulous design that makes her look like a queen of some ancient empire.

“The man was about seventy, Kay. Come on. Gorgeous or not, the way he was looking is inappropriate for a man of that particular age.” Emani scrunches her nose

and shakes her head. I thought she was going to spit on the floor in disgust like some old woman in those mafia movies.

I laugh out loud at her face and her words. Emani is right. She definitely dodged a creeper.

“My bad. You’re right. I’ll try not to leave you alone, so you don’t get harassed by any more geriatric stalkers.” Emani slaps my arm, but she laughs with me.

We enter the ballroom, and the first person I spot is Anderson. He’s standing beside Shelby, and he has a look of determination covering his face. I gulp because I know my avoidance of Anderson McNair is over.

* * *

ANDERSON

I see Kayla as soon as she enters the ballroom. My strides are long, and I am determined to make it to her this time. I stare into her big brown eyes, and they go wide. I know that she can see the determination on my face, and I’m glad that she isn’t running this time.

I am almost to her when Bethany pulls my arm. I look down at her with a furrowed brow and a frustrated grunt as I pull my arm away from her grasp.

“Anderson, we need you for a photo.” She waves over the photographer.

“Not now. I have something to do.” I go to step around her, but she steps in my way, blocking my exit.

“Mr. and Mrs. Grant are waiting. You know how Pearson can be. We need this

picture for the next issue of Tech Plus magazine.” Bethany’s voice is pleading, and I know I need to do what she asks, but I need to talk to Kay.

“Can you just hold them off for a few minutes? There’s something I need to do.”

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“Anderson, my goodness! Stop running after a woman who doesn’t want you! You’re chasing this girl around this party. Hell, around every party, you two are together. I’m right here. Helping you with everything, and you don’t even acknowledge me. I helped you get that deal with Pearson Grant! Me leaking that story got everybody interested. I need to be the woman on your arm. We would be the power couple that everyone wants to be. Can’t you see that?” Bethany’s words are strong but not loud. If anyone were watching, they would think we were just having a normal conversation. But her words shock me.

Bethany just dropped a bomb of emotions, and I wasn’t aware of the depth of her feelings. My grandmother was right as usual. Bethany doesn’t just want to be with me. Her words tell me that she has thought long and hard about this. I can’t have the conversation that needs to be had at this very moment, but I can tell Bethany the truth.

“Bethany, I’m in love with Kayla,” I say, not to hurt her feelings but to make her understand. “I’m not interested in you that way. You’re a good employee, but I’m not the man for you. I can never be that guy.”

Bethany looks up at me with tears in her eyes and takes a deep breath. Then she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me. I jerk away from her in surprise, and the first thing I do is look to where Kayla was standing. She’s gone.

I run my hands over my face, and I look around the ballroom in dismay. I can’t believe Bethany just did that. What the hell was she thinking?

“See? No matter what, a woman like that can’t handle you, Anderson. She won’t

even fight for you. You say that you love her, but does she love you back?” Bethany has an evil little grin on her face, and I’m flabbergasted.

“Kayla doesn’t need to fight for me. Why the fuck am I still standing here arguing with you? Fuck this!” I begin to walk away to go chase after my woman. What’s between Kay and me is nobody’s business, especially Bethany.

“Anderson, you need to do this for...”

“You’re fired, Bethany,” I throw over my shoulder. I’ll be damned if I have a person like that working for me.

When I finally reach the hall, Kayla is nowhere to be found. I can’t believe this shit! I know that she was ready to hear what I had to say because she didn’t run when I looked in her direction. Kayla has been skittish from the start, and now there’s no telling what she’s thinking.

“You know, if I weren’t close enough to eavesdrop on that conniving snake you call a PR specialist, I would kick your ass right now.” Shelby comes up behind me, and I’m glad that her nosy ass is here for once.

“You heard her?” I say with slight relief lacing my tone.

“Yeah. She’s going to be a problem, Andy.” Shelby shakes her head, and I know she’s right. Hell, my grandmother said the same thing. But I can’t think about Bethany right now. I need to find Kay.

“Where’s Kayla? Did she leave?” I asked, still looking around as if she will pop up out of thin air.

“She did her best impression of Cinderella, but no worries, I got your back, Andy.”

Shelby smirks at me, and I shake my head.

“Thanks, Shell. But the way Kayla left, I don’t think she’ll even listen to what I have to say,” I say in a defeated tone.

I was such a dick to her at the restaurant, and now she catches me not even a week later kissing one of my employees. There’s no telling what she’s thinking right now. I have to explain things to her. The irony of the thought isn’t lost on me. If I would’ve just let her explain things to me, we wouldn’t be in this mess. Now, I just hope that she will give me the chance I didn’t give to her.

“You’re going to have to do a lot of groveling, but she’ll listen. Eventually,” Shelby says, and although her words are meant to encourage, I still feel a sense of loss like never before.

Bethany knew I would never be with her, but I guess the saying is correct... misery loves company. But I refuse to be miserable for one minute longer. I am going to get Kayla back. Fuck misery!

25

Foolishness, Flowers, And Forgiveness

ANDERSON

“She’s trying to do what?” My loud voice almost shakes the walls of our conference room.

It’s been a week since the McNair Fall Ball, and we are in an emergency meeting. Bethany is claiming her firing was in retaliation for my sexual advances not being returned. She’s saying that I sexually harassed her.

“We need to just settle. Bethany Lester will go away with a few million.” One of the slimy lawyers suggest, and I want to fire his ass. These are a different batch of attorneys than the ones we use for business negotiations. And these weasels are the worst.

“Fuck that! I didn’t sexually harass her, and I’m not giving her a dime,” I growl at the man.

“You said that Shelby heard everything that she said. She’s a witness,” Brady says.

“Yeah, but Shelby is a friend. They’ll just claim that she’s lying.” I shake my head. That was the first thing I thought of when I heard the ridiculous claims.

“I wouldn’t necessarily call Shelby your friend, though.” Brady shrugs. I nod, but that’s beside the point. We have enough friends in common that the relationship is still there.

“Won’t work. We need solid evidence that Bethany is lying,” another lawyer says.

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“Don’t worry about Bethany Lester. We have proof of what she said, and not because of a friend.” Monique Grant walks into the room, and I am glad that she’s here. If there’s anyone that can fix this mess, it’s her.

“Thank God you’re here!” I breathe out, relieved as hell.

“You are so very welcome, Anderson. My husband was not about to let anything happen to my golden boys.” She winks at me, and I chuckle. I found out she calls us that because of mine and Brady’s looks.

“Shelby’s company had cameras and photographers all over that building. Please believe we have evidence of Ms. Lester coming on to you. Once we finish with her, she will wish she went off with the severance package that A&M offered her.”

I smile widely because even with all the money we pay these snake ass lawyers, all we needed was the fixer to come in and set everything straight within minutes.

“We have a mediation set with her this afternoon. And Pearson sent one of his best. He’s been informed and given all the documentation for the case,” Monique says to the room.

“Where’s the meeting taking place?” I ask, and Monique smiles.

“Ms. Lester wanted to have the conference on neutral territory, so we are meeting at a mediator downtown.”

I nod and take a deep breath. Everything may not be over, but at least there is a light

at the end of the tunnel.

* * *

“Mr. McNair came on to me and then fired me when I said I didn’t want to date him,” Bethany says from across the table. She’s doing her best impression of a mild mannered, meek employee, but she won’t be winning an Oscar anytime soon.

Instead of the power suits that she usually wears, she is dressed in a long billowy skirt and a cardigan sweater. Her blonde hair is pulled back into a severe bun, and she’s wearing a pair of glasses that I’ve never seen.

“Do you have proof of his unwanted advances? Text messages, phone calls, emails?” one of my lawyers asks.

“I deleted them all, per his request,” Bethany states with a sniffle.

I’m doing my best not to fucking explode because I’m not the person she’s accusing me of being. I never saw this coming. I want the lawyers to just play the recordings they got from Shelby’s company to prove Bethany is lying so I can get this over with, but I know there’s a reason for their line of questioning, so I sit as patiently as I can.

“Do you always do what Mr. McNair tells you to do?”

“Yes,” Bethany demurely answers.

“So, when you leaked the story to the blog about an upcoming deal, did Mr. McNair tell you to do that?”

“Yes,” Bethany answers, but she looks at her lawyer with a frown.

I want to smile because she was just caught in a lie.

“Are you sure? Because there are several witnesses and a recording that says otherwise.”

“Well, I did what was in the best interest of the company.”

“So, you just lied. Mr. McNair didn’t tell you to leak the story?”

“Your question was confusing.” Bethany’s eyes well up with tears, but my lawyer goes in for the kill.

“So, Mr. McNair wanted to date you, but you said no, and that’s why he fired you? Correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct. I didn’t want to date my boss, so I told him no. He fired me right after.”

“Did you ever go out on a date with Mr. McNair?”

“Well, no. Not really. I mean.”

“So, Mr. McNair harassed you over text messages and emails, but you deleted them because he told you to? Is that correct?”

“I-I... well...” Bethany looks at her lawyer, and the man shakes his head.

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Bethany seemed so career driven and ambitious. But this story of hers has more holes in it than a basketball net. She didn't think this through at all, and it shows. I would pity her if I weren't a bastard. But I am.

"Ms. Lester, your story isn't adding up. Would you like to tell us about the conversations you had with Mr. McNair?"

"Anderson... I mean Mr. McNair, wanted to get over his girlfriend, so he asked me back to his home. I turned him down."

"When did this conversation take place?"

"At the McNair Ball," Bethany responds confidently, and I smirk. She walked right into the trap. It's sad really.

"It's funny that you mention the ball because we have a recording of a conversation of you and Mr. McNair. Would you like to hear the recording?" our lawyer asks calmly, and I take back every bad word I said about him.

"I need to talk to my lawyer privately," Bethany says, and I smile. Her little charade is over, and we all know it.

"I don't think that will be necessary. You can drop the complaint, or we can see you in court for defamation of character, slander, as well as character assassination damaging to Mr. McNair's business."

"This isn't even public knowledge! How can you sue me?" Bethany says

incredulously.

“Things have a way of leaking, Ms. Lester. You of all people know that.”

* * *

“Maddox Reid, I take back everything I said about you.” I shake our lawyer’s hand.

“Don’t apologize. You haven’t gotten my bill yet.” Maddox’s gray eyes twinkle, and he gives me a wide grin. I can tell this was a walk in the park for him. “Ya’ll have my number if you need anything else,” he says in a thick country accent before smirking and exiting the lobby of the mediation building.

“I know you’re glad that’s over with,” Brady says as he follows me out of the lobby.

“Yeah, I still can’t believe Bethany did this. Like why?” I frown as we make our way to the parking garage of the building.

“Anderson, dude, you can’t be this naïve. Bethany was obsessed with you. She has been after you for years, and you ignored her.” Brady shakes his head, and my frown deepens.

“Bethany wasn’t obsessed with me.” I think back on her odd behavior at the ball. Then my thoughts go a little further, and I begin to remember all of the things she did and said, and it all makes perfect sense.

“Damn! I didn’t even notice,” I say, running a hand through my hair. I was always so busy with work, and then my attention turned from building my company to building a relationship with Kayla. I hardly ever paid much attention to Bethany or any other woman, for that matter.

“Yeah. We all know you only have eyes for Kay. Speaking of which. Did you get her to talk to you yet?” Brady questions, and I nod.

After a week of sending flowers to her home and office, and calling and leaving a good morning, I hope your day is going well, and good night messages, Kayla finally broke down and agreed to meet me for dinner.

I know she knows that Bethany kissed me, and I didn’t callously move onto another woman in front of her. Shelby has been my ally. She told me Warren crashed Kay’s solo date after he’d followed her. It made me feel even worse. But I’m glad Shelby took pity on me and has been keeping me in the loop about everything that’s going on with Kay.

And although the claims that Bethany made didn’t hit the public, I made sure Kayla knew about them. I also made sure she knew about every secret I held when it came to us. I write her letters that are delivered with her morning flowers.

Kayla sends me thank you texts every day, but we haven’t spoken. I know she needs her space, but this time I refuse to let her think that I don’t love or want her. I make sure she knows even if I look like a total fool. I don’t care. If I have to be a fool, then I will be Kayla’s.

“We have a date on Friday.” I try but fail to keep the wide grin from covering my face.

“Thank goodness! I was going to beg her myself if she didn’t give you another chance. Your sulking and overall assholeyness was really getting on my damned nerves,” Brady chuckles, and I throw a scowl in his direction.

“Assholeyness isn’t a word. Dickhead,” I respond with narrowed eyes. “Anyway, why are you worried about me. I saw that preteen you brought to the party.”

“Dude, go to hell. Ally is twenty-three.” Brady waves his hand, and I scoff.

“Like I said, preteen. You’re ten years older than her, what the hell, man? What happened with you and...”

“Anderson, just drop it, man. I’m with Ally now. I’m just having a bit of fun. Relationships aren’t for guys like me.” There’s something in Brady’s tone that makes me drop the subject. Whatever is going on with him, I’m sure he’ll get over it soon.

Once Brady and I get back to the office, I call Kay and leave her an “I can’t wait to see you” voicemail. Now that all the foolishness is behind me, I can really focus on giving her the apology she deserves.

* * *

KAYLA

“Shelby, don’t think that you’re slick. I know you’re the one feeding Anderson all his information,” I say into the phone. I hear Shelby suck her teeth on the other end, and I laugh.

I’m not upset that she’s helping Anderson. She has always been rooting for us. Besides, if Shelby weren’t there to hear Bethany, I wouldn’t have known what really happened that night. Bethany is a piece of work, and because Anderson wouldn’t be with her, she decided to ruin his career. Vindictive cow.

I’m glad that Shelby’s company had cameras everywhere to help prove Bethany was lying. I’m also glad that both Anderson and Shelby have been keeping me in the loop. Even though I have limited my contact to text messages, I’ve been worried sick about him. I didn’t want to be a distraction for him, so I’ve been keeping a low profile, but I miss him like crazy.

“Kay, the poor guy was damned near crying at my feet to help him get you back. What was I supposed to do, drown in both of ya’lls tears? No, ma’am, I don’t think so,” Shelby responds, and all I can do is shake my head.

“We didn’t mean to burden you with our mess, Shell.” I genuinely mean that. I never meant to put Shelby in the middle of my crap.

“You could never be a burden, sweetie. I’m happy to help.” I can hear the smile in

her voice, and it makes me smile. “Now, tell me what you’re wearing on your date.”

Once I got off the phone with Shelby, I started to get ready. The air had turned crisp, and I didn’t want to be cold. However, I didn’t want to wear anything bulky or unflattering. It’s amazing that I used to live in clothes like that.

I run my fingers through my newly flat-ironed hair and pick out something cute but warm to wear. The blue leather leggings and oversized off the shoulder white sweater is the perfect combination. I pair the outfit with gold and black block heeled combat boots. I look very edgy and the opposite of a school librarian. I shake my head because a lot has changed.

Speaking of changes, I’d had a confrontation once and for all with Warren. I didn’t understand why he kept harassing me to be with him. It turned out that his grandmother had left him an inheritance. However, the condition was that he was married or engaged to a woman he’d been in a relationship with for at least a year. I was just his way to his money. The will specifically said woman, so I’m pretty sure that his family already knows about his sexuality.

Warren finally broke down and told me when I threatened to go to HR about his harassment. He continued to plead with me for help, but I told him that I didn’t owe him anything, and if he stopped wasting time with me, he could find another woman to help him get his money. Warren wasn’t happy about it, but when I threatened to blast him on social media, he promised to leave me alone. I would never put his business out for the world to see, but at least it got him to go away.

A knock on the door brings me out of my thoughts but makes the butterflies dance in my stomach. The nervous anticipation is back like it’s our first date. I take a deep breath and open the door.

Anderson is standing there with a beautiful smile on his face. His chocolate brown

hair is styled back out of his crystal blue eyes that are alight with the same excitement that I feel. The dark hair of his beard is trimmed so that I can see his plump pink lips, and my eyes can't help but roam. Anderson is wearing dark blue jeans, combat boots, and a soft teal sweater that brings out the color of his eyes.

"Hey," I finally manage to squeak out through a dry throat. His presence takes my breath away.

"I missed you so fucking much, doll face!" Anderson scoops me up and kisses me until my eyes roll back into my head. "Please, forgive me."

"With a kiss like that, how could I not?" I breathe out, staring into his dreamy eyes.

"So, you forgive me?" He says with a grin.

"Well, I have a list of things you need to do for me to completely forgive you, but I'm sure we can work it out," I respond with a smirk.

Anderson laughs as he pulls me into another earthshattering kiss.

EPILOGUE

Happy Birthday

One Year Later

KAYLA

"I still can't believe you brought me to Bora Bora," I say, looking out at the crystal blue water.

The hotel that we're staying in has these beautiful huts that are suspended over the water. The beach is right behind our hut, and we have an infinity pool right in front. It is heaven on Earth, and I never want to leave.

"We had to cross off those last few before you turned the big three-oh." Anderson comes up behind me, wrapping his long arms around my body and pulling me back against his chest.

"It's so beautiful, even with the clouds," I say on a contented sigh. The weather forecasted rain, but it's so beautiful here that nothing can spoil my mood... not even the rain.

"It will only rain for a bit, and even then, it will probably be light. I'm sure we can find something to do until the rain passes." Anderson moves my braids to the side and nuzzles my neck. The tickling of his beard against my skin makes me giggle.

We stand gazing out at the ocean until I feel raindrops hit my bare shoulder. The rain is warm and light, so we don't rush inside.

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Anderson turns me around and starts to slow dance with me. He hums a melody, and I move with him until the rain really starts to come down.

“Let’s go in. My hair is getting wet,” I say, pulling him toward the door.

“Doll face, you have braids. I’m trying to mark off number four on your list.”

“It’s my birthday. The list is null and void.” I continue pulling him, but he won’t budge.

“I veto that idea. We will just continue to add to the list. So, how about we cross off number thirty-one?” Anderson says, finally moving.

He picks me up, and I wrap my legs around his waist. I can already feel his pulsating member through his swim trunks. I wiggle to get closer to the bulge in his pants until he presses me against the wall of our hut. He moves my swimsuit bottoms to the side and rubs his thick finger up and down my slit.

“We’re gonna make this quick, baby. This is only a semi-private cottage.” Anderson’s voice is a low growl, and I shiver.

Anderson maneuvers his shorts down slightly and pulls himself out. He’s like steel wrapped in velvet as he slips inside of my wet channel. I bite my lip hard so that I don’t cry out. We are outside, and the only thing blocking us from view is the wall of our hut that Anderson has me pushed up against. If anyone goes for a swim, they will see us.

Anderson thrusts his hips, and I meet his thrust with my own. He wraps his hand around my braids and pulls my face to his. I kiss him with a fever that is consuming my entire being. He growls into my mouth when I flex my inner muscles around his hard dick.

“Damn, baby. You feel so good. Shit!” Anderson growls and pumps harder.

“Baby! Oh my... shit! Oh! Oh!” I yell until Anderson covers my mouth with his.

I moan into his mouth as we both come together. Once we catch our breaths, Anderson pulls out and fixes my swimsuit and his.

“Number thirty-one, have sex in public. Done!” Anderson chuckles when I slap his shoulder.

“Happy Birthday, Kayla. I love you.”

“Thank you, baby. I love you too. Best! Birthday! Ever!”