







# Rock Bottom (Tristan & Danika #2)

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**Category:** Romance, Young Adult

**Description:** Rock Bottom (Tristan & Danika #2)

Their love had the power of a runaway freight train, and the potential to be just as destructive.

The tempestuous sequel to *Bad Things* picks up where the first book left off. Reeling from a profound loss, Tristan and Danika struggle to pick up the pieces and build a life together, but the hard habits of a lifetime are not so easy to escape.

*Rock Bottom* takes us on a dual point of view journey through addiction and desire, through love and agony, and answers the question we've been asking since these characters were introduced in *Grounded*: "What happened between Tristan and Danika?"

DANIKA

Even love couldn't cushion a fall like ours. My love for Tristan was so big that I felt consumed by it, and even so, it was not enough to overpower our combined demons.

I struggled. I yelled and screamed. I scratched and kicked.

I fought like hell, but even the most determined fighters have to stop before they break.

No one could say I didn't fight for him.

"I love you," I spoke softly into his ear.

He gripped me harder. "I can't ever lose you, Danika. I'm not sure I'd survive it."

"You've got me. And I'm not going anywhere. Not ever."

I meant the words when I said them, but life had other plans for us.

I'd have given my life for that fight. In fact, I very nearly did.

TRISTAN

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:02 am*

## PROLOGUE

### DANIKA

I took a deep breath, my face buried in the most divine chest in the world. I'd been awake for a while, but I didn't even think about getting up. I wasn't sure if I was more wrapped around Tristan, or he me. We'd gone to sleep clutching each other, and from what I could tell, neither of us had moved an inch.

My leg was thrown over his hip, my arm around his side, a fistful of his T-shirt gripped in my hand like I was holding on for dear life. I was lying on my other arm, enough weight on it that it'd gone numb, and still, I didn't even think about moving.

His arm was thrown over my shoulders, one leg pushed high between mine. I could feel my own T-shirt riding up to my ribs, his hand gripping a handful of it at my back. We'd been mirroring each other, clinging for dear life, even in sleep.

I felt him stir, and I lifted my head to look up at him.

His beautiful golden eyes were blinking, still blank from sleep. I witnessed his transformation from sweet oblivion and into dawning horror as he remembered.

I thought that might have been the worst thing about losing someone, that moment between asleep and awake, when you had to remember and accept the loss again, relive that moment when your life changed, and you lost something dear. It had been just over a month since his brother's funeral, and he was still reliving that horrible moment of realization every single morning.

Two days after the funeral, Tristan's mother had asked him to leave her home and not come back. As wrong as it was, it was clear she was placing all of the blame for Jared's death at Tristan's door. I thought he'd taken the falling out well, considering all he'd been through, and I'd been confident that she'd change her mind after she made it out of her own grief, but so far, she was holding firm in her pique.

It was a struggle for me not to get mad at her. But I told myself, over and over, that she was just hurting bad, and that much pain could spill outward. She loved Tristan, and so she would get over this.

Tristan had taken her rejection well, all things considered, but he needed me now more than ever, and I was determined to get him through this.

He'd spent the past month basically glued to my side. He still had his apartment, but he'd slept over at Bev's house every single night since we'd left his mother's. He didn't want to be alone for even a second, and I understood. Solitude was perhaps a necessary component when dealing with grief, but I could not deny this man anything.

We didn't go out, spending our days playing with the boys, and our nights watching re-runs of Jerry's all-time favorite show, *Arrested Development*, over and over again, until we could quote the episodes to each other. We'd make love, fall asleep, then make love again. It was a time of comfort and distraction, of love and avoidance.

To this day, I thought back on those days as the most bittersweet of escapes.

His eyes shut tightly, and his lips sought out mine, seeking comfort through touch. I gave it to him. I was ready and willing to give him absolutely everything.

His fingers let loose their grip on my shirt, skimming up along my back, peeling it off me in a few smooth, swift motions. His shirt received the same treatment from my

impatient hands. I rubbed my chest to his as we made direct contact, skin on skin.

He dragged off my panties while I dragged off his boxer-briefs, kissing every part of his body that I could reach, sucking his nipple hard into my mouth until he gasped and tugged me away, his hands in my hair.

He slid his hands down to my hips, gripping tight. He rolled onto his back, and pulled me up to straddle him. "Ride me," he told me gruffly, using those big hands to tug me into place over his erection.

I arched my back, using one hand to balance on his chest while the other guided him to my entrance. I rubbed him there, letting him feel how ready I was, and just loving the feel of his tip playing over me.

His hips bucked underneath me, pushing him in far enough to make me gasp. "Now," he growled, "I can't wait."

I pushed down while he surged up, seating me to the hilt.

My eyes closed, my head falling back as sensation overtook me.

I stayed still, just enjoying that perfect contact, until his impatient hands tugged at my hips, urging me to move.

I circled at first, a teasing motion that had him gripping my ass and moaning.

I bit my lip and worked into a rhythm, rocking back and forth, back and forth.

He brought one hand up, kneading at my breast, his other sliding up my thigh, going unerringly to my clit, rubbing in a circle that brought me to the threshold of release deliciously, leisurely.

Those magic hands never missed their mark.

“Please,” I cried, quickening my pace.

He worked me faster, and I froze and shook like I had a fever, letting the waves of rapture take me. I felt him jerking inside of me as I came back down from that addictive high, his face arrested in his own gratifying release. I loved to watch him come, and I held as still as I could, impaled on him, until his eyes opened, and he blinked up at me.

I folded down to lay against him, burying my face in the side of his neck, breathing him in.

He always smelled divine. Like home.

“I love you,” he rasped out. He said it all the time. He didn’t hold it back, now that he’d admitted it, but it still gave me butterflies, every single time.

“I love you,” I spoke softly into his ear.

He gripped me harder. “I can’t ever lose you, Danika. I’m not sure I’d survive it.”

“You’ve got me. And I’m not going anywhere. Not ever.”

I meant the words when I said them, but life had other plans for us.

I was, by nature, a fighter, and no one could say I didn’t fight for us.

I’d have given my life for that fight.

In fact, I very nearly did.

Tristan was in the shower when I finally took Kenny's call. He'd been trying to contact us both for a week, but some strange instinct had kept me from talking to him. I felt bad about it. Kenny was a nice guy, and he had to be hurting about Jared as well, but Tristan and I had been thriving in our own little world, and it was hard for me to let go of that.

"Hello," I answered, my voice tentative.

"Danika!" Kenny's voice filled the phone, warm with relief. "I've been trying to call you for a week. How are you? And how's Tristan doing?"

I sighed, filled with guilt. "He's okay. Sorry I haven't answered. It's just been, well..."

"No worries. I understand. You're taking care of him, and we all appreciate that. Thank you."

That set me aback. I had been trying to take care of him, but I hadn't expected his friends to thank me for it. "You're welcome, Kenny. I just want to be there for him. I'd do anything for Tristan."

"I'm happy to hear that. I'm glad he had you to help him through all of this. He really needed you."

I swallowed hard, choked up at his praise. I wasn't used to hearing things like that.

"I know he won't want to talk to me yet, but could you give him a message for me?"

"Of course."

"I have Jared's guitar. I doubt he'll want it now, but just let him know that I'm



keeping it for him. Jared was teaching him to play. Did you know that?"

"I didn't."

"I think it would be good for him to take it up again. It would make him feel closer to Jared, and he needs that."

"Do you think that will help right now, or make it worse?" I asked. I wasn't asking because I had the answer. In my opinion, it could go either way.

"I think it will help. They were so close. Forgetting his brother is not an option, and staying close to what made Jared whole is the best way to remember him."

I could tell by his voice that he believed that.

Later, much later, I would regret telling Tristan about the phone call, about the guitar. Some part of me, the part that liked to wallow in my own misery and dwell on the past, would blame that guitar for everything that went wrong between us, because it brought him back to the band and that lifestyle. But the logical part of me knew that Tristan would have gone back to old habits and old friends, and that whether he sank or swam was, inevitably, in his own hands.

Every misstep that led us down the path to our destruction was our own doing, but to this day, I still hated that guitar.

## CHAPTER ONE

### DANIKA

When we hit the party scene again, we did it in force. We were people of extremes, to be sure, though I'd never have put myself in Tristan's league when it came to

decadence. After several weeks of seclusion, staying home night after night, we began to go out again.

It was supposed to be one night, one party, but that wasn't how things worked with Tristan.

It was my firm belief that to properly mourn the loss of a person, you had to deal with the silence in your head and accept what it turned into when life didn't keep you too busy to think. We had some small bit of that, when we spent time alone together, just the two of us. I didn't think we had nearly enough of it before we started up again with the party scene, but Tristan didn't agree. He was determined to escape from the silence in his head, at all costs.

I felt helpless to stop him. His demons were so very different from my own.

We found ourselves at another house party, of another friend of a friend, celebrating something or other. I was thoroughly over it by then. The house parties didn't even have danceable music most of the time, and Tristan took off to talk to Kenny nearly the second we arrived at this one. Frankly, I'd as soon have been home studying or at the dance studio practicing.

The consolation prize for this party was that Frankie was there. She almost made up for the fact that Dean and Twatalie were in attendance.

Unfortunately, long before I found Frankie, Twatalie found me.

I was just grabbing a drink from some stranger's kitchen when a voice spoke to me from behind.

I stiffened instantly in recognition.

“Well, you are an exotic little piece of ass, I’ll give you that. But I don’t suppose the yellow fever can last forever. His first love is for blondes, you know.”

I blinked slowly at her random little diatribe, then smiled big. This I could handle. It was the keeping my mouth shut and the claws in that had been a struggle.

“Not all of us can look like Bratz dolls,” I said, my tone idle. “Did your doctor give you a discount when he realized that you’d lost the ability to blink your eyes or close your mouth? If not, you should definitely write a nasty letter. Though, in your case, I guess the more you have in common with a blow-up doll, the better.” I met her furious eyes straight on, making my expression into one of surprise, popping my lips out and slightly open like hers were permanently; my best impression of a blow-up doll.

“You’re a real bitch, you know that?”

I rolled my eyes, disappointed that was the best she could do. I’d been ready for a real sparring match. “And you’re a tired old Vegas slut of a gold digger.”

“I’m only twenty-six!”

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. It really said it all, that the old part of my statement was the only thing she took exception to. “Sluts that bang old men age in dog years, didn’t you know?”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:02 am*

She had nothing for me besides a hand throw in the air and some heel stomping as she walked away. I knew men liked boobs, but I was baffled that Tristan had fallen for her. Unaccountably, dealing with her just always made me want to throw things at him.

“Why do you look like you want to hit something? What did Tristan do now?”

My mouth twisted ruefully as I turned to look at Frankie. “You know what’s infuriating? Verbal sparring with a blow-up doll and realizing that this used to be my boyfriend’s ‘type.’”

“Ahh, Twatalie. She’d put anyone in a bad mood.”

“I swear she’s stalking us. She’s everywhere we go lately.”

“She wants him back. She’s making no bones about it.”

That made my gut twist. He’d given her a ring once, and I was almost certain there were still some feelings left between them.

“It would never happen, Danika. Get that look off your face. He wouldn’t do that to you, especially not with her.”

“I walked in on them flirting once. It was months ago, but I could tell there were still feelings between them.”

“I bet you misunderstood.”

“I don’t think I did.”

“For the record, I think your jealousy is clouding your judgement on this one. They have a long history, yeah, and I think he went from resenting her to feeling sorry for her. I think she had a rough childhood, and Tristan was always trying to rescue her from it. He’s got this savior complex...”

“Savior complex... You think he’s trying to save me?”

“No. That’s not what I’m saying. What I mean is he’s a good guy, and he always sympathized with her. That’s a part of him that won’t change. He doesn’t like what Nat’s become, but he’s got a soft spot for what she’s gone through. As a matter of fact, that’s also why he’s still friends with Dean, mega-asshole that he is. I guess Dean had a tough childhood, and that’s why Tristan cuts him so much slack.”

“Well, that soft spot makes me want throw things at him. Does that make me a bitch?”

“Not in my book. Just don’t mistake a soft spot for some kind of an emotional affair. He’ll barely talk to her now, sympathy or no, because he knows how much it pisses you off.”

“That’s only fair, when he’d try to kill one of my ex-boyfriends if he saw them so much as looking at me.”

“True. You make a solid point. He can never ever complain about you being jealous, since he turns into a maniac if anyone looks at you funny.”

“Exactly.”

We tracked Tristan down in a crowd of people laughing by the pool. He was talking

to Kenny, with Cory and Dean just a few feet away. The band was back together. I could tell at a glance. And the man in a suit that seemed to be kissing their ass made my gut twist.

I was about to lose him. The thought was swift and hard to shake. But something was happening here, some big move for the band that was bound to take him away from me, be it in time or distance.

He smiled huge when he saw me. I hadn't seen him so happy since Jared died.

I wanted to throw up I was so worried about what he was going to tell me as he left the group, grabbing my hand and tugging me away.

"I need to talk to you about something," he explained.

I followed on leaden feet, wanting to stall, or run, whatever it took to stop this thing in its tracks. I was being ridiculous, I knew, but knowing that didn't stop the horrible feeling in my gut. "That sounds ominous," I told him, keeping my voice steady.

"It's nothing bad. It's good, I think, actually."

He pulled me until we found a private little corner on the side of the house. He moved close, touching his forehead to mine and smiling before he began.

"We just got a record deal."

I'd known it, known by the happy reunion of the band, who hadn't been together since the funeral, that this was happening. It had always been heading in this direction.

He swallowed, his eyes suddenly downcast. "It was what Jared always wanted. It's

not right that he's not here to see it."

I melted, stroking a hand over his cheek, trying to offer him whatever comfort I could.

"The rest of the guys are all over it, and I'm happy for them, especially Kenny, but I'm not sure I'm up for it. The band...the entire thing is not the same for me without Jared. It won't be at all hard for them to find a new lead singer. They're a dime a dozen."

He was delusional if he thought the band would fare as well without him. Hell, I didn't think they'd still have a record deal if he backed out, but that wasn't for me to say.

It was a touchy question and hard for me to ask, but... "What about Jared's spot? Don't you need another guitarist?"

He grimaced, running a hand through his hair. "We had enough guys that we don't technically need another member, but the record company has someone that they want us to use. I haven't met him, but I hear he's good. I'm happy for the guys, but like I said, I'm not sure I'm up for it. None of it would be the same for me without Jared. Just the thought of someone else taking his spot makes me feel sick."

I saw what he wanted from me, even if he didn't.

He tried so hard to hide all of his pent-up frustration at life, his malcontent with the hand he'd been dealt; a talented man who was good at everything, of sound mind and exceptional body, and yet had nothing to do with it, nowhere to put it to its proper use.

He'd been raised in a world where his potential had been valued at so much less than

its worth. He was ambitious. He'd never admit it, because it was a pipe dream where he came from, but his ambitions were a hot burning thing, beyond his control, and he needed this.

I buried my hands in his hair, touching my forehead back to his. It wasn't easy, but when I spoke, I made my voice sure. "I think you should do it. Opportunities like these don't come often, and when they do, you have to grab them. This is what Jared would have wanted."

"It's just not the same without him. It never will be."

"No, it won't. It will be completely different, but that doesn't mean it won't still be good. For the guys and for you. And for Jared. It was his dream for the band to make it, and he was not selfish. He'd be just as happy if you made it without him. But you're never really without him. He'll always be a part of you, right? And that part of you needs to do this, baby."

He hugged me to him, his face burrowing into my neck, breathing me in, making my eyes flutter closed in pleasure. "Thank you. You're my rock, sweetheart. I don't know what I'd do without you. You make everything better."

I melted into a messy little puddle at his feet. Having this man love me like he did had become my whole world.

Though he'd put up a token protest, I knew he wanted this bad, and I couldn't blame him. I understood his need for this. I desperately wanted to amount to something too, and so I didn't ever even consider holding him back.

My approval, or encouragement, was seemingly all he needed, and so it was settled.

I got more details, troubling details, as we rejoined the group of giddy bandmates.



They were going to start working in the studio in just over a week. And that studio was in L.A., which was a five-hour drive away. They were required to work on the new album five days a week, and the entire process could potentially take months to complete. I wanted to throw up, but instead I smiled, and congratulated them all, and let Tristan hang his arm over my shoulders like all was right with the world.

I didn't need another reason to hate Dean, but he always seemed more than willing to give me one.

Tristan was off talking to their new producer, leaving me alone for less than five minutes when Dean approached with a shit-eating grin on his face. I had the strong urge to literally make him eat shit.

“Out of town five days a week...How long do think it will take for Tristan to bury himself in some fan pussy? I give it two weeks. Let's make a wager out of it. If I'm right, I get to bury my dick in your pussy.”

I glanced in Tristan's direction, debating whether I should deck the creep or sic Tristan on him.

“Aww, you gonna tell your boyfriend that I was out of line with you? You can dish it out, babe, but you sure can't take it.”

I glared at him, because I'd been real good about not dishing it out where Dean was concerned. The less interaction the better, I'd learned. “I would tell Tristan what you just said to me, but then he'd kick your ass, and I don't think it's right to hit girls.” I smiled sweetly as the jab hit home, and he glared at me.

In an act of supreme self-control, I walked away.

At least I'd gotten the last word.

## CHAPTER TWO

### TRISTAN

The party had gone into full swing with the announcement of our record deal. Music started blasting and across the brightly lit backyard, I saw Danika dancing with Frankie. No matter how many times I saw it, Danika moving her hips to the beat was the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen.

She was wearing a little tiny blue skirt, her legs toned and shown off to perfection, her little ass so tight my mouth went dry every time she turned it my way. I was standing near the pool, talking with a group of guys about the news, but I wasn't really. In my mind, I was lifting up that tiny skirt, bending her over, and burying myself balls deep inside her.

I owned that. She was mine. Mine. That sexy as hell creature belonged to me, and the second I thought someone else didn't seem to understand that, I lost my fucking mind.

How I knew I was a lunatic about her was that I was even jealous of her smiles, her laughs, any damn thing that brought her joy that I hadn't caused. I just didn't want to share her, any part of her.

She was mine.

The way she felt about me was evident with just a look. I'd never been loved like that before, not by anyone, and it did insane things to me. I'd only had one other relationship to compare this to, and so I thought of Nat, and how she'd said she loved me five fucking times a day, incessantly, until I felt suffocated by it. Suffocated, but never actually loved. Not like I felt with just one glance from those pale silver eyes. Now if I could only become halfway worthy of that love, I'd make it through all the

shit life was throwing at me.

“She is beyond hot, I’ll give you that. If you’re gonna let a bitch pussy whip you, she ain’t a bad choice.”

I sent Dean an unfriendly look. He and I had not been seeing eye to eye lately. “Knock it the fuck off, unless you’ll enjoy it when I kick your ass.”

He just smiled his crazy smile. When we were kids, I’d loved that smile. It had always meant fun, likely trouble, but still fun, but something had changed about him over the years. I couldn’t put my finger on when it had happened, but he just wasn’t the same guy he’d been.

I cut him an ounce of slack, because losing Jared hadn’t only broken me. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the change in him had happened long before Jared’s death.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“I’m just talking, Tryst. Just words, my man. Anyway, all of that pussy whipping that’s got you so salty will be worth it when you kick her to the curb and I get a revenge fuck out of her, Nat style.”

I had his shirt in my hands, my temper going through the charts with a few sentences out of his asshole mouth.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I asked him through my teeth. “And what the fuck does Nat have to do with anything?”

“She fucked me, not a week after you broke it off. Let me do all kinds of messed up shit to her, just to get back at you. Joke was on her. You never found out until now, when you couldn’t give two fucks about who taps that.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” I was shaking with rage.

“Oh, my bad. You still give a shit who gets inside of Nat? Good to know, man.”

I shook him like a rag doll. I could feel how everyone had frozen around us, so my voice was quiet when I spoke. “Girlfriends, ex or not, are off-limits, and you fucking know it. It doesn’t matter what goes down, if you ever lay a finger on Danika, I will cut your dick off and fucking feed it to you. Do you understand? I don’t care if it’s ten years from now. You touch her, you’re dead.” I let him go, my fists clenching. I had to get away from him before I lost my mind and someone called the cops.

Dean was still grinning like the crazy bastard he was. “I got your message loud and clear. Good to see that anger management is working for you. I’ll leave you alone so

you can practice your zen and shit.”

He walked away, whistling like nothing had happened.

“Crazy fucker,” I muttered to his back. He’d been blatantly baiting me, and still, it had worked. The idea of another man so much as shaking Danika’s hand made me lose my shit, and the idea of Dean, fucking dirtball Dean, having her, made me feel murderous.

“Tristan,” a breathless, all too familiar voice called my name softly, gripping my elbow.

I turned, giving Natalie an annoyed eyebrow lift in question. The woman was becoming a real nuisance. We’d gone years without so much as bumping into each other, but now that the old man had dumped her, she was everywhere I turned. I didn’t think for a second that it was an accident, and I was beginning to think back on the years of no contact with genuine affection. It was becoming apparent that even though we’d grown up together, we weren’t going to be able to be friends. She was never going to let go of the idea of us getting back together, and there was a no percent chance of that ever happening again.

“What do you want?” I asked her, ill-tempered and making no attempts to hide it.

She smiled, unfazed. She was a sly one, and for years I’d mistaken that slyness for intelligence. It wasn’t that. Over time, I’d realized that she was nothing but a dumb bitch. “I had some things I wanted to talk to you about. Can we go somewhere private?”

That was so crazy it was almost amusing. “Fuck no we can’t. My girlfriend hates your guts, on account of you being a fucking bitch to her, and the last thing I’m going to do is piss her off again because of you. If you have something to say to me, you

can say it right here. And make it quick.”

She touched my arm, smiling up at me. All I could think was that she wasn’t worth talking to for five seconds if it got Danika mad at me.

“Oh, Tryst, remember how it used to be?” Her tone was dreamy. I felt suffocated by it. “Remember the chemistry? We were so hot for each other. I’ve never felt anything like it, not before or since.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed. It was not a happy laugh. I was too sick of her walks down memory lane to indulge her. Just over it. “That’s not how I remember it. I remember how you withheld sex to get your way. And the chemistry was nothing special. Frankly, I get better every night now. World’s better. No comparison.”

She gasped in outrage, but I wasn’t done.

“I hope someday you find someone you really care about, Nat, someone you really love. Then you’ll realize that what you and I had was nothing but dumb puppy love.”

DANIKA

I abruptly stopped dancing as Tristan yelled something at Dean and grabbed his shirtfront.

Not again, I thought, cringing. Those two were at each other’s throats every time I turned around. Two men had never seemed less suited to be roommates, but roommates they were. I wasn’t sure how long that could last, but I’d be more relieved than anyone when they parted ways.

“What the ever-loving fuck did Dean do now?” Frankie muttered behind me, tugging on my arm.

“I should go try to break it up,” I said, the very idea just making me feel exhausted.

“No, you shouldn’t. You should come inside with me and let them sort it out.”

“I might be the only one that can calm him down,” I explained, but I followed her in.

“That is a very temporary solution to a much bigger problem. That man has got to learn not to lose his temper without you as a crutch.”

I knew she was right, but I still couldn’t stop worrying, and looking outside every few seconds, trying to gage if the situation was going to spiral out of control.

I was beyond relieved when Dean strode through the door, whistling. He even smiled when he saw me, as though the sight of me made him happy, when it never did.

“You,” he said, making it sound like an endearment. “I was just looking for you.”

There was no way that was a good thing. The bastard was looking for trouble more than me, I just knew it. I crossed my arms over my chest, glaring at him. “Why? And what did you say to Tristan to get him riled again?”

“Let’s not pretend he isn’t always riled, yeah?”

I hated that he had a point.

“But that out there, that was nothing. He was just having a jealous fit about Nat and me hooking up. You have nothing to worry about, though. I’m sure that doesn’t mean he still has feelings for her. Oh and look,” he pointed out the window.

I turned to follow his stare, my body tensed up; my head messed up by what he’d said. I couldn’t shake my suspicion that Tristan still had feelings for that bitch, and

what he'd said just validated it.

Sure enough, Tristan was talking to Natalie, noticeably angry.

"I'm sure he's telling her off for fucking me. But it doesn't mean he still wants her. It's totally normal to get pissed off about something that happened years ago with your ex-girlfriend, right?"

I hated that he spoke in my language, sarcasm, when everything he said pissed me off.

"Just go away, you little shit," Frankie told him.

I was still staring outside at Tristan and Nat, watching how his face transformed as his scowl disappeared and a loud laugh escaped him that made my fists clench. She'd just said something that he thought was funny, and I hated it.

"Just remember. I'm always here if you want to make him jealous back."

I ignored Dean completely until he went away, my eyes, every iota of my concentration on the couple speaking, and leaning close together outside. She touched his arm twice. I counted.

"I say we just leave. Just get out of here. You in the mood for some In-N-Out? It's good drinking food."

"Yes." I turned decisively away from the window, done torturing myself with that. If he wanted to talk to his ex, he could wonder where the hell I'd gone. I didn't particularly want a burger and I hadn't had even a sip of alcohol, but that was not the point.



He'd texted me five times by the time we were ten minutes away. I just watched the screen flash, not even reading them at first.

"Let's talk it out, girl," Frankie drawled, shooting me a sideways eyebrow lift. "You look mad enough to spit."

"I think he still has feelings for her," just sort of fell out of my mouth. I felt childish and paranoid, but I couldn't shake the awful way it made me feel to see them talking to each other. "You don't get jealous enough to fight somebody because they hooked up with someone you broke up with years ago unless you still care about that person, right?"

Frankie shook her head, sighing loudly and dramatically. "I don't know. Those guys do have a rule about that. They don't hook up with each other's girlfriends, ex or not."

"Yet they've slept up with the same women before. Makes no sense."

"I doesn't make any sense to me either. That is definitely a guy thing. Somehow calling a chick your girlfriend changes everything."

My phone dinged with another message, and I had the strong urge to chuck it out the window. "I need to stop going to these stupid parties with him all the time. They're pure drama." If I was honest with myself, I was terrified for him to go to one without me. Twatalie seemed to be lurking everywhere, just waiting for her chance.

"That's not a bad idea. You have enough on your plate without dealing with Dean's instigating ass."

"I could have gotten some studying done tonight, or even just helped Jerry with the boys. Anything would have been better than going out and watching my man get

chummy with his ex.”

“I know I’ve said it before, but if it helps I’ll say it again; I don’t think there’s a chance in hell he’d ever touch her with a ten foot pole.”

It did help.

We ate burgers and skipped the fries. We’d decided that the fries were the fattening part, and the burgers were just good solid protein.

We were heading back before I checked my texts. I rolled my eyes when I saw that there were thirteen of them. The last one told me all I needed to know about his mood.

Tristan: Where the fuck did you go?

I made a face at my phone for that one, and my reply was short.

Danika: Left with Frankie.

His answer was immediate.

Tristan: Why didn’t you tell me you were leaving?

That was all the invitation I needed to vent.

Danika: I would have, but you were busy talking to Nat.

My phone started ringing, and I cringed inwardly before answering.

“Hey...” I began.

“She fucking walked up to me!” his angry voice was loud enough that I held the phone away from my ear. “I wanted nothing to do with her. I never do. Where are you? I’m coming to get you.”

“We’re driving back to the party now.”

“We’re ten minutes out!” Frankie called loud enough to be heard on his end.

“Are you mad about this bullshit?” Tristan asked, his voice low and mean and just his tone would have had me mad if I wasn’t already.

“I don’t know. Are you mad enough about Natalie sleeping with Dean after you broke up to fight him over it?”

He cursed on the other end. “That is not what happened. Dean is just trying to start shit, as usual.”

“Answer me this then: Are you upset that they slept together?”

“I’m not mad at Natalie. Believe me when I say that I couldn’t care less who she hooks up with. I’m upset with Dean. He’s crossing boundaries we set up fucking years ago, and he’s starting shit between you and me when there’s no call for it, and it’s none of his fucking business.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

He both had and hadn't answered my question, but I suddenly felt silly about the entire thing. He'd only been talking to her, and it wasn't like they'd gone off alone.

His voice suddenly got very soft and from the first word, I knew I was done for. "Let's not fight, sweetheart. You know you're the only one I want."

Did I know that? The man had gotten around before he met me. Hell, he'd been getting around even after that. But he had been on his best behavior since we'd become exclusive. I should know, since we were practically attached at the hip.

"I don't want to fight either," I conceded.

I glared at Frankie as she sent a smirk in my direction. Everyone knew that Tristan had me wrapped around his little finger.

"Does this mean we skip straight to the make-up sex?" Tristan's low voice rumbled across the line, making things low in my stomach clench. "Want me to pull your hair and give you a rough ride, sweetheart? Fuck the angst out?"

I snuck a peek at Frankie, and by the irrepressible grin on her face, she was hearing every word he was saying. "I'll see you in a minute," I barked at him, hanging up.

"You're blushing," Frankie observed with a laugh.

"That man is shameless," I grumbled.

## CHAPTER THREE

DANIKA

Tristan was standing in the middle of the street, arms crossed over his chest, as we drove up. He looked ready to fight...or pull some hair and do some hard fucking.

“Man, he’s got some impressive arms,” Frankie remarked.

Did he ever. They were bulging and tatted up and looking ready to bust the seams of his black T-shirt.

He looked mean, and gorgeous, and his glowering expression did contrary things to my libido.

God, I wanted him.

“I’m not gonna lie, he is fucking hot, if you’re into that kind of thing, which it’s apparent you are.”

I barely heard Frankie as I watched Tristan stride around to my side of the car, pulling the door open before we were even fully stopped at the curb.

“Relax, loverboy,” Frankie called to him, “we were only gone an hour.”

He barely answered her, just giving her the most perfunctory wave before he tugged me out of the car.

“Let’s go home,” he growled, pretty much dragging me after him down the sidewalk.

“Goodnight!” Frankie shouted loudly.

“Call you tomorrow!” I yelled back, suddenly just as anxious as Tristan to get us to

his car. All it had taken was one smoldering glance.

“You like fighting,” I accused him, my voice low.

“Hardly. What I like is fucking you, and I can’t do that when you’re ditching me at parties.”

I just glared at him, no comeback coming to mind. It didn’t help that he was making me equal parts horny and mad.

“We grabbed a burger. You were busy, so I don’t see how you can complain.”

“What do you want me to do, run when she comes near me? Should I have shoved her in the pool?”

That painted an appealing picture that had me smiling. “You might have earned some brownie points, if you had.”

He grimaced as he handed me into the car.

I changed the subject, just as tired as he was of talking about Natalie. “You sure you’re good to drive?”

“Yeah. We were talking more than drinking.” He got behind the wheel, not looking at me as he started the car.

“Take off your panties.” His tone was casual, idle even.

My nipples tightened, a heavy, delicious feeling pooling between my legs. “We aren’t that far from your apartment,” I protested, even as my hands inched my skirt up, pulling at the tiny string of my panties. I yanked them down impatiently.

“Just a warm up, pudding.”

I swallowed hard as he started driving with one hand, and the other went to my upper thigh, rubbing hard. “I’m already warmed up.” I’d come a long way from needing much foreplay. He had me well tuned, in a constant state of rut that matched his own.

“Open your legs. Prove it.”

I parted my legs, my hips moving towards his hand. He inched it higher, but not enough.

“You wet? Show me. I want your pussy crying for me.”

I grabbed his hand, tugging it until his knuckles grazed my entrance. We both sucked in a breath at the light contact.

He turned his wrist in my hand, shoving two fingers in deep before I knew his intent. My eyes shut and I moaned loudly.

“God, I love your hands,” I groaned.

He dragged his fingers out slowly, wriggling them along my inner walls, making me squirm and curse. He punched them back in hard, and I kicked a shoe off, digging one heel into the car seat, tilting my hips up as far as they’d go, lost to sensation, worried only about my own race toward release, the world coming down to what his fingers were doing to me.

He got me off fast, knowing just where to touch and how hard to work me.

I only realized that the car was stopped as I came back down from my orgasm, his fingers dragging out of me. I started to sit up as I saw that his jeans were unfastened.

His cock was bared, hard and prominent, one big hand fisting it.

I moaned at the sight.

“Let me,” I offered, trying to sit up. He jammed his fingers back inside of me, pinning me where I was.

“No. I want this right here,” he moved his fingers to demonstrate what ‘this’ was, “so I’ll wait until we’re home. I want a rough ride, so I’m just warming you up. I’m going to nail you to the wall.”

“Ahhh,” I gasped as his fingers started up a rhythm, then protested when they abruptly left me.

“Buckle up, boo. We’re going home.”

I sat up and fastened my seat belt, eyeing up his bared erection as he started to drive. I lasted maybe thirty seconds before my hand began to inch toward it.

I gripped him hard, having to lean far to the left to get a good hold of it. My fingers barely touched around the girth of him. I thought that was the hottest thing in the world.

I stroked him roughly once, twice, before he stayed my hand. I watched in rapt fascination as one pearly drop of liquid seeped out of his engorged tip.

I was out of my seatbelt, leaning over him the second he pulled the car into the parking lot of his apartment, my mouth hungry as I tongued the head of his cock.

He pulled me off him by my hair, giving me a pained smile. “Like I said, I’m waiting to fuck you. Get out of the car, boo.”



I had a brief urge to sass him for that, but I squelched it, instead hightailing it upstairs. He had plans, and I was on board with them, regardless of what exactly they were. My libido had gone into overdrive with this man, and become a thing beyond my control.

It was like a magic trick in itself, the speed in which he unlocked the apartment door, shut it behind us, and had me pinned against it.

My heels dug into his ass as he ground into me. Our kisses were hard and rough, hot and intoxicating, hungry and insatiable.

He buried himself inside of me with one sure thrust, and the fever took us as he gave me the rough ride he'd promised, muttering curses and endearments into my ear as he rocked my world.

"Gonna fuck you 'til neither of us can walk straight tomorrow," he growled into my mouth.

I melted. Deep waves of rapture took me as he pulled out and shot back in with long, heavy thrusts, fast and hard, my hips moving with him, each thrust slamming me into the door at my back.

"Love you," I gasped as I came.

His back bowed, and he came, buried deep inside of me, shouting with his pleasure.

"God, that was intense," I breathed.

"Oh, we're not finished."

He pulled out still twitching, no sooner letting my feet touch the ground than he was

dragging me straight to his bedroom.

He pushed me onto the bed, his expression fierce. And tender.

God, I loved him, loved this, adored everything he did to me, every touch, every taste, making me love an act that had terrorized me for most of my adult life.

He flipped me onto my stomach, lifting my hips to just the right angle, the head of his cock pulsing against me, barely pushing inside, instead teasing me relentlessly.

“Talk to me, sweetheart,” he rasped into my ear. “I want you to tell me just what you want. Make it dirty.”

My hips strained back against him, my back arching as his hand palmed my breast. “Fuck me hard.” I gasped as the first perfect inch of him breached me. “Pull my hair and pound me into this bed.”

That startled a rough laugh out of him. The laugh was cut off short, though, as he sank into me, pushing hard and deep, stretching me, filling me until every nerve inside of me vibrated to life.

He took my request literally, pounding into me until I thought I’d leave a permanent indent in his bed, my face buried so deep in his soft mattress that I had to push up on my elbows just to take a breath.

He didn’t let up, taking me with relentless purpose. It was a sheet clawing kind of fuck, and he had me screaming before he was done.

He lay heavy on my back after we finished, panting, his hips still grinding down, pinning me. “You okay?” he panted. “I think I lost all brain function for a bit there.”

“Mmmhmm,” I murmured, still breathing hard as I drifted back down to earth.

It was a long time before he shifted off me, and even then he draped himself over me. My man was a cuddler, and I couldn’t have been happier about it.

“It’s going to be tough to give this up for five days a week,” he mused, his voice sleepy.

That made me stiffen. I’d nearly forgotten about the record deal. Maybe my mind had blocked it out. The entire thing terrified me. I knew it wouldn’t be good for us. Good for Tristan, maybe. At least I hoped so. But certainly not good for the two of us together.

His hand tightened on my hip, and I realized that I’d been spacing out while he’d been asking me a question. “Are you sure you’re okay with this? If you don’t like it, I won’t do it. I don’t want to be gone that much anyway.”

I patted his hand, shutting my eyes tight. He was hugging my back, and didn’t see the tears slipping past my lids. “Of course I’m okay with it. You can’t pass up this chance, Tristan, and we’ll still see each other on weekends.”

“God, that sounds awful. Five days a week is ridiculous. I’ll see if I can’t change their minds about the schedule.”

In the end, they stuck to the schedule. Five days away, two days home, week after week. It began to take its toll on us almost right away; Tristan coming home more tired each time, more strung out. I felt him inching further away from me every time he left, and the absences started to stretch into longer lengths of time, days turning into weeks.

We were drifting apart. I felt helpless to stop the pattern, but still, I held onto him for

dear life.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### MONTHS LATER

#### DANIKA

The neighborhood was scary, even by trailer park standards. It was just the sort of place I'd pictured her living for all these years apart. In my mind, it had always been either a dump like this or her not living at all. She just led that kind of a life.

I knocked on the door, waited a solid minute, then knocked again. I could hear the TV on inside and there was an old, beat-up Nissan Sentra in the carport. This was the place, and somebody was home. I wasn't leaving until that somebody answered the door.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

After a solid five minutes of this, I tried the door. It wasn't locked, and with more than a little trepidation, I opened it.

The inside of the trailer was even smaller than it appeared outside, and I could make out most of the inside of the place with just a glance.

My mother, rail thin and haggard, sat slumped on a sofa that looked like it had been through hell. Knowing her, and remembering my childhood, it probably had. The woman was a bundle of apathetic chaos.

She was aimed at a TV that was running an episode of some reality show, but I didn't think she was actually watching it. She was zoning out, and even at the entrance of a daughter she hadn't seen in years, her gaze barely shifted, and her face didn't so much as twitch.

The bedroom didn't have its own wall to separate it from the living quarters, and so I saw some man's feet sticking out of the bottom of the bed across the room. I hadn't expected anything different. Even ravaged by her addiction, I could see the beauty in my mother's face. That, paired with the fact that she wasn't at all picky, meant that she'd never had a second's trouble finding a man.

Keeping one around for long, well now, that was another story.

"Hi," I said to her quietly, mindful of the strange man just a few feet away.

"Hey," she said tonelessly. Nothing else.

I wasn't certain it had ever been said aloud, but I'd always had the acute sense that my sister and I had been nothing but a burden to my mother. I was grown now and hadn't seen her in years, and still, I saw the same look in her eyes that I always had.

I wasn't wanted here.

I never had been.

I grabbed a short stool near the door, carrying it with me to sit down eye level to her. I made sure not to block her view of the TV. I wasn't here to rile her.

"The man and woman that came to see you a few years ago, Jerry and Bev," I began, having rehearsed the words like a nervous child, "they are very good people. They've been wonderful to me. They're very dependable employers and close friends of mine. They take care of me, provide a good home for me."

There was no change in her expression, no recognition in her eyes that I'd said anything that should affect her.

"I'm doing well. I'm a full-time student, and I work part-time during the semester."

Nothing.

"I'm still taking dance classes. I don't have a lot of time for dancing, with school and work, but I haven't given up. When things calm down, I fully plan to pursue that."

"Do you have any cash?" she asked, as though it was the most reasonable question in the world, and I hadn't been talking about something entirely different.

I swallowed, stung when I shouldn't have been, further disillusioned when I had no right to it.

“There’s a man asleep in the other room. If I don’t pay him what I owe him, he’s going to hurt me.”

“Should I call the police?”

“That won’t help me. It’s...complicated. Do you have any cash?”

Even when she talked about him hurting her, there was no expression on her face. She’d been dead inside for a very long time.

I pulled out my wallet, fishing out what little cash I had. I knew I wasn’t really helping her, but being an enabler was deeply ingrained in me, thanks to her, and the thought of the creep in the bedroom hurting her was something I’d prevent, if I could.

I handed her forty dollars, and she took it without a qualm.

“That all you have?” she asked blankly. She was a shell of a person. A zombie.

I nodded. “I don’t keep much cash on me. It’s not convenient.”

“What about a debit card? I won’t take much, and I’ll send it back to you.”

My mouth hardened. I’d heard that before. “I’m not comfortable with that.”

Finally, that got a reaction from her, even if only a slight one. Her face formed into a ghost of a sneer. “I’m just trying to survive here, same as you, same as anyone.”

I didn’t think she was the same as me. I knew that her demons had won a long time ago. I still planned to put up a hell of a fight with mine.

“I’m working my way through school, and I don’t have any more money to spare.

That's how I survive."

"You got my looks, but that's it. Where you got that attitude of yours, I'll never know. Dahlia didn't get our looks, but at least when I talk to her, I know I'm talking to my daughter."

I latched onto that. It was the entire reason I'd come. Whatever digs she'd been trying to get in, I ignored completely. "Have you talked to Dahlia? Has she come to see you?"

Her sneer was back. "Saw her a few months ago. That one doesn't think she's too good for her mother."

I processed that.

I'd begun to look for my sister about a month prior. Just telling Jerry about my search had unearthed some clues. Unbeknownst to me, he'd found my mother years ago, at the beginning of my employment, and paid her a visit. I'd been very young, and he'd just wanted to be sure that my mother was okay with her daughter, who was barely out of high school, working as a live-in nanny. He had found what I found today, a woman that cared about nothing.

The casual observer might have mistaken it all for apathy, but I was not the casual observer. I'd been watching this indifference all my life, and it was a step beyond even that.

Any soul she'd had she'd lost before I had memories.

It had been a last resort, but having her address was a lead I couldn't ignore.

"Do you have her address or even her phone number? I'd like to find her. She and I



have been out of touch for a while.”

“She told me all about what happened with you and that old man. I doubt she’ll want to talk to you.”

My spine stiffened, and it took every ounce of my will not to visibly flinch.

Those memories had been buried in some dark corner of my mind, but just the knowledge that my mother knew what had happened felt as though they’d been unearthed afresh. I felt exposed and filthy in a way I hadn’t experienced in years.

“I’d like to at least try,” I explained to her calmly. “It’s been years, and she is my sister.”

“You’re no different than me. What you did with that old man proves that. You can look at me like I’m the dirt beneath your feet all you want, but we’re the same. Living wretched lives and getting by however we can.”

“You missed your calling,” I shot back, falling back on sarcasm, as usual, to get by, “you should have been a poet.” I wanted to rail at her, the one who’d abandoned us to the mercy of twisted strangers, but I dug deep and managed to stop with that one barb.

“I don’t have her number, don’t know where she lives. She’s the one visits me, from time to time.”

“How often?”

“How should I know? Do I look like I keep a calendar? Whenever she feels like it, I guess.”

“Does she live in town, or does she drive in from somewhere else?”

“You sure you don’t have any more cash?”

“Are you saying you’ll have answers for me if I bring you more money?”

She shrugged and said something noncommittal, but I suddenly wasn’t concentrating on her, my focus shifting to the man stirring on the bed.

“I should be going,” I began, standing up to leave.

A shiver of fear went through my body when the large man sat up, his black glare going immediately to me. He was older, with salt and pepper hair and an intimidatingly large frame.

I needed to get out of there. One glance and I knew that I did not want to be at this man’s mercy.

I took a few steps back, reaching into my purse, trying clumsily to find the note I’d painstakingly written out for my sister.

The man was across the room, in my face before I could find the piece of paper. He snatched my purse out of my hands. He had my wallet in his hands before I could blink, rifling through it as though he had every right. He shoved it back in the bag, glaring at me. His black eyes lacked any sign of humanity.

I backed away two more steps. He followed, the look on his face as menacing as any I’d seen.

“This your girl, bitch?” he growled at my mother over his shoulder. “It must be your girl. She looks just like you. Girl, you know your bitch of a mom owes me five

grand?”

I shook my head, trembling in fear, because for every step I took back, he took two, crowding me against the door.

He thrust my purse back at me, speaking in a low, harsh voice. “What were you digging for in that bag?”

I shook my head, too frightened to process the question quickly.

“Answer me!” He shouted, one beefy hand gripping my chin.

“N-n a note. It was just a note.”

He dug in the purse, pulling out my letter to my sister and shaking it in my face. “This? This what you come for?”

I nodded, then whimpered as he crumpled the paper in his fist, pried my mouth open roughly, and shoved it between my teeth.

“Get the fuck out of here! You come back when you have this bitch’s money, you understand?”

I nodded, but I had no intention of ever coming back.

He let me go.

I fumbled with the knob, but he was on me, catching my shoulders in his hands with a death grip that made my eyes sting in pain.

He snarled, shaking me hard enough to make my teeth rattle.

He let go of my shoulders, but only to grip the thin shoulders of my tank top, ripping it open with one violent movement.

I stopped breathing; I was so shocked and terrified. My mind couldn't comprehend how fast the situation had escalated, how fast I'd lost all control of it.

"Please don't," I tried to say around the crumpled paper in my mouth.

He paid no mind, moving his big body hard into mine, capturing my thighs between his own. "Keep in mind, bitch, you take more'n two days to get me my money, you're gonna pay me back the interest in snatch, and I ain't gonna make it nice for you. We clear?"

I nodded, just struggling to breathe.

He wasn't finished, palming one of my breasts, kneading at it roughly. "You don't come back, I'm coming for you, you understand?"

He let me loose, smiling as he handed me my purse and backed away. His smile alone was enough to give me nightmares.

"Go on now, little girl. I'll be seeing you soon."

I ran out of there, not trusting for a second that he was really letting me go.

I was a good five minute drive away before I pulled over, coughing out the paper in my mouth, taking deep gasping breaths in relief. I was shaking, but I didn't cry, though it was an effort.

I held my shirt together as I got out of the car, moving to the trunk. I grabbed my entire overnight bag, dragging it into the car with me. Luckily, I had a change of

clothes, since I'd planned to stay over at Tristan's apartment for the weekend. But it wouldn't do to show up with a torn shirt. That would surely raise questions that I had no intention of answering.

I changed my shirt, stuffing the ruined one into my bag.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

I sat there, trembling, for a solid thirty minutes before I felt steady enough to drive.

### CHAPTER FIVE

#### DANIKA

It had already been a shit of a day by the time I made it to Tristan's apartment. Shitty was really an understatement, though. It had been hell. Pure hell. Right in the fire of it.

Sadly, the awful confrontation with the man in my mother's trailer was only a piece of that hell.

I had too much on my plate, and my boyfriend was out of town for weeks at a time, which just sucked. Knowing that I'd get to see Tristan at some point on a day like this was all that had helped me keep it together.

I had a key to his apartment, but I knocked first, out of courtesy. I wasn't that courteous, though, because I unlocked it and walked in before anyone had time to answer.

I saw right away that they wouldn't have answered, anyway.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon, but you wouldn't know it by the state of the apartment. Women were everywhere, slutty, groupie looking women, and I instantly felt my temper starting to boil.

Dean was lying, shirtless, on the couch. His jeans were undone, and some tramp had her hand down his pants, even as another bimbo sat hip to hip with him, sharing a joint.

Dean saw me and smiled, and I knew that this wasn't going to be a good visit. Just as I could read a different meaning into every one of Tristan's smiles, Dean's only ever meant one thing. Trouble. Not fun trouble. Just bad trouble. Ruin your day trouble.

"Hey! You come to join the party? I think your boyfriend is busy, but you know you're always first in line to suck my cock."

I walked through the living room, heading to the back of the apartment, where the bedrooms were. If I'd been thinking clearly, I'd have gone through the kitchen, but a few words out of his mouth and my brain was already too scrambled with my temper to have a mature interaction with him, if there was such a thing.

"You might not want to go back there. I believe he said he wanted privacy..."

I whipped my head around to give him one smoldering glare.

He just chuckled. "You know I think you're fucking hot when you're mad. I mean, I'd fuck you any time, but when you're mad, mmmm, now that would be a treat."

I stifled my first urge, which was to tell him to go fuck himself, because I knew he'd just turn it into a suggestion. Instead, I settled for specific and childish. "I hope you choke on one of your own used condoms and die, you asshole," I told him, striding out of the room.

I heard him laughing behind me, and my fists clenched hard.

"Babe, I don't use condoms," he called after me.

“Disgusting pig,” I muttered as I reached the closed door to Tristan’s room.

I didn’t knock, just opening the door quietly. I figured girlfriend rights superseded some common courtesies.

I froze in the doorway as I took in the room.

Tristan was lying on his back on the bed, wearing nothing but his boxers, an arm thrown over his eyes, as though he were sleeping. By the agitated movements of his chest, I knew that wasn’t the case.

A naked woman, some beyond trashy, slutbag blonde from hell, was straddling him. Her hands were running over his chest, tracing his tattoos.

I was absolutely frozen, in fury, in hurt, in outright disbelief, which was all that kept me from reacting too quickly, which turned out to be a good thing.

“If you don’t get off right this second,” Tristan growled from underneath the naked tramp, his voice sleepy, and irritated, and just plain mean. “I’m going to throw you off. I told you, I have a girlfriend.”

“She’s not here now,” the slut from hell purred, still running her hands over his chest. My chest. “I won’t tell if you won’t.”

That was my cue to shout, yes, you bitch, I am here, but some devil kept me silent. I sincerely wanted to see how this played out. I needed to see it.

“Well, then, since you apparently don’t have an ounce of pride or self-respect, let me spell it out for you. I don’t want you. I want you to leave my room and my apartment and never come back. I turned you down three times, and you still waited until I was passed out and jumped me. How many times do I have to say it? I wouldn’t touch you



if you were my only option, which you aren't. Is that clear enough for you, or do you want me to try a different language now?"

He sounded mean, mean in a way I rarely heard from him. He was usually so amiable, bossy, yes, possessive, always, but usually just nice, and it was startling to hear his voice go pure mean.

Bimbo face seemed to get the hint, climbing off him with a pout on her face. "You're no fun," she muttered, "and I can tell that you wanted me. I got you hard."

"Don't take it personal. The fucking wind blowing gets me hard. Now get out."

She barely spared me a glance, but I had to stifle the urge to follow her and scratch her eyes out.

I stayed in the doorway, leaning against the frame of it while he sat up, rubbing his eyes. It took him a few quiet moments to notice me there.

When he did, he went white, as though he'd just seen a ghost.

He slid out of bed, moving to me, looking guilty as hell. If I hadn't just heard the whole thing with my own ears, that look would have been enough to convict him. It was a good thing I'd kept my mouth shut and let it play out. Still, I was spitting mad. I was sick to death of shit like this always testing us. It just seemed to me, that if you valued a thing, you found ways to keep it from being compromised. Groupies in the apartment had been a bone of contention for a while now.

He was in just a pair of black boxers and so it was impossible to miss the fact that he had a raging hard-on. That was the last straw for me. I just couldn't deal with this today, especially when I'd so been looking forward to a happy reunion, and not some disgusting groupie rubbing her naked body on him.

“I need to leave,” I told him, already backing out of the room. “I just can’t deal with this shit right now. I have enough on my plate already.”

He followed me, uncaring of the fact that he was practically naked, and sporting an obvious erection and the house was full of groupies.

“Danika, you have to believe me. Whatever you think that was—”

“I know what it was. I heard what it fucking was, and I don’t care. I’m sick of this. If you cared about us, you wouldn’t be putting yourself in positions where naked whores are rubbing on you in your sleep. Dean can have his groupies live here for all I care, but I’m out.”

I turned on my heel and strode to the front door. I had my hand on the knob before he stopped me, and he stopped me in the most Tristan way possible.

He pressed against me from behind, mostly naked, hard as a poker, and completely unmindful of the room full of people that must be watching us.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered in my ear, his hands moving over my hands, pinning them to the door above me. “You can’t imagine how much I’ve missed you. I thought about you day and night. When I would text and you wouldn’t reply right away, I came so close to saying fuck it all and driving home to find you.”

“I’ve been busy. I have classes, and I actually attend them pretty regularly. I always answered back as soon as I could.”

“I know, but it’s not enough. We should never be apart, not for any reason. I can’t stand it. Come back to bed with me, sweetheart. I need you. Now.”

The press of his body, that rasp in my ear, had me wet and ready and I wanted

nothing more than to give in, but I didn't intend to just let this go. It had been too big of a problem for too long, and I was sick of it. I had enough shitty things going on in my life right now. Groupies humping my boyfriend in his sleep was not going to be one of them.

"I need to leave. I'll call you later, but I really just can't deal with this right now. I'm too angry. I might say some things to you that I'll regret later if I don't have time to cool off first."

He made a little sound of protest in the back of his throat, and of course, that got to me. It had always been so hard for me to tell him no, and that had only gotten worse, the deeper I'd fallen for him.

"Please," he said, very, very quietly, a word he almost never used. "I need you. Now. You can chew me a new one after. I can take it, sweetheart."

I wrenched my hands free, turning to glare at him. "It's not about chewing you a new one, you ass. It's about things that go on in this apartment when I'm away that I won't stand for. It's not about talk, it's about change—"

"Okay. Fine," he interrupted, looking earnest. "You tell me what you need and I'll see it done. Change away."

I set my jaw into a stubborn line, knowing that I was going to go down in the band's history for being a bitch for this. "No more groupies in the apartment. And wherever you're staying in L.A., for the recording, no groupies there, either. Girlfriends, dates, fine, but these sluts I see today, have got to go."

He gave a brief nod, turning his head to address the room. "New house rules. Any chick that isn't a girlfriend needs to leave. And since I know Dean doesn't have a girlfriend, that's all of you."

Of course Dean, who was still on the couch, had something to say about that. “Fuck you, man. This is my house, too. If you get to have your pus—”

“If you finish that fucking sentence, you know what’s going to happen. Now, clear the room. The lease is under my name. If you have a problem with the new house rule, you can get the fuck out, too.”

There was a lot of muttering and movement, but everyone seemed to be obeying.

Tristan pulled me out of the way as the slutty parade started to file out. He watched for a moment, seeming to think it was settled, and turned back to me, moving against me until my shoulders hit the wall.

“Anything else?” he asked, but he didn’t even give me a chance to answer before he was slanting his lips over mine, hungry and hot, and just what I’d been waiting for. It had been weeks since I’d seen him, and I was kissing him back instantly, moaning as his tongue invaded. He thrust it in and out, fucking my mouth.

He pinned my hands to the wall, sliding a thigh between mine, pushing it high, until I was riding it, my hips moving in circles to rub against him restlessly. It wasn’t enough, and I hooked my leg behind his hip, every part of me working to bring his hardness into my core.

He groaned, working his hips between my thighs until we were fitted. Our clothes were in the way, but the contact was just in the perfect spot, and I writhed against him, rubbing my clit against his cock, working to a fever pitch in seconds.

“Get a room,” Dean said loudly.

Tristan ripped his mouth away, turning his head to bark, “Privacy! Now!”

Dean muttered something that I couldn't quite make out, but sure enough, he obeyed.

I'd witnessed this exchange countless times.

The instant we were completely alone, Tristan began stripping me. He started with my tank top, peeling it off, opening the front clasp of my bra with one swift movement, and slipping it off my arms.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

He went down to his knees to work on my jeans. They were tight, so he had to peel them off slowly, taking my panties with them.

Being stripped was distracting, but not as distracting as his kiss had been, and as I became slightly less distracted, I found my mind moving to the thing that was bugging me, stupid as it was.

“You wanted her. You were hard for her.”

He paused briefly, then resumed peeling. “Sweetheart, I was sleeping. That was morning wood, and for your information, I was dreaming of you when she interrupted me. I was expecting you, and when I felt someone get on top of me, that was the first thought that occurred. It didn’t last but a second, though, before I realized that it was some strange woman.”

That appeased me, but mostly because skanky groupies were now banned from the house, so it wouldn’t be happening again.

The second he got my jeans free of my feet, he pulled my legs over his shoulders and buried his face between my thighs, effectively stopping any more thinking on my part. His tongue worked on me expertly, his big fingers delving inside of me, working into a rhythm that had me mindless and writhing against the wall, his shoulders pushing between my legs all that kept me upright.

He’d been growing his hair out, per my request, and I buried my hands in it, gripping for dear life.

“I love you,” I cried out as I came.

“I love you, too, sweetheart,” he said, as he freed himself from my legs, rising. He stripped off his boxers in one smooth motion, moving flush against me, and fitting himself between my legs. “I can’t take these separations. I’m leaning towards saying fuck this record deal. You’re my whole life. What’s the point of it all, if I can’t be with you all the fucking time?”

I couldn’t respond, as he was wrapping my legs around his hips. He lined himself up at my entrance, pushing in that first perfect inch.

“Wait, condom,” I said, not thinking at all. It was just sort of an instinct for me.

He froze. “Are you off the pill?”

I turned my face away, flushing. “No,” I said, very quietly, wondering what can of worms I’d just opened.

He caught what my instinctive response meant instantly. He turned my face so I was looking at him, and the raw pain in his eyes just about undid me. “You don’t trust me anymore? You think I’m screwing around on you?” His voice was devastated.

I shook my head, well shook it as much as I could, with my jaw held in his viselike grip. “I don’t think that. We wouldn’t be doing this at all if I thought that. I didn’t mean for that to come out. It was just my instinctive reaction. I guess I’m feeling insecure.”

He pulled my hand over his heart. “That hurts me. This is all yours right here. All of me. No one else gets a thing from me, you understand? I wouldn’t do that to you. I wouldn’t make all these promises if I didn’t intend to keep them.”

I nodded, blinking back tears.

He moved back into me, pinning me to the wall. His forehead touched mine as he gripped my hips, shifting until he was poised back at the core of me. "I'm fucking done with this record deal if it means I'm losing your trust. This is forever for me, sweetheart. I want it all with you. You're the thing that gets me up in the morning and lets me rest easy at night. I wouldn't have survived some of the shit these last few months if it weren't for you. You're my rock, Danika, and I need you to trust me."

I nodded again, then gasped as he thrust hard into me.

It had been weeks for us, and so it was a fast coupling. Fast, but satisfying.

As always, he waited until I came before he let himself go, holding me tight on his cock as he emptied himself deep inside of me with a gratifying shout.

He caught his breath, growled for me to hold on tight and without pulling out, carried me to the couch, lying back so I was riding him.

His hands went to my hips, gripping tight, and his eyes flew to mine. There was a world of worshipful desire in his eyes that I craved like air.

"Ride me," he ordered, or begged. It could have been either, his tone was so rough, his eyes so intent.

He was hard and ready to go again, which I'd become accustomed to. It took a lot to really satisfy him, after days apart.

I started to move, circling my hips, seating myself hard, then pulling up again. I rode him how he loved, my movements sure, my hands cupping my breasts. I knew how it titillated him to watch me touch myself, and I was rewarded with a harsh groan and a



hard surge of his hips under me.

I pinched my nipples, my head falling back, hips still grinding on him with more frantic, jerky motions as I grew close.

My own release made me pause as I shivered and gripped around him like a vise, squeezing him tight as each wave of pleasure took me. He wasn't far behind, surging high inside of me as he went over.

We didn't move for a long time after. My hands sifted through his hair as we kissed leisurely, lazily. I thought I could have slept for days after that delicious interlude.

He pushed me back slightly to smile up into my face. "I missed you."

"Always. Every second of every day."

## CHAPTER SIX

### DANIKA

I was getting dressed the next morning, in the process of buttoning my jeans, when I felt him running a light finger along first one of my shoulders, and then the other.

I glanced down at myself. A line of small bruises patterned my shoulders, which brought my eyes down to my chest. One abused breast had received a similar treatment.

The man at my mother's house had left his mark on me. Tristan's talent for distraction had helped me forget the entire thing, for a time, but the bruises were an unwelcome and brutal reminder.

I could feel the tension in his voice when he asked, “Where did these come from?”

I’d always been a terrible liar, but I still gave it an honest try.

“Hmmm?” I attempted, going for casual. I made a point of glancing behind me, where his hands were tracing, my brow furrowing as though I had no notion where they’d come from. “No idea. Could have been anything.”

“Those bruises look like handprints.” His tone was deadly.

I began to backtrack and tiptoe. It was a fact that Tristan had a temper that was not to be messed with, and if he had a clue what had actually made these bruises, he’d go ballistic in a heartbeat.

“I bruise easy. I’ve never even noticed them before, so it must have just happened.”

He took a quick step back. A man his size didn’t move that fast without an impact. I turned to study his face. The arrested look of horror on his face didn’t help. I saw right away that I’d played it all wrong.

“I did that? That was me?”

I began shaking my head no before he’d gotten a word out. “No, no, no. It definitely wasn’t you.”

“How can you say that? You don’t know where those marks came from, you said. I must have grabbed you there yesterday. I did that to you.”

“It wasn’t you, okay? I swear. Can we just drop it?”

He seemed to catch something in my words, or my tone, that had his expression

changing from horrified into perceptive, an even more troublesome option. “What happened, sweetheart? Tell me how you got those bruises.” His tone was all cajoling charm.

I didn’t let it sway me.

He moved until we were face to face, brushing light hands over my shoulders and up into my hair, fisting until he’d tilted my face up to his, his body moving close enough to mine to stop my brain from functioning properly. “Tell me.”

“They don’t even hurt. You’re overreacting.”

He blinked, looking taken aback. “Overreacting? Okay. So tell me what I’m overreacting to.”

I swallowed, feeling very nervous about his response, my mind still trying to find an excuse for the bruises. I honestly thought he might kill the guy if I gave him the real story.

“It was a misunderstanding,” I explained, licking lips gone dry.

His face became very blank. “A misunderstanding did that? Where can I find this ‘misunderstanding’?”

I rolled my eyes, though I’d known all along he’d go straight caveman on this.

I rubbed his chest, a soothing gesture, still trying to avoid what I knew was coming. “I’m hungry. Let’s go eat, ‘kay?”

He stayed where he was as I pulled myself slowly out of his hands. I bent to grab my bra, turning my back to him again as I shrugged into it.

I wasn't quick enough, and he stayed my hand with his, stepping around me to look at my chest. A tick started pumping high in his jaw as he took in the bruises there.

This was bad.

He swallowed, let go of my hand, gripping his fingers hard into his hair as he took a few steps back from me. "What is that?" Each word was pronounced slowly through his teeth. He was about to lose it.

I fastened the bra, bent down, grabbed my shirt, and shrugged into it fast. The longer he looked at the marks, the worse he seemed to get, so I wisely determined to cover them sooner rather than later.

"Tell me."

I ignored that too, going to dig through my bag for something that would completely cover my shoulders. "It's not what you're thinking, and you need to calm down."

"Explain it to me then. Explain to me why my girlfriend looks like she's been manhandled. Give me a good reason for those marks, and then I'll calm the fuck down." Rage vibrated through his voice with every word.

"I don't like your tone, and I refuse to talk about this right now." As I spoke, I shrugged into a little blue cardigan that covered my shoulders and chest.

"Do I need to call Jerry about this?"

My nose wrinkled at him as I tried to figure that one out. "Surely you don't think that Jerry bruised me up?"

"No, but I think he will help me get to the bottom of this."

He wasn't wrong. Jerry would piece things together in a hurry. He knew where I'd gone yesterday.

"Please, just drop it. I'm hungry, and this nonsense is going to make us late to meet with Frankie."

I didn't wait for an answer, walking out of his room. I could feel him moving behind me as I made my way through the apartment, which I supposed was a good sign. Maybe he was actually going to drop it.

He was silent on the drive to the Cavendish Hotel & Casino where Frankie had her tattoo parlor. We were meeting her at a diner that had the best steak and eggs in town. It was turning into a weekly ritual, though Tristan was a new addition to the equation, since he'd been gone so often lately.

After twenty minutes of silence, I was ready to crack. It was unnerving to watch him drive, his hands white on the steering wheel, without a word passing between us.

I put my hand on his thigh, rubbing in little soothing circles. "Frankie's been working on my tattoo," I told him finally. I'd been meaning to get it done when he was out of town, and surprise him when he got back, but it was the only way I could think of to distract him from his black mood.

It worked. He sent me a probing sideways glance, his interest thoroughly caught. "Your tattoo? So you are for sure getting one?"

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

I nodded, rubbing my hand higher, feeling a rush of relief that he was going to let the issue of the bruises go. “Yes. For sure.”

“When? You’re not going to do it while I’m out of town, are you?”

That had been exactly what I was planning to do. “Um, yeah. Why?”

“I want to be there.” He was vehement.

“You that excited to watch Frankie torture me on her table?”

His hand covered mine on his leg, squeezing gently. “Not excited, no. I just want to be there. Will you promise me that you won’t do it while I’m out of town? Please.”

The please got to me. He didn’t say it often, but when he did, it was always sincere and earnest. This was important to him, for whatever reason. “She’s very booked up, so I’ll ask her when she can squeeze me in at breakfast. I kind of promised her that she could let her crew film it for the show.”

His mouth tightened, and I knew he wasn’t happy about that. “Where are you getting it?”

“On my back.”

“Where on your back?”

“Mid back, near my spine.”

“So you’re going topless for Frankie’s camera crew? On fucking TV?”

I sighed. My caveman was back. “No one will see anything but my back. My front will be down on the table, and I’ll be careful to keep everything covered up. Quit looking for things to get upset about.”

“Looking for things? Looking for things?” he asked the question twice, as though he were thinking aloud. “My girlfriend, who I’m fucking in love with, comes to me covered in bruises that she won’t explain, and I’m looking for things to get upset about? And then I find out she’s putting her fucking perfect bare body on TV, for any fucking weirdo to jack off to, and I’m looking for things?”

I shut my eyes, wishing I could take back the words that had obviously made things worse.

I caved. “I’ll make sure I get my ink done when you’re there, okay? You can stay close and guard my modesty. That make you feel better?”

“It helps, but you’re off your rocker if you think I’m just going to forget about those bruises.”

I kept from rolling my eyes, but only barely. There were downsides to having a possessive boyfriend, no matter that I was crazy in love with him.

I was relieved when Frankie met us at the valet station, hugging us both exuberantly, and talking a mile a minute from the second she saw us, effectively distracting Tristan from his dark mood.

“I had dinner with James last night,” she began.

I smirked, always amused when she referred to the famous James Cavendish by his

first name. It just sounded wrong. The man was too intimidating for first name basis, but I knew they were close friends. “He’s opening up an internship at his gallery, not this semester, but the next, and he wants to interview you for it! You want it, right? I told him you’d want to do it, so you better want it.”

My heart did a little flip in my chest. It was a huge opportunity for me. It was notoriously hard to get an internship in one of his galleries, and nearly impossible to be hired on. “That’s amazing! Of course I want it! I’ll scale back on classes next semester if I have to.”

“Good, good. I told him you’d be psyched, and I gave him your number.”

I hugged her, squeezing hard. “Thank you! You’re the best!”

“Did you tell him that if he hits on her I’ll fucking kill him?” Tristan spoke quiet and low.

We sent him matching glares.

“Give me some credit, man.” Frankie’s tone was exasperated. “James doesn’t do vanilla anymore, not for a long time now, and I told him very clearly that Danika isn’t his type. Trust me, he won’t go there.”

“Does he know she’s taken? Did you tell him that she’s with me?”

“Not in so many words, but I’m sure he can connect the dots. It’s not like he’s interested in her personal life. This is about the gallery. He’s decided he’d like her working for him, period.”

“Bullshit.”



My hands clenched into fists. The thought of him ruining this for me had me livid. I pointed at him. “Knock it off. Do you see me holding you back from being successful? I didn’t think so. Show me the same respect, you ass.”

Something, either my words or my tone, had him backing off instantly.

“Fine, fine. Just promise to tell me if he steps out of line.”

I began to walk into the building, done with the conversation. The way things were going, we’d be skipping straight to lunch as Tristan found one thing after another to be jealous about.

We were seated with menus before he spoke again.

“Just promise me you’ll let me know if he’s out of line, and I’ll drop it.”

“The man is a fucking billionaire sexgod. I’m pretty sure I won’t have to beat him off with a stick, but yeah, I promise.”

Frankie snorted. “Right? You have nothing to worry about, Tristan. I’ve never met a person in my life that has more self-control than James, and I already as good as warned him off.”

That seemed to settle it, and Tristan dropped the issue—thank God.

“I think I’ve got your tattoo design ready,” Frankie said excitedly, rubbing her hands together like a little girl. It was adorable, really, how much she loved her ink.

“Can I see it?” I asked, nervous but excited.

“Of course. I was thinking we could get you in on Tuesday. You should do it all in

one sitting. It's better that way, trust me."

"I'm supposed to be in the studio on Tuesday," Tristan told her, looking grumpy again. No, more like downright agitated.

"Well, you don't got to be there, stud muffin," she explained cheerfully.

"Yes, I do. I'll talk to the producer; see what we can work out."

Her mouth twisted ruefully. "Another one bites the dust. Could you be more obsessed with your girl, man?"

"Doubtful," he replied mildly.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DANIKA

The shit really hit the fan the next morning.

I was digging through my overnight bag, fishing out workout clothes. The plan was to hit the gym together, and then the shower, but we never got to do either.

I pulled out the black tank top that had been ripped down the middle, unfolding it before I realized which shirt it was. Rolled up, it had looked roughly the same as my workout top. I tried to rebury it just as quickly, but I was too late.

It was wrenched out of my hand before I could put it back.

Tristan loomed above me. He'd been dressing, too, and wore nothing but some dark blue athletic shorts and tennis shoes.

He was shirtless and his chest and abdominal muscles clenched, his biceps twitching, as he gripped the shirt. In spite of my better judgement, even knowing the day was about to be ruined, I was turned on by the sight.

“What is this?” he asked, unfolding the material, examining every inch of it, as though to make some sense of the rip that ran down the front.

I sighed, my eyes closing in dread. “It’s a shirt,” I explained, my tone resigned.

“Why is it ripped in half?” he bit out. I could already tell by his blank eyes that his temper had taken him to a place I couldn’t reach.

“Long story.”

He gave me a very pained smile, his eyes scary. “I’ve got all day, sweetheart.”

“Let’s not do this, Tristan. It’s over with, and it was nothing that was worth you going to jail for.”

“Fine. Have it your way. You give me no explanations, so I can only assume the absolute worst. Just answer me one question. Were you raped?”

“No! It didn’t get that far.”

Far from appeasing him, that statement seemed to set him off and I realized that I’d finally admitted there was an attack, a statement that I could not take back.

He pointed at me, his hand shaking. “Stay here.”

I sat on his bed, stunned by the turn of events for a solid ten minutes after he’d left.

I was spurred into action as I realized that I knew where he was going, and if I got to Jerry first, I could stop this train wreck in its tracks.

I started calling Bev's phone, and then Jerry's, over and over again on the drive, but no one was picking up. When I got to the house, a stressed out and confused Bev met me in the driveway. Tristan and Jerry had already left.

We didn't hear a thing from them for hours. And when we finally did, it wasn't anything I wanted to hear.

Tristan was in jail.

## TRISTAN

My world had narrowed down to a red haze, my mind working like a broken record, focused on three things: Danika had been attacked, her shirt torn in half, her body bruised.

Some man had put his hands on her.

I couldn't quite believe it, but I had no trouble reacting to it.

And her only explanation: It didn't get that far.

I couldn't wrap my mind around that, because it clearly implied that it had gotten somewhere. The steering wheel of my car was some faceless man's neck. I held it in a death grip and drove straight to Jerry.

He answered the door himself, his face lighting up in a friendly smile at the sight of me.

I didn't waste any time, holding the torn shirt up for him to see. "Where did Danika go on Friday?"

"Friday?" he asked, just looking confused.

"It may have been Thursday, but I doubt it, because I didn't see the bruises on Friday, which makes me think they happened right before she came to see me."

"Bruises?"

I shook the shirt at him. "And a fucking torn shirt. She was attacked, Jerry. Where the fuck was she on Friday morning?"

He swallowed hard, looking ill as dawning horror overtook his face. "Attacked? My God...is she all right?"

"Where, Jerry? Where did this happen?"

His hand covered his eyes as he rubbed at his temple. "Goddammit, I knew I shouldn't have let her go alone."

It took all of my self-control not to put hands on him. "Go where?" I growled.

He darted into the house, re-emerging with his keys. "I'll drive."

I was in the passenger's seat and glaring at him before he spoke again.

"She went to visit her mother Friday. It must have happened there. It's in a very seedy area of town."

"And you let her go there alone?"

“I see that I should have gone with her, but I never imagined she’d be attacked. She was just going to ask her mom if she had her sister’s phone number. A very quick visit.”

“Well, now you fucking know. When I asked her if she’d been raped, she said, and I quote, ‘It didn’t get that far.’”

“Jesus Christ,” Jerry said, running a hand through his hair, and pulling out his phone. He was speaking before I realized that he was calling the police.

“That was a mistake,” I told him as he hung up the phone. “You just got me arrested, man.”

He sent me a baffled look. “Well, don’t do anything that can get you arrested, and you’ll be just fine.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“Someone put hands on her, ripped a fucking shirt off her. Her shoulders, and one of her tits is completely covered in bruises. How fucking likely do you think it is that if I see this guy, I’m keeping my hands to myself?”

“Well, fuck, at least you have your lawyer with you.”

That surprised a humorless laugh out of me. “At least we have that. Plead insanity for me when I kill him, because I’m losing my fucking shit right now.”

“Here’s the game plan. We go there and wait for the cops, then tell them what we know. You don’t ever even need to look at this guy.”

I shook my head. “You’re delusional,” I muttered.

If I found whoever had put his hands on Danika, I was going to kill him.

“Well, I may be delusional, but at least I’m wearing a shirt,” he shot back.

I glanced down at my chest. I didn’t even remember leaving the apartment, but apparently, I’d forgotten something.

“That’s fine. I didn’t need to ruin one of my shirts with some stranger’s blood.”

“You sound like a nutcase, Tristan. You’ve been attending anger management, right? Can you try to use your exercises and tone it down a bit with the rage hard-on?”

“Some guy ripped her shirt off her, Jerry. Popping a dude in the mouth for calling her

hot is an anger management issue. This right here is a necessary evil. No one hurts Danika and gets away with it. And I promise you this, when I get done with this guy, he won't ever think about doing it again."

Jerry sighed heavily, shooting me a glance that made him look like a disappointed father...Not that I'd have a clue what that really looked like.

We drove for forty-five minutes before we found the place, and I'd calmed a bit in that time, but my blood started pumping faster as we turned into a rundown trailer park. This was no place for Danika, and Jerry should have known better than to let her come to a place like this alone.

I glared at him.

"It wasn't this bad the last time I came here."

"It's a trailer park on the wrong end of Boulder Highway, man. You should have used your fucking head and done the math."

"You're right. You're absolutely right."

That satisfied me a bit, but not enough to dampen the rage inside of me for the man we were looking for.

I couldn't have said whether I would have shown more restraint if we'd shown up and found the culprit, say, sleeping, but that isn't how we found him.

We found him beating on Danika's mother, being loud enough about it to shake the walls of their trailer.

I heard a female cry of pain as I opened my car door, and that was it.



I didn't remember charging to the door, or even through it.

I did remember grabbing the fist the man had cocked back, bringing my other hand to his back, and wrenching it hard enough to dislocate a shoulder, then sending the abuser flying across the room.

I advanced on him, keeping my arms at my sides as he came back to his feet, clutching his limp shoulder, his face twisted in agony.

He took a swing at me with his good arm, and I let his fist make solid contact with my jaw.

He had a hell of a left hook, and my neck snapped to the side with the impact.

I grinned like a maniac as I jerked my neck back to look at him.

It was crazy, but I was so angry that I wanted to feel some pain. I wanted this son of a bitch to put up a good fight before I took him down.

"Who the fuck are you, and what is your problem?" the man growled.

"You're my fucking problem."

I took two steps forward, kneeing him in the stomach hard enough to have him doubled over and coughing.

I gripped a handful of his greasy hair in my hand, pushing down hard while I raised a knee. I heard his nose break with a wet crunch.

I pulled his head straight, and his fist caught me in the stomach. Good. I wanted a fight more than a beating, and it had been starting to feel pathetic.

I never let go of his hair as my fist met his jaw, then his mouth.

I felt a few of his teeth give at the contact, and smiled right into the motherfucker's face.

"You remember the girl you roughed up on Friday?" I asked him, bashing his face into the trailer's tiny stovetop, once, twice.

"You remember her?" I asked again when he didn't answer. He was too busy swallowing mouthfuls of his own blood to talk.

"Yeah," he wheezed, blood flowing freely through his nostrils, and out his mouth.

"If you make it through today, if I decide to let you fucking breathe after this, I want you to remember one thing: You touch that girl again, you're dead. Do you understand?"

"I-I d-do, man. I understand." He seemed to mean it.

Unfortunately, the memory of Danika's breast, covered in bruises from this man's big hand, came into my head again, and I started beating.

I couldn't have catalogued all of the blows after that, but he stopped fighting long before I stopped wailing on him, and the only reason I stopped was because not one, but two Tasers had me flopping like a fish on the ground.

Things got fuzzy, and I was cuffed and in the back of a police cruiser before I had my wits back.

"Not cool guys," I told the two cops in front. "Tasers fucking suck."

One of them, an overweight sandy-haired guy, looked back at me, his eyes widening.

I smiled at him.

I could tell that he thought I was a crazy fucker. I was shirtless, covered in blood, coming off a stun-gun ass kicking, and grinning like a fool.

I'd think I was crazy, too.

"That stun-gun did a hell of a lot less damage than you did to that other guy."

"Not my fault he only knows how to beat up women. Probably the first time he's fought someone his own size."

"You are no-fucking-body's size, man."

He had a point.

"You want to tell me what was going on back there? Why were you trying to kill that guy?"

He'd gone into cop mode, and the word kill had me nervous as hell.

"Ask my lawyer," I told him, knowing that Jerry was following us closely behind.

"Fucking maniac has a lawyer," he told his partner.

They laughed. They didn't believe me, but they would soon enough. Jerry was good, always looking for an angle. He hated being a lawyer, but that didn't mean he was bad at it.

In the end, I spent way less time in a cell than anyone could have guessed. The guy had worked Danika's mom over before I'd arrived and that complicated things.

I'd only caught the barest glimpse of the woman before I'd gone after the man. She'd appeared to me to be just a mess of dark hair on a tiny body, but she'd looked badly hurt.

Jerry turned out to be the best witness, and so he called Bev in to be my lawyer, keeping things as much on the up and up as we could. The cleaner the case the better, he said.

In the end, Bev got me out of there in mere hours, no charges pressed. My actions were justified, she argued, since I'd stopped a potentially fatal attack on Marta, Danika's mother. The woman's injuries supported our case, since she'd been hospitalized along with the man.

The man, who I found out along the way was named Bert McLeary, was going to live. He hadn't struck me as a Bert, was my first thought. My second was that I'd dodged a bullet.

Theoretically, Bev explained to me, her argument was sound whether I'd killed him or not, but having a corpse in the mix always complicated things.

She sounded so cold-blooded when she said it, as though she wouldn't have been too upset if he had died, that it gave me pause.

She took in my wide-eyed sizing up with a grim smile. "I made her show me the bruises. You can't imagine you're the only one who'd kill for her. That man is just lucky that you got to him before I did."

She looked so serious, her tone so glacial, that I believed her.

I made a note never to get on Bev's bad side.

The only time I felt even a second's worth of remorse about the whole thing was when we got back to Bev's house, and Danika rushed outside to meet us. She took one look at me and buried her face in her hands, bursting into tears.

That made me feel like a real bastard.

I gathered her into my arms, making soothing noises as I stroked her hair. I'd acquired a T-shirt somewhere along the way, and she buried her face in the white cotton, sobbing hard enough to make my gut clench.

Finally, she calmed down enough to talk into my shirt. "Were you hurt?"

My jaw clenched, my hand fisting in her hair. I made myself relax the muscles of my fingers and stroke over her hair softly. "Not at all. Bastard barely got a punch in."

"He was so big. I thought he might hurt you."

My pulse started throbbing again with that reminder of her contact with the man. I tried to moderate my breathing, calming myself. I toyed briefly with the idea of finding Bert at the hospital and finishing him off.

"He was big, but he was slow. Not a great fighter, from what I could tell."

She pulled back to look at me, her eyes red-rimmed from crying. "You never lose. Where did you learn to fight like that?"

My mouth twisted ruefully. "When you're the biggest boy in your class, everyone thinks it's a great accomplishment to kick your ass. You can't be my size and not know how to defend yourself. Having a bad temper never hurt either."

“I take it Bev posted your bail?”

“That’s the thing. No charges were pressed.” I had to consider how to word the next part, sensitive to her feelings. “He was...beating on your mom when we arrived. She’ll be okay, I think, but I wasn’t charged because I stopped the beating.”

She showed very little reaction to that news, just the tiniest stiffening of her expression.

“We could go visit her in the hospital,” I offered.

She shook her head instantly and decisively. “No, that’s all right. Our relationship is...complicated. We aren’t healthy together. I can’t stand the woman, but I know that if she catches me in a moment of sympathy, she’ll prey on that weakness, and I’ll end up doing something I’ll regret.”

I knew just what she meant. My mother had pulled the same sort of thing on me, countless times. I kissed her forehead tenderly, thinking that there wasn’t a way I could love her more.

“Do you think I’m awful? I sound like a cold bitch, don’t I?”

I shook my head, bending forward slightly to kiss her temple. “No. You’ve met my mother. I can well understand what you’ve gone through with yours.”

“She thinks I’m like her because of what I let that old man do to me.” The words burst out of her as though it were an embarrassing confession. “I’m not, though. I was just a kid, and I didn’t think I had a choice.”

A bullet to the chest couldn’t have hurt my heart more than the weak thread to her voice as she whispered those words. My eyes stung as I clutched her to me,

whispering into her ear. “Of course not. You don’t ever have to defend yourself to me, sweetheart.”

“I know. I know. And I know what the truth is. It’s just so hard to feel it. Some dirt you just can’t wash off.”

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

I picked her up, cradling her to me. “There’s not an ounce of dirt on you, sweetheart. You have the purest heart I’ve ever known.”

That seemed to appease her, and she calmed and quieted for a long time before she spoke again. “We’ve made a spectacle of ourselves on the front lawn.”

“Ask me if I give a damn.”

I was gifted with a tiny smile and flashing silver eyes.

God, she was beautiful. Perfect.

“Promise me you won’t ever do that again. It scares me when you get like that. You can’t kill a man because I have a few bruises, Tristan.”

I kissed her, a blatant distraction from her train of thought. There was no way I could make that promise when her bruises hadn’t even faded.

“You should never be scared of me, Danika.”

We laid on the grass, side by side, hands clasped, in Bev’s front yard as I told her haltingly about the boy I’d been, always too big, too strong for my own good.

Too good at fighting, too ready to fight, with too much to fight for, albeit futilely, with a mother I could never protect, because she didn’t want protecting from the men that hurt her.



I shared that piece of myself, the huge piece that needed, above all things, to protect, because I hadn't been there protect her when she'd needed me the most, though of course I hadn't known her then. It wasn't logical. It was a feeling, an undeniable sense of failure, because I'd always failed the biggest tests when it came to sheltering the ones I loved.

There were things I needed to explain to her, about the girl she'd been, the girl who'd needed a protector, and hadn't had one, and how she'd never be that girl again, because she had me, and I took my duty seriously.

It was why I went crazy when any man so much as looked at her shifty, I explained carefully. I couldn't regulate that part of myself. No anger management class in the world could convince me that there was a way I could keep her too safe.

That seemed to bring her peace, and her eyes closed, the gentlest smile transforming her lovely face, her hand laying quiet on my racing heart.

And that brought me peace, because she was my perfect girl, and as much as I needed to safeguard her, she needed what I had to give her just as desperately.

We lay on the front yard like silly teenagers, for minutes, for hours.

It was one of those slowed moments in time, where things became clear, and parts of the past were brought to rest. I'd learned long ago that moments like these were few and far between, and I tried to remember everything. The rustling leaves in the tree overhead, the nearly cloudless sky, the mild autumn weather.

The perfect, intensely trusting tranquility written on her face as she lay with her head on my shoulder.

And later, when we finally rose from the grass, I remembered the slip of paper in my

back pocket.

I handed it to her gingerly. It contained no words, just a phone number.

Her brow furrowed in question, her teeth catching her lip.

“Dahlia’s phone number. Your mother gave it to me.”

She hugged me so hard that I could feel it down to my soul.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### TRISTAN

I was shrugging into a dark blue T-shirt when I froze mid-motion, not quite believing my eyes.

“There is no fucking way you are wearing that,” I told her, sitting down on the edge of my bed to watch her, equal parts pissed off and turned on at the sight of her.

She was wearing tiny black cheer shorts that didn’t belong outside of a bedroom, and a black half-shirt that read ‘Fuck No.’ It left all of the skin bare from two inches below her naval to the top of her ribs, just covering her breasts. She wasn’t even wearing a bra.

My jaw went slack, my eyes glued to the sight.

She didn’t have huge breasts, but they were a handful, and they were fucking perfect, soft and pliant in my hands, and when real tits went braless, there was no mistaking it.

“Fucking no way in hell.”

“I can’t wear a bra after the tattoo, and the half-shirt makes it so I won’t have to take off my top for the cameras. Frankie told me exactly what to wear, and I’m wearing it, so wipe that Neanderthal look off your face.” As she spoke, she twisted her hair into a bun on top of her head, the shirt riding up, bearing the undersides of her breasts.

“Are you fucking serious?”

She rolled her eyes, completely blowing me off as she slipped into flip-flops.

“It’s important for me to be comfortable and properly prepared, Frankie says. If you can’t behave yourself, you are staying home.”

“Are you fucking serious?” I repeated. “I took a week off just for this, and you’ve had to postpone it for weeks, just so I could go with you.”

“So behave yourself if you actually want to come.”

I clenched my jaw to keep from arguing, counting to ten, my eyes glued to the front of her shirt.

“Fuck No?” I asked her.

“Frankie says it’s a great way to let the censors keep you modest. If my nipples are hard, they won’t pick it up, because they’ll already be blurring the word fuck. She loaned me the shirt.”

No shit, I thought. It was clearly a Frankie creation.

She moved to stand in front of me, hands on her sexy little hips. I reached up,

palming her breasts with both hands. I closed my eyes, not quite managing to stifle a groan.

“We’re already late, Tristan, and the camera crew is on a tight schedule.”

My eyes snapped open to glare at her. I lifted her shirt that minuscule degree it took to bare her tits, cursing loudly and fluently as I leaned forward, framing her breasts in my hands and sucking one hard nipple into my mouth.

“I’m going to pin you to that table when she’s done with you and fuck your brains out.”

She gasped, and one of my hands snaked down, sliding into the waistband of her shorts to finger her. I yanked it out with a curse, using the leg of her shorts instead to ram my finger into her hard.

“If I can get at your pussy this easy, that’s a good sign that your shorts are too tiny.”

Her hips twitched, moving on my finger, and I went back to sucking on her nipple and working her on my finger.

I waited until she was close and pulled away, extricating my finger slowly, teasingly. “We’re late, boo. Remember? Tight schedule.”

She glared at me, backing away.

I grinned at her and winked.

I could barely keep my eyes on the road as we drove to Frankie’s tattoo parlor, glancing over at her every time she shifted on her seat.

She was jittery with excitement, and every movement, every twitch of her body was distracting in that barely there excuse of an outfit.

I fondled her with one hand until she moaned, trying to push my hand away.

“Quit teasing me,” she complained. “I don’t want to be turned on right now. It’s going to be hours before we can do anything about it.”

“Well, tough shit,” I told her, sending her a sidelong smile. “You know what that outfit is? It’s a tease. You’re only getting what you’re dishing out right now.”

She lifted her shirt, and my hand was suddenly kneading at her bare skin.

Fuck.

I glanced over.

She was folding the band of her shorts down, making them even tinier, and pulling the waistband open wide. She grabbed my hand and slid it down her body, cupping my hand over her sex, shifting until she could force one of my big fingers inside of her.

I yanked my hand away, and refused to look at her for the rest of the drive. As always, she’d won the teasing contest. She was the uncontested champ.

I should have known better than to go there.

I put my arm around her like the overprotective boyfriend I was as we walked through the casino, glaring at every asshole that stopped to stare at her.

“Fucking pinning you to that table as soon as she’s done. Going to fuck until we’re

both fucking raw,” I muttered under my breath, making her giggle. I wasn’t even close to joking.

She tried to hug Frankie when we got to the shop, but I got in between them, giving Frankie a pointed look. “You talked her into wearing this, but you sure as hell aren’t feeling her up while she does it.”

Frankie just laughed.

Danika punched me in the shoulder.

I stood back, arms folded across my chest as the TV producer did a brief interview for the show about her tattoo. She blushed and giggled and told a little story about how she’d always loved cherry blossoms.

She was adorable, and I was counting the seconds until I could fuck her brains out again.

They did a lot of close-ups of the spot on her back where the ink was going. Frankie held up a square of paper that was about three by five inches, illustrating exactly where and how she planned to place her precise sketch of a cherry blossom branch, left of her spine, the top ending right where her shoulder blade started. It was beautiful, as I’d known it would be. Frankie’s work was always excellent.

I stood at Danika’s head, holding both of her hands for hours while Frankie worked, wanting to punch each member of the camera crew nearly every second of those hours.

The process was slow and fascinating. Watching Frankie work was always a treat, but watching Danika’s lovely back becoming even more exquisite with an intricate piece of art was an experience.

And of course, it turned me on.

Danika took the pain well. I'd crouch down to check her expression, and only occasionally were her eyes squeezed tight with pain. Mostly, they were clear and excited about seeing the results.

I took down her hair, stroked it, and even bent down to kiss her face when Frankie took the needle off for brief breaks while she switched ink, or wiped the area.

The final result was well worth the wait and the pain. Dark branches were painstakingly detailed and ended in pretty blossoms that went from myriad shades of pale pink, to magenta, to a bright red.

It was a feminine tattoo, perfect in every detail, just like its owner. She squealed in delight when she finally got a good look at it.

"Give her some privacy while she gets dressed," I snapped at the crew when Frankie was finally done.

Frankie shooed them out, following behind. She gave me a rueful smile before she shut the door behind her. "I'll blast some rock so you can have some privacy. I'd recommend you lock up after me."

I locked the door, moving back to the table. Danika was already on her stomach, lying down, so all I had to do was twist her until she was sideways, her hips at the edge of the table, her feet not quite touching the ground.

"Get up on your elbows," I told her, tugging off her shorts.

"I can't believe you're doing this," she said breathlessly, rising up just enough to give me access to her chest.

“No one can say I didn’t give you fair warning.”

“Frankie knows exactly what we’re doing in here.”

No shit, I thought. “Nah,” I said. “You just needed a minute to straighten your clothes.”

“I don’t have that many clothes.”

“That’s the problem, now, isn’t it?” I slid my hands up her ribs, palming her bare breasts under that joke of a shirt.

I rammed into her, not stopping until my hips slammed hard against her.



## Page 11

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

She screamed, gripping the other edge of the cushioned table.

“Well, now she definitely knows what we’re doing,” I rasped, pulling out slowly. I let go of her breasts, leaning back to watch my cock slide out of her slick entrance, cursing as her sheath gripped me tight, the curses turning into praise as I lunged back inside of her, hitting the end of her so hard it jarred us both, and she screamed again.

I bent back over her, speaking into her ear. “Did I hurt you, sweetheart?”

“No. More, Tristan, more. Fast. Please, please.”

I closed my eyes, the sound of her soft voice begging me about all I could take.

I was true to my word. I pinned her to that tattoo table and fucked her brains out.

I came so hard, my legs just about gave out, and I was shouting nearly as loud as she was screaming.

“You like that angle, huh?”

She mumbled something in the affirmative, laying her cheek on the table, looking like she was about to drift off.

I cleaned us both up with paper towels from the bathroom that adjoined the room, slipping her shorts back on her.

I had to pick her up and set her on the table to get her upright, and even then she

leaned forward against me, her head on my shoulder. I copped a feel, completely powerless to keep my hands off her bra-free tits.

“Just remember, if you ever decide to wear something like this again, this is what will happen. You won’t be able to get anything done, because I won’t be able to stop touching you for more than seconds at a time.”

“I need a nap,” she said, sounding half-asleep already.

“I need inside of you again,” I said into her ear, already trying to work her shorts back over her hips.

Copping a feel had backfired in a hurry. My brainless cock had taken it to heart.

I fucked her sitting up that time, leaning her back on her hands so I could watch her round breasts bounce with every jarring thrust, her shirt pulled up to her neck.

Frankie knocked loudly on the door for that round, telling us to hurry up. I shouted loudly back for her to fuck off.

I pounded into Danika, growling, cursing, praising, all the while completely mesmerized by her naked chest. Something about having just the tops of her shoulders covered, and the rest of her bare, was turning me into a sex-crazed maniac.

Come to think of it, everything about her turned me into a sex-crazed maniac.

She moaned almost lazily as she came that time, squeezing me like a vise for torturous, drawn out moments.

I shouted and came, laid her back on her elbows, spread her legs wider, bringing her heels up to the table, and hard again, I pushed inside of her.

Again.

She was so slick, so full of me, and I groaned and cursed and rutted mindlessly in her until my legs wouldn't hold me for another second.

I leaned forward on my elbows as I twitched and spurted inside of her, my face in her neck, and wondered if anyone would notice if we passed out on Frankie's table for a few hours.

"You better clean up after yourselves, you nymphomaniac horndogs!" Frankie was shouting on the other side of the door.

Who knew how long she'd been shouting? Not me.

"I put Clorox wipes by the door, lovebirds!" she shouted, maybe five minutes later.

I blinked, wondered if I'd been sleeping, and then studied Danika, trying to figure out if she was sleeping. She was still managing to prop herself up on her elbows high enough not to lay directly on her fresh tattoo.

"I hope she doesn't think we're going to use those to clean ourselves," I muttered, trying to find the strength to stand up straight.

"I think those are for her table that we desecrated," Danika murmured, eyes still closed.

"And the floor! And the wall! And everything else you touched in there!" Frankie shouted.

"How about you work on getting thicker walls in here, Miss Nosypants?" Danika shouted back without missing a beat, her face still looking relaxed enough to be

asleep.

I couldn't help it. I laughed. Even nearly unconscious, she could manage to dish out sass.

## CHAPTER NINE

### DANIKA

I blew out my breath in a noisy sigh of frustration as we missed the step, yet again.

My dance partner, Preston, was a good sport about it, as usual. I'd worked with more experienced dancers, but I far preferred one with a good attitude. The guy never had a bad day.

"You wanna call it?" he asked with a smile, giving my fingers a little squeeze.

He knew better. I'd never be the one to call an end to a session. I always wanted to stay until we got the steps down right.

Our instructor strode into the room, took in our stances, and turned on his heel, moving directly to the stereo. I smiled when Mary J. Blige's Family Affair came on. It was impossible not to dance to that song, or to stay in a bad mood when you heard it.

Anthony, our instructor, was at least forty, but still had a sexy older man kind of vibe, with salt and pepper hair, a slim but muscular build, steely gray eyes, and a hot Italian accent. He was also just plain nice, which went a long way with me.

I pulled away from Preston, loosened up my stance, and started dancing. Not the tango, just good old feeling it dancing.

Anthony moved closer, but not too close, moving his shoulders, twisting his hips. No Italian man had ever moved so well to MJB. The man had soul. Our sessions always ended like this, in a freestyle jam, so I knew we were done. His disposition, along with his talent, were what had attracted me to his dance studio. No matter what, I never wanted to stop doing this because I loved it, and I'd worked with people that forgot that part.

Tristan was out of town yet again, and so I went out for dinner and drinks with a group of dancers afterward, and, as was becoming the pattern, Preston wound up sitting next to me.

I was aware, in an uncomfortable sort of way, that he liked me as more than just a friend. He couldn't have been further off my radar as far as that was concerned. I was a one man kind of woman.

But even if I had been single, I wouldn't have gone out with him.

He was a good-looking guy, with light brown hair, and hazel eyes. His build was very slender, and he was a few inches shy of six feet. I'd developed a very marked taste for huge men that towered over me and had biceps like tree trunks. Tristan had officially ruined me.

The group stayed and talked for hours. I drank sparingly. I hadn't been much of a drinker since Jared's death. It had served as a wake-up call for me. I was not immune to the pitfalls of vice.

Addiction was hereditary, and it was in my blood, so I knew that I had to be more careful than most to avoid its trappings.

We were at a college bar across the street from campus, and it had a dance floor. There were eight of us, all dancers, and so of course we danced.

I had fun. It was nice to go out with new people, with fresh faces and carefree smiles.

I found myself texting Frankie, telling her to come out and join us.

Frankie: To a college bar? Do you have any idea how old I am?

I thought about it. No, I did not.

Danika: No, I don't. How old are you?

Frankie: I am twenty-seven.

Danika: That's not even old.

Frankie: It's too fuckin old for a college bar.

Danika: It's fun. Come on.

Frankie: How long are you going to be there?

Danika: I don't know. Depends on if you come hang out with us.

Frankie: Fine. I'll be there in thirty, but if I spot any sorority girls, I'm outta there.

I was dancing with Preston when I caught sight of Frankie in the crowd near the bar.

I squealed, rushing to her.

She smiled when she saw me. We hugged, but she kept looking over my shoulder. At Preston, I thought.

She reaffirmed my suspicion in short order. “Who is, uh, that guy?” she asked, pointing.

I knew whom she was referring to, since I’d just been dancing with him, but I followed her finger to look.

“That’s Preston. He’s my ballroom dance partner at the studio. Super nice guy.”

“And you’re, like, out with him?”

My eyes narrowed at her chastising tone. “I’m out with seven other dancers. There’s a whole group of us.”

“But you were dancing with him.”

“He’s my dance partner. It seemed like a pretty normal thing to do.” I found myself getting defensive.

“How do you think Tristan will feel about that?” she asked, her tone bland, the pointed arch to her eyebrow, not so much.

“Tristan is crazy when it comes to me and other guys. Do you think I should cater to crazy?”

She gave me a look that should have been reserved for disapproving mothers. “How would you feel if you found out that Tristan was going out to clubs with the band and dancing with other woman while he’s in L.A.? That’d be fine with you?”

I mulled it over, and finally got her point. I’d hate that. Really hate it. Yes, I was dating crazy, but I had apparently fallen from the same crazy tree.

“But he’s my dance partner. We have to practice. I can’t give up dancing for Tristan. That wouldn’t be healthy.”

“Agreed, but how ‘bout you keep it to the studio? That’s seems to me to be a far cry from dirty dancing in the club.”

“How do I know Tristan isn’t going out and dancing with other girls? He could be doing that or worse every night. I’d have no clue if he was or wasn’t.”

“You know because I’m telling you. He’s a good boyfriend to you, and he wouldn’t do that. He’s very, very careful not to step out of line. Show him the same respect.”

She had a point, and I suddenly felt like shit. “I wasn’t dirty dancing, and this isn’t a club,” I pointed out.

She gave me a head to toe once over, giving my exposed stomach a pointed look. “Shaking your hips in that outfit is dirty dancing, period.”

I pointed to her half-shirt. “Don’t you dare knock my outfit. You’re baring more skin than you’re covering.”

“Well, I am single. World of difference.”

“You’re a fun killer tonight, you know that?”

“Yeah, I know. Now tell me I’m wrong.”

I curled my lip at her, looking around for some of the dancers. There was one in particular that I thought she’d like to meet.

“Speaking of you being single...” I began.



“Oh hell no, girl. You wouldn’t know how to set me up.”

“She’s a dancer. She’s hot, and I heard her say she’s a lesbian.”

“You think that’s how things work? She’s a lesbian, I’m a lesbian, so of course you should set us up?”

I rolled my eyes, then grinned because she was grinning. She loved to mess with me.

“More like, you’re hot, she’s hot, you’re both lesbians. That would be closer.”

“You’re forgetting one very important detail. I don’t mess with vanilla girls.”

I’d forgotten that little fact. “Well, who knows, maybe she’s not so vanilla.”

“Trust me, girl, I know every lesbian submissive in town. If she wasn’t vanilla, we’d have crossed paths before.”

“Well, dammit. She’s really cute.”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“So are you, and you and I are about as compatible as me and vanilla.”

“Fair enough,” I conceded, effectively giving up.

I was a failure of a matchmaker.

Frankie met the girl we’d been talking about, Estella, less than ten minutes later. The irony about the whole thing was that Estella was noticeably into Frankie, blatantly flirting with her right from the start.

Estella was a shapely little Brazilian, with long, thick, wavy brown hair. She was maybe an inch shorter than Frankie and had an outgoing, fiery personality. She also liked to wear very little in terms of clothing, which gave her yet another thing in common with Frankie.

Frankie wasn’t having it. She was nice to the girl, but not at all flirtatious.

“It’s hard to explain a preference like mine,” Frankie explained when the girl had finally flitted off. “I’m attracted to Estella. She’s highly fuckable, but that is not the point. I couldn’t be who I need to be with her, and I won’t settle for less.”

“How do you ever find anyone? It’s hard enough finding decent people to date and then throwing something like that in the mix...”

“It’s not easy. Not at all. But I’ll tell you what, I won’t ever be finding that somebody at a college bar. I’d rather be celibate for life than try vanilla again. Does nothing for me.”

“So you have tried it?”

“Not with a lot of success, and not since I was too young to know better. A preference like mine...it’s a dark thing, in a way, but when I get it right, God, there’s nothing like it. Regular sex could never compare. Has all the excitement of a board game to me.”

“How long has it been since you’ve, yanno, found someone?”

“I parted ways with my last sub over a year ago. Like I said, it’s not easy for me to find someone that’s compatible.”

I felt like a jerk for asking so many questions, because suddenly, she sounded very sad. “It’s none of my business. I was being nosy. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. You’re my friend. I make it a point to be open with friends. I want you to know who I am, and my sexuality is a huge part of that. It’s unusual enough that it is part of what defines me. I’ve made peace with that. And dating sucks for everyone. I’m far from alone there.”

“Very true.”

Estella came back, smiling at Frankie and holding two martinis. I’d thought she’d gotten the hint, but I saw that I was wrong.

“I love tattoos,” she told Frankie, handing her one of the drinks.

“Oh yeah?” Frankie asked politely, taking a sip of the drink. “I have a tattoo parlor. If you’re ever thinking about getting ink, you should come to me.”

Estella blinked, looking fascinated. “I was just talking about the ink you have on you.

I didn't realize you were an artist. I'd love to come look at designs. Where is your shop? I'm new in town. I don't have, how do you say, connections?"

Frankie looked more drawn in with every word the other woman said. Estella did have a sexy accent. "You don't need to have connections to get a tattoo."

Estella giggled, and the way Frankie smiled at that gave me the tiniest sliver of hope.

"I meant directions, not connections." She giggled some more. She really was adorable.

She leaned into Frankie, touching her arm. She was interested, and not even trying to hide it. "I'd love to be your canvas. I think ink is art."

If she'd known Frankie for years, the girl could not have had a better pick up line for her.

"That's actually my motto. It's even on my cards." Frankie reached into her pocket, pulling one out. "The address is on the card, but my joint is up in the mall at the Cavendish casino. You can't miss it."

Estella bounced a bit in her excitement, and I saw Frankie's eyes glue straight to her generous chest. "The Cavendish Hotel? How exciting to have a parlor there! It is a beautiful casino."

"Do you watch a lot of TV?" Frankie asked her.

"Television? I used to watch a lot. It helped me with my English, but I don't have time to watch it anymore."

Frankie looked relieved, and didn't mention her own reality show. I didn't blame her.

It had to be hard not to attract the wrong people, being that high profile.

“What do I owe you for the drink?” she asked.

Estella waved her off, giving her a very friendly smile. “It was my treat. Unless, of course, you want to kiss me. I never turn down a kiss from a beautiful woman.”

Frankie’s mouth twisted ruefully. “I don’t give out kisses for drinks.”

“Then it is free. Will you kiss me now?”

Frankie shook her head, looking more uncomfortable than I’d ever seen her. “It doesn’t work like that with me. Don’t get me wrong. You’re beautiful, but I don’t do easy hookups.”

“Who says this is easy? I want you. I don’t see the point of hiding it, but that doesn’t make it easy.”

Frankie grabbed Estella’s wrist, pulling the other woman’s body against hers. Being nearly the same height, they lined up perfectly. They were a striking sight, two beautiful women embracing, looking like they were about to kiss. I knew I wasn’t the only one in the bar staring at them.

Frankie didn’t kiss her though, instead putting her lips to Estella’s ear.

What she said to the other woman, I could only imagine, but Estella wasn’t pulling away in horror. On the contrary, her jaw went slack, her eyes glassy. I would have bet money she was turned on.

It was several fascinating minutes before Frankie pulled back, making very solid eye contact with Estella before she grabbed a handful of the woman’s wavy brown hair,

dragging their mouths together for one of the sexiest kisses I'd ever seen in my life.

When Frankie finally pulled back, she smiled at the other woman. Something in that smile, in the way her expression had changed, made me think she'd taken control of their dynamic, gone from prey to predator.

"That's the only free kiss you'll ever get from me, Estella. The rest you'll have to earn. My number's on that card if you want to talk about it."

Frankie turned away from her, obviously thinking the matter was settled, but Estella grabbed her arm before she could take a step.

"Wait! I do! I want to talk about it. I'd like to...do what you mentioned."

Frankie swallowed hard, back to looking uncomfortable. "Is it something you've tried before?"

She shook her head. "No, but I've thought about it. I've...fantasized about it." She glanced around as she said it, as though afraid they'd be overheard. I wasn't going to be the one to tell her that half the bar was listening in.

To say Frankie looked intrigued was putting it mildly. "Have you now?" she asked softly. "I might just be able to work with that. Give me a call tomorrow, if you don't change your mind after you've slept on it."

Estella didn't let go of her arm. She wasn't done. "I won't be able to sleep. I want to spend the night with you. I don't want to wait."

"It shouldn't be a rash decision. You should take your time and think about it."

"Please. I know what I want. Trust me that much, at least."

And so I found myself driving to Frankie's house, two lesbians going at it in the back of my beat-up car. Frankie claimed that she'd taken a taxi to the bar, and didn't want to wait for one to pick them up, and Estella had gotten a ride from one of the other dancers.

I didn't mind playing chauffeur, unabashedly thrilled that Frankie might have found someone she could be compatible with.

Someone's shirt, I thought it was Estella's, though it was hard to tell in the dark, landed in the passenger's seat.

"Whoa," I said under my breath.

"God, her fucking tits are real," Frankie said loudly.

Was she talking to me? "Oh yeah?" I responded in the most appropriate way I could think of.

"Yeah. I fucking love real tits. They are hard as hell to find in Vegas."

"Well, that's nice," I said pleasantly, thinking this was the strangest car ride I'd ever had.

"Do I get to touch you?" Estella asked her.

"If you are very, very good, you will earn that right when I say, but not before. Even if it is just handholding, I will be doing all of the touching. You okay with that? Is this going to be too much for you?"

Estella's swift and firm denial made me smile. I wanted this to work out for them.

“The correct response will always end in Mistress Abelli.”

I felt suddenly like a voyeur, that little tidbit feeling like an intrusion into Frankie’s other ‘side.’

“Yes, Mistress Abelli,” Estella told her in a breathless voice.

“Dayum,” I said under my breath. I knew Frankie was hardcore, but damn me if that stuff wasn’t kind of hot.

Tristan seemed just as happy as I was about Frankie’s potential love match when I called him before bed.

The background noise on his end was bad. It sounded like he was in a small room with about a thousand giggling women.

“Where are you?” I asked him. It sounded like a party or a club.

“At some party for the record people.” He sounded distracted.

“Well, I’ll let you go. You sound busy. Hopefully we can talk tomorrow.”

“Sounds good. Tomorrow, then.”

“Kay.”

I hung up, feeling edgy and upset, suddenly plagued by a wave of discontent. Here we were, apart most of the time, and I couldn’t even go out and dance without worrying about what he’d think.

Meanwhile, he was at God only knew what kind of a party. Real trust was an elusive



thing for me, given my track record with men, and Tristan's track record with sex.

He could be doing absolutely anything he wanted, and I'd never know.

I felt our distance so keenly in that moment, not just in miles but in intimacy. What was it that kept us together? We didn't even live in the same city now, and he apparently didn't need me anymore.

I tossed and turned all night, tortured by the thought that I may not really even know him at all.

## CHAPTER TEN

### TRISTAN

I hung up the phone, glaring at Dean, who was laughing, draped over some chick I'd never seen before across the room.

The band shared a small house near the recording studio. It was not ideal, being that we didn't even get our own bedrooms, and the living area was small enough to be useless.

And instead of getting weekends off, like they'd promised us, we worked through them half the time, making it feel more and more like we were living here, instead of in Vegas.

It was wearing on me, to say the least.

And, pissing me off just as badly, the record was being stalled at every turn. Dean had gone into full on self-destruct mode, spouting off bullshit about having creative differences with Kenny, slowing down a process that was already too slow.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

Creative differences, my ass. I wanted to beat his face in. He did nothing for the creative side of the band, and messing with Kenny for no fucking reason was more than I could stand.

I took a direct swig from a bottle of Jack, still glaring away. On top of all of his other bullshit, he'd shown up to the house with a van full of groupies, and I'd ended up lying to Danika about the noise.

Cory was out with our new guitarist, and Kenny had escaped to his room. Smart man. I'd have done the same, but after the naked groupie jumping on me in my sleep that I knew had been Dean's idea, I didn't trust him, and I certainly didn't trust any of the strange women that had invaded our place.

What a fucking mess, I thought, taking another swig of whiskey.

Dean caught my glare. He smiled like it had made his day. "What's up, my friend? Why the bad attitude? There's plenty of pussy to go around."

"You know what's up," I growled, fists clenched. "No groupies at the house. Those are the rules."

The women in the room that didn't want to admit to being groupies loudly protested that. I didn't care. They were groupies.

I looked around at them. "Out," I said rudely. I had no more patience.

A few started to leave, muttering 'asshole' and 'jerk' on their way out.

A few didn't budge, which just made Dean laugh harder. "What are you gonna do, man, carry them all out?"

"They go or I go, and if I walk out that door, I'm not coming back. You can do this deal without me. I don't give a shit anymore. I didn't sign on for any of this."

That, finally, got him moving, shuffling girls out, and being bad-tempered about it.

I wasn't bluffing, not even close, and he knew it.

The next morning I woke up hungover and pissed off.

I got dressed and shook Kenny awake. He started, nearly falling out of the tiny twin bed situated on his side of the room. He was the only one I bothered, since we shared the room.

"I'm leaving. Heading back to Vegas for a few days. I'm done with this working through the weekend bullshit. I've got a girl back home."

Kenny didn't try to stop me. He was good like that, good at reading people, and knowing when they meant what they said. "I'll tell the producer. Just call me when you're on your way back to L.A."

"I will."

I called Danika once before I started driving. She didn't answer, which was pretty normal for her. She left her phone all over the place, her ringer turned off most of the time because of school. I settled for sending her one clear-cut text.

Tristan: Heading back to Vegas. Try to get the afternoon off. I'd like to take you out.

I was filling up my tank in Barstow when she finally responded.

Danika: Good. I've been missing you bad. Jerry says he'll watch the kids whenever you get here. What should I wear?

I grinned, happier than I'd been since I'd last said goodbye to her, weeks ago.

Tristan: The tiniest bikini you own. Dental floss would work, too.

Danika: LOL. You are a pervert...Were you serious about the bikini?

Tristan: Yes. Frankie got us a pool cabana for the afternoon at the Cavendish resort.

Danika: Wow.

She was ready and waiting when I pulled up to Bev's house.

She wore her tiny bronze bikini, my favorite, with a transparent gold cover-up that didn't manage to cover up a thing. She wore sexy high-heeled metallic sandals that matched numerous gold chains around her neck and wrists, gold sunglasses and large hoop earrings. Her hair hung long and straight down her back.

I was hard as a rock before she'd taken two steps out the front door.

I met her halfway, catching her to me for a short kiss. I couldn't get into it with her on the front lawn, or I'd lose my mind and traumatize the neighborhood children.

I grabbed the small bag she had in her hand, leading her to the car, and ushering her in.

"Where are your swim trunks?" she asked me as I was settling back into the driver's

seat.

“I have a bag in back. I’ll change when we get to the pool. I came straight here.”

“I thought you were working through the weekend again. How’d you get time off?”

“I took it. I just left. I’m not doing that shit anymore. They can fire me if they don’t like it. I didn’t sign on to move there.”

She stroked my arm as I drove. I kept my hands to myself. It’d been too long for me. My self-control was hanging on by a thread just sitting next to her. I was so horny I felt violent with it.

The cabanas were set up nearly on top of the swimming pool, on platforms set along an aisle that ran down the middle of the main pool.

They were designed like a four-sided tent, one side open to the water. It was large enough for about four people, set up like one huge bed with a dozen pillows thrown everywhere.

It was hot out for fall in Vegas, perfect for a day at the pool. I changed into swim trunks and slipped on some shades, my movements clumsy in my rush.

Since Danika had come in a bikini, she was waiting for me when I came outside. Music was blasting. It was the middle of the day, but parties started early and ended never in Vegas.

Danika was moving her hips and snapping her fingers to the heavy beat, her lips mouthing the words to the song, her eyes on the pool. It was impossible for her to hold still when music was playing.

She was as adorable as she was sexy.

I hooked my arm around her waist as we were led to our cabana. Danika's mouth dropped open in surprise as she took in the opulent setup. Her reaction alone had made the whole thing worth it. I'd had to make about a dozen phone calls to set this up.

Our waiter met us with frozen daiquiris already in hand, the order having been placed hours ago.

I lasted maybe five minutes before I got up and shut the curtain.

"Can you do that?" she asked me.

I turned back and smiled at her. She was sprawled out on the cushioned lounge wearing nothing but strings and tiny triangles, looking good enough to eat. And fuck until I passed out. "I'd like to see them stop me."

I sprawled out beside her, my hand resting on her stomach. I felt her muscles spasm under my hand.

My cock jerked in reaction. I rubbed the soft skin just below her belly button, running a finger idly to one of her knotted strings, and then the other. I had her tiny string bottoms off and tossed aside before she realized what I was doing. Her hands shot down, covering her sex and inadvertently touching herself in the process. I about came just watching her. I held back, if only barely, my hand covering hers.

"You already started. Don't stop now. Touch yourself. And open your legs wide. I want to watch you."

"The waiter could walk in at any moment!"

“So you’d best hurry.” As I spoke, I was moving my hand again, this time to her neck. She had the strings knotted tightly, but I’d had a lot of training undoing knots much harder than this, and I had her topless with a few quick twists.

“Tristan! What are you doing?!”

Her affronted tone only turned me on even more. I loved it when she got prissy. It made it that much more satisfying to have her moaning my name mere minutes later.

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“You want to have sex in public?”

I didn’t bother to point out that it would hardly be the first time.

Instead, I stroked her with one finger, teasing her own hands into rubbing at her folds. I was glued to the sight. She had the prettiest little cunt on the planet.

“You little exhibitionist,” I teased her. “You’re completely naked in public, and you are loving it. There’s nothing but one tiny sheet of fabric between us and the rowdy crowd outside, and you are sopping wet from it.” I rubbed at the wet core of her to illustrate my point. “Maybe the waiter will walk in on us. Do you think he’d like to see you touching your wet pussy?”

I knew she hated that word, but I got a kick out of the way she glared at me when I said it. She completely ruined the glare when she moaned as my fingers pushed inside of her. Her walls clenched on me like a vise. I was just about past my breaking point. If I didn’t get inside of her in the next minute, I knew I was going to embarrass myself.

“That’s not an answer,” I started up on her again. “Should I take your silence to mean

you want our waiter to see you like this? You want him to watch you with my fingers buried deep inside of you?"

"No!" she cried, but there was no heat in it, as her moans of pleasure, her clenching walls, quickly followed.

"Not very convincing, Danika. I get the idea you enjoy being watched. No one dances the way you dance and doesn't like an audience. Maybe I should call for our waiter."

"No, don't!" she sounded genuinely alarmed now, as though I'd ever fucking dream of sharing even the sight of her like this.

"You have to do better than that, sweetheart. Say please."

She didn't hesitate. "Please."

"Good. Good. Now tell me, do you want me to make you come with my hands? Like this?" As I spoke, I dragged my fingers out of her slowly, and began to rub her clit, stroking her until her hips were jerking in agitations, her breath coming out in needy little pants.

She shook her head, her eyes falling closed as I struck a nerve. The nerve.

"No?" I questioned. "You don't want it like this? Tell me how you do want it, then."

Her voice came out in a breathless whisper, her lips trembling on the words. "I want you inside of me."

I obliged her, though not the way she'd intended, shoving two fingers back inside of her and starting up a smooth rhythm.



She arched her back, barely stifling a loud moan as my other hand took up that invitation, cupping a rounded breast softly in my palm.

“This what you wanted?” I asked her, my breath ragged.

“Nooo,” she answered, the word drawn out with a frustrated moan.

“Tell me what you do want then.” Making her talk dirty to me was one of my personal favorites.

“I want your cock inside of me.” She said each word through clenched teeth. “I don’t want to come until I feel you buried deep.”

I barely muffled a groan, rolling onto my back. I plucked her up by her hips easily. She didn’t weigh a thing.

I arranged her long legs to straddle me, facing away. It was an ambitious position for someone my size, but she was whimpering and so wet and ready that I couldn’t seem to help myself.

Painstakingly, I pushed just the tip of me inside of her. She covered her own mouth to try to stifle a scream of pleasure.

“It feels so fucking good, Danika,” I told her in a rough whisper as I worked myself into her tight sheath, relishing every inch as I worked my way in, stretching her.

It felt in-fucking-credible.

Her head fell back as I worked my way in. It was one of the hottest things I’d ever seen in my life.

My grip on her hips tightened as I thrust my hips up, driving in savagely while I pulled her down, forcing her to take every inch of me.

She barely stifled her scream.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

I shushed her, because if our waiter really did walk in on us, I thought I might kill him.

I closed my eyes as she started to move, pleasure overtaking my body, insinuating itself into every pore.

The world dissolved. Only sensation remained. And the perfect harmony of our movements, the feel of flesh on flesh.

I circled my hips, rising up and down to match her steady rhythm. The girl made love like she danced. It was hypnotic. Intoxicating. I couldn't remember why I'd ever signed on to be away from her for days at a time. This was what I craved, what I needed, the only way I felt whole, and the only real peace there was to be had since Jared had died.

I could never get deep enough, rocking her harder and harder on top of me. Our movements became jolting and urgent as we reached that fever pitch together.

She began to shudder with her climax, and I let myself go, holding her hips hard enough to bruise, buried deep, I came. Hard. My whole body shook, my breath shuddering out of me in great heaves.

I didn't think I'd ever been through anything that intensely pleasurable in my life. And so of course, I wanted to do it again almost instantly.

Danika dislodged herself from me slowly, lazily, flopping down on her back next to me. She looked utterly relaxed. I loved doing that to her. She was an anxious person,

and I loved fucking her until she couldn't so much as finish a thought.

"Oh my God," she said quietly, her eyes drifting closed. "That was...out of this world."

"I missed you," I told her, moving on top of her.

"What are you...really?"

I just grinned as I steered myself to her entrance with my hand. "Really. You look sleepy. Go ahead and sleep. Don't mind me." I drove into her.

She'd started to laugh at my words, but it turned into a drawn out gasp.

I started thrusting. I had used all of my restraint the last time. This one was a quick, hell bent fucking. I rocked inside of her, cramming deep when the harsh, rushing waves of release began to take me. She was with me, but that was more luck than skill on my part. I'd lost all control.

She lay limp as I tied her back into her tiny bikini. We'd pushed our luck enough. I didn't want her to be exposed as we gloried in the aftermath.

"I missed you," she mumbled, touching my hand. No sooner had she spoken then her eyes drifted closed. She was done, passed out, sated, completely oblivious to the crowd outside.

I grinned.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### TRISTAN

We spent the next few days almost entirely in bed. Danika ditched out of work, forgot about studying, and when Monday rolled around, skipped all of her classes. She dropped everything for me, to be there for me when I asked her to. It was just what I'd needed to feel sane again.

I left once on Monday to grab some groceries, leaving Danika passed out in bed.

To my delight, she wasn't passed out when I got home.

I heard the bath running as I opened the door to my bedroom, stepping in to find a sight in my bathtub that had me salivating.

Dean called it a porno tub, and he wasn't wrong, considering how many bodies you could potentially fit into the thing. At the moment it was filled with a vision too exquisite to ever grace the small screen.

Danika smiled when she saw me, arching her back like the vixen she was. The woman had me wrapped around her pinkie and she had to know it. I was hard before I'd fully shut the door behind me.

"Glad you made yourself comfortable in here," I told her, my voice hoarse with unadulterated lust.

The glow of candles played over her flesh as she shifted restlessly in the water, the pert globes of her breasts rising above the surface like a decadent offering.

She didn't say a word, just lifted one leg, balancing a heel on the edge of the tub. There were no bubbles in the bath, and I moved closer, my gaze intent on her body in the clear water. My jaw clenched hard as she slowly raised her other foot, spreading her legs wide, giving me a perfect view of paradise. "Are you waiting for an invitation? The water's nice, I swear."

I shrugged out of my shirt, fingers going to my jeans, fumbling with the button. I felt like a horny teenager, clumsy with lust. Only Danika could do that to me.

“We’re going to make a mess,” I warned her.

“What’s this huge tub for if you can’t even make love to me in it?”

“You have a point. We should probably eat before we have sex again. We’re going to make ourselves pass out.”

“You poor thing.” Her tone was mocking, and she moved as she spoke, sitting up and reaching over to clasp one firm hand around my throbbing cock. My eyes shut and my head fell back as sensation superseded my ability to think or speak.

I moaned, arching into her hand. I let her play with me over my jeans, fumbling with my zipper when I couldn’t stand the light teasing anymore.

She made a delicious little humming noise as I sprang hard into her hand, stroking me, once, twice.

I pulled away, stripping in a few swift moves.

I stepped into the bath, between her widely spread thighs, savoring the view, every bit of it, as I sank down to my knees in the water.

I reached for her, grasping her round breasts into my hands, kneading softly until she moaned and writhed for me, her hands on the rim of the tub keeping her chest above the water.

“Drain the tub a bit,” I ordered her gruffly. “I don’t want you to drown.”

One of her hands moved behind her, fumbling with the drain as I climbed on top of her. I rubbed our bodies together, my hands gripping her thigh, jerking them wider as I moved between.

I buried myself in her slowly, her tight sheath clasping each inch that I gave her, making my vision blur with the perfect pressure.

“So fucking tight,” I said through gritted teeth. It was too much. Just too fucking much. I could have died like this, delirious with pleasure, and never regretted it for a second. “I swear your cunt was put on this earth to drive me out of my fucking mind.”

Water lapped over the sides of the tub as I stroked in and out of her slowly, leisurely, her nose and lips barely above the water line, her eyes squeezed shut tight and submerged.

I barely made a full lap before I started to come, premature in my absolute, body consuming pleasure. It was just too much sometimes, the utter completeness of it. It was a mystery I ever kept any control of myself, buried inside of her like this. It was sheer dumb luck that she followed me as I shook and groaned with my own death throes.

My mouth stayed glued to her ear even after the water ran out, the tub empty, whispering over and over how much I adored her.

“I shudder to think what kind of action this porno tub has seen.” I could hear the smile her voice as she spoke against my cheek.

“Dean has you calling it a porno tub too, huh?” I asked sternly, finally pushing up on my arms to look at her.

“Dean? Hell no. I basically hear white noise whenever he opens his big mouth. I call it a porno tub because it’s a porno tub. You could fit six people in here.”

That had me hardening my jaw and studying her.

“Watch a lot of porn, do you?”

She rolled her eyes at me, pursing her lips in that adorably bratty way of hers. “I don’t, no, but my ex used to watch it all the—“

I stopped her before she could finish, feeling that now familiar red cloud of rage overtaking my vision. I tried to grasp a handle on it, but it was elusive. “I don’t want to talk about skinny jeans, and I sure as fuck don’t want you to tell me how he liked to get off—“

One soft hand to my cheek had me shutting my mouth, and feeling like a jerk.

“I don’t want to talk about him either. Calm down, okay? I get it. I like to pretend there was never a Nat, so I get it, but you can’t turn into a caveman every time I say the wrong thing.”

I nodded, moving to stand, closing my eyes and groaning with the slow pull out of her before making it to my knees and then my feet in the wet tub.

I stepped out before helping her do the same. “Well, the good news is, I think you get a five minute break before I attack you again, but what will we do with all that free time?”

She laughed, giving me a fond look and a kiss on the chin.

I stayed for an entire week, ignoring my phone, ignoring the world.



“Fuck ‘em,” I told her. “This is what I need. I can’t go back without more.”

She smiled that smile where I saw myself and forever in her eyes, and gave me everything. She was selfless, my Danika, keeping nothing for herself.

I thought that too brief respite would help me. It made perfect sense to me that after a week of filling myself up with Danika, I’d stay full for a while. It would buy me some time, before I started to feel so empty again.

It didn’t work that way, not at all.

It was just the opposite.

The contrast unraveled me faster. What I’d left behind, the constant using, the highs followed by the strung out lows, only the lows were more unbearable than ever. I couldn’t exist as me, couldn’t stand how that felt.

Not without her.

Most days, I needed chemical assistance to even get out of bed. There was always a party, always something to do with our record label, something that lasted until morning. And our studio sessions always seemed to get later and later, and less and less productive.

This is not a good place for me to be, I thought, at least once a day. There were no brakes at our little band crash pad in L.A.

“It’s like I’m watching a fucking gnarly flashback scene from an episode of Behind the Music,” Adair, the replacement lead guitarist said to me one night, as we caught Dean snorting coke off some groupie’s bared stomach in the house’s tiny kitchen.

I laughed. In spite of myself, I was starting to like the guy.

Adair was very tall and lean, with flinty gray eyes, and crazy unruly brown hair that was dyed blue half the time. He wasn't far behind Dean on the drug and groupie binging scale, but he had a point.

"You have to finish a fucking record to ever get on any damn show, and thanks to that hot mess across the room, that is not happening for us." I sounded bitter.

I was bitter.

Adair poured us each a shot of whiskey. I'd lost count of the shots I'd had that night, but I grabbed the glass with one hand, my other still holding my cigarette, and clinked glasses. "Bottoms up," I muttered, downing it. "Here's to getting out of L.A. as fast as fucking possible, no thanks to Dean."

"It's not so bad," he mused. "Worse for you, since you're the only one with a girlfriend. But, hell, I don't feel sorry for you."

He caught the look on my face and grinned. "Don't try to kill me or anything. I know the deal. Everyone has warned me not to talk about her. Well, except for Dean. Dean has given me some spectacularly bad advice about telling you...well, never mind that. But you know, I've seen her, and you don't have such a rough deal. Hell, even I would go without pussy a few days a week for a girl like that."

My empty fist clenched, but I could tell that he wasn't trying to offend, and I took a long drag off my smoke as I tried hard not to let my temper broil. "So tell me, what has everyone been telling you?"

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

He grimaced. “Well, let’s see. Cory told me that you nearly beat a man to death for basically touching her arm.”

That made me laugh. The truth was crazy enough. No one needed to be making anything up, but it was amusing. I knew that Cory was just exaggerating to make his point.

“He told me not to flirt with her, or curse in front of her.” I did not have a problem with either of those pieces of advice, so I just nodded at him to go on. “And then Kenny told me that you nearly castrated a guy for standing too close to her. Said you stage dived into him, stopped a whole performance for it.”

I was clutching my stomach, laughing too hard to hold it in.

“And Kenny also told me not to talk about how hot she is, or make any comments about any part of her body, even after I see her dance, and if I do see her dance, definitely never mention it to you.”

That was very sound advice, I thought.

“What about Dean? What was his advice?” I was only asking because Cory and Kenny’s advice had lightened my mood. They were good friends.

“Nothing useful and nothing I care to repeat. I know that Dean is full of shit, so I usually do the opposite of whatever he says is a good idea. He’d watch me get my ass kicked just for a good laugh. No offense, man, but basically, I plan to stay as far away from her as possible. Hell, I plan to avoid looking at her. Speak when spoken to, also

seems to be a good idea.”

I clapped him on the shoulder, more cheerful than I’d been in ages. If only every man in the world could take a page from Adair’s book. “On the contrary, my man, that’s just what I prefer.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### DANIKA

I mingled. It wasn’t my favorite thing, but this was the kind of party that called for it. The only people I knew at the function were in high demand, my boyfriend and Frankie, a famous TV personality, included.

I was in L.A. for the weekend, coming to Tristan instead of him coming to me, for a change. It took me less than five minutes at one L.A. party to know that this was not the place for me. I’d thought Vegas was bad, but L.A. was the pretentious version of it.

We were at some stranger’s house again, but this house was being rented out, and had actual art on the walls, and so the people thought that it had substance.

I wound up talking to a freckled, red-headed model that had a great set of legs and a wicked sense of humor. We hit it off right away when she made some wisecrack about the house’s owner needing to hide all of the mirrors on account of all the cokeheads in L.A.

“Do you know the band?” I asked her finally, making small talk. I didn’t figure many of the people at the party would actually know them, since they hadn’t finished recording their first album.

“Oh yeah. Love them. The lead singer is smokin’.”

I smiled ruefully, totally used to that. “He is that.”

“He’s great in bed, too. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire, with that one. Can go all night.”

That had me controlling my breath, and steadying my voice, with effort. “When did you sleep with him?”

She waved her hand. “Oh, ages ago. Years. Met him in a club in Vegas. We holed up for like two weeks, hardly even left the room, fucked each other’s brains out. Wouldn’t mind a repeat performance, but I hear he has a girlfriend now. Maybe I’ll screw their new lead guitar. He’s fucking hot.”

“I haven’t met that one.” My tone was casual, crisis averted, though I knew it wasn’t a good sign that I still had doubts about the man that I loved.

“Hmm, he is yummy, but it’s like a downgrade. Tryst was killer in bed.”

Oh Lord, I thought, I don’t want to hear this.

“We did everything there is to do to each other. The man is dirty.”

I wanted to plug my ears, or hell, stab out my eardrums. Instead, I made polite noises, and tried to block her out.

“First guy I ever let fuck me in the ass. We couldn’t get enough of each other. He wanted to do everything to me. And it hurt, because he’s got a big fucking dick, but I still let him do it. It’s hard to say no to a man that gives you that many orgasms.”

I wanted to throw up, or even just find the will to walk away from this woman's unwanted verbal diarrhea. She continued on, oblivious, "I even grabbed a friend one night to join us. I swear to God, he wore us both out."

"Excuse me," I finally said, just walking away when she started to wax poetic about his tongue.

I didn't find the woman's candid charm so charming anymore.

I basically hid out after that, avoiding mingling, avoiding all human contact, just sitting out back on one of the free lounges, trying to enjoy the perfect weather, the gorgeous view, and the light ocean breeze.

I failed.

Instead, I stewed about what some random chick had told me about things that had happened before I'd even met Tristan. I knew it was pathetic, and I made a promise to myself that I was not going to turn it into a thing. Not a fight thing. Not a drama thing. Not a thing at all, because I'd known about his past before I'd ever touched the man.

And still, I stewed. For some reason, my mind had fixated on the act he'd done with some random chick that he'd never even mentioned wanting to do to me.

He'd wanted to do everything to her, she'd said.

Couldn't get enough of each other, she'd said.

Tristan found me there hours later. I was still just staring out at the ocean, even though it had long since gotten dark.

He hunkered down beside me, studying me like he was gaging my mood. I knew that didn't say good things about me, that I was so volatile he had to constantly assess.

"You okay, sweetheart?" he asked quietly.

I just nodded, not particularly wanting to talk to him, or even look at him. I hoped I was starting my period or something, something that could account for me being so moody, and wanting only to withdraw into myself.

"You ready to go to bed? They rented the place out for the night, and they reserved this amazing room for us. The party will probably go on all night, but I feel like I've done enough ass kissing to get a pass on the rest."

I smiled weakly. "Sure."

"You feel okay? You look a little woozy."

"I'm a little nauseous. Lying down should help."

"Want anything to eat or drink? They're well stocked here."

I just shook my head, standing up.

He immediately draped his arm over my shoulders, leading me into the house. "I'm sorry I wasn't much company for you. I turned around and you were gone, and then I didn't have a spare second to look for you."

"Don't worry about it. It was your party. You should get to do whatever you want." I knew as soon as I said it that it sounded petulant, and I wanted to take it back.

"Hey now," he said softly. "If I got to do what I wanted, I'd have been with you all

night, now wouldn't I?"

I didn't answer, just feeling tired.

"Did you meet anyone interesting?"

I met a model that said you were the first man she ever did anal with, I wanted to say, but no good could come of it, so I managed to hold my tongue.

"Yeah. Some entertaining people around here," I said instead.

"Are you upset? It feels like you're upset with me."

"I just don't feel well. A good night's sleep will help."

We were laying down, the room dark, sounds from the party still drifting to us when he said, "I'd always rather have you tell me what's wrong, instead of keeping it bottled up. You know that, right? Whatever it is, I'd always rather know."

I sighed, knowing there was a short timer on how long I could keep my feelings to myself. There always had been. "Do you ever feel like you can't get enough of me, Tristan?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you want to do everything to me?"

"What are we talking about? I thought you weren't feeling well."

"Not tonight. I mean, just in general. Do you ever want to hole up in bed for two weeks and not let me out?"



I felt him shifting on the bed, then draping himself over my still form, his lips going to the top of my head for a brief kiss. “That sounds like a kidnapping. If this is you somehow asking how much I want you, you’re being silly. I want you to the point of insanity. I’ve never wanted anything the way I want you. Two weeks in bed? That’s nothing. I’d keep you in bed for the rest of our lives, if there were any feasible way to do that. And I don’t feel like I’ll ever get enough of you; I know that I won’t. Now what is this all about?”

“How come you’ve never even tried to...?” I couldn’t even finish the sentence, not even in the dark, when I’d already embarrassed myself.

“Tried to what? Lock you in my bedroom? Don’t think I won’t, boo, now that you just gave me your permission.” I could hear the smile in his voice.

“No...that isn’t what I was going to say.” I shut my eyes tight, hating that I could never keep any stupid thing to myself. “I met this model tonight, and she said that you guys stayed in bed together for two weeks, and did everything. She said you couldn’t get enough of her.”

I felt him stiffen. “Sweetheart, I haven’t touch—“

“It was years ago, she said. She has red hair, freckles, and great legs. Do you remember her?”

“Is it good or bad that your description doesn’t even ring a bell?”

I didn’t know the answer to that. “I wasn’t fishing for information from her. We were just chatting and she came out with all of that, and then went into detail about all the crazy things you did to each other. It just got me thinking.”

“Uh-oh.”

I slapped his closest body part, the shoulder behind me. “And I started to wonder if you’ve been holding back on me, if there were other things you wanted to do, that you’ve done with other women.” I had a thought. “She said you had a threesome.”

He cursed. “We are not fucking doing that.”

“No, no, I wasn’t suggesting we do that. It just occurred to me that you’d been a lot more wild before me, and that you might get bored with how much your sex life has toned down in our relationship.”

His hand gripped my hip hard enough to bruise, and his voice when he spoke was cold. “You’re being ridiculous. It’s not the novelty of an act that makes a thing exciting, Danika, it’s the feeling behind it. I guarantee that if I had a threesome with some chick I don’t remember, it wasn’t because I couldn’t get enough of her.

You’re the only one I’ve felt like this with, and it’s the most exciting feeling in the world. Nothing has toned down for me. Just the opposite. You’re making it sound like it’s not wild enough for you. Tell me, what kind of things are you used to doing?” He’d really worked himself up by the last sentence.

I wondered briefly why I worried about being a jealous nutcase, when Tristan could always manage to top me. “Nothing. I’ve never been wild at all, and you know it.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“I know it? You just basically told me that the best sex of my life has been toned down for you, so I’d really love to know what you think can top this. What did skinny jeans do for you that I haven’t?”

“Tristan, now you’re being silly. I wasn’t talking about me.”

“Weren’t you? What have I neglected, Danika? I won’t bring a third party into this, but you said you weren’t talking about that. So what is it? What’s the magic formula that equals a wild sex life? You think variety does that? Variety comes from boredom, and I will never fucking share you.”

He was getting angrier by the second.

“I don’t understand how this got so twisted,” I said quietly, honestly baffled. “Why are you so angry? And I never suggested anything about us sharing.”

“You brought up a fucking threesome to me! What am I supposed to think?”

“You’re the one that had a threesome. Quit turning everything around on me!”

“Do you have any idea how crazy you make me? And you call it fucking toned down? Do you know how crazy that makes me?”

“That is not what I meant at all. Again, I wasn’t talking about me.”

“Well, I’m sure as hell not the one complaining about our sex life, now am I? The only complaint I have is that I’m out of town too much. So tell me, what is it that we

haven't done that makes you think our sex life is boring."

I said, my voice stern, "I'm done talking about this. You're getting too worked up."

"Well, that still sounds like an improvement over toned down."

He was pressing hard against me from behind now, obviously aroused. The hand on my hip went up to grab my breast.

"You're impossible," I told him.

He ignored that, inching my camisole up, caressing me, his mouth on my neck. "You make me insane, you know that? Here I am, thinking things couldn't get any hotter between us, and you're worried we aren't wild enough together?" As he spoke, he was moving my panties aside, nudging hard at my entrance.

He plunged in, entering me fully, but then just stopping, holding himself there. "Tell me what we aren't doing? What's not enough for you here?" He moved inside of me slightly to illustrate his point.

When I didn't answer, he pulled out almost completely, as though to punish me for my silence.

I bit my lip, reaching back to grip him in my hand. I shifted him, dragging his tip until it was poised at my other entrance.

"What the fuck?" he growled into my ear. "This something you been wanting? Was this what you did with skinny jeans?"

If I wasn't so turned on and embarrassed, I'd have rolled my eyes. "No. I haven't done this before, though skinny jeans, bleh, I mean Daryl, was obsessed with doing it,

I never let him. I never got the appeal. It sounds painful.”

“So why do you want to do it now?”

“Just something that chick said to me. I know it’s something you like.”

“Oh, you know that, do you? You think I’m shy about telling you what I like? Is that the impression you’ve gotten?”

I pressed back against him, trying to work his big tip inside. I could tell right away that it wasn’t going to be easy. “You did it to a stranger. I just think you should give me everything you gave to all those other women.”

“I do. I give you everything. No one else got anything worth having from me. When are you going to get that through your head?”

“What if I just want to do it? Are you really going to tell me you aren’t even a little bit interested in it?”

“You know why we haven’t done it? Because for me it’s been the thing you do when you get bored with random pussy. That may sound harsh, but that’s how I see it. You want me to fuck you like this? I’ll do it. I’ll take you fucking sideways, if the mood strikes you, but don’t twist it for a second into something I wanted, or something I was holding back from you. And frankly, I think I’m too angry to fuck you like that right now. You don’t do that angry, or it might really hurt you, though it’s going to be damned uncomfortable either way.”

I wiggled back against him, still trying to work him inside of me with no success.

With a frustrated sigh, he pulled away. I lay in stunned silence while he strode to the adjoining bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

The shower ran for less than five minutes, and he strode out, dressed again, just minutes after that.

I squinted into the bright light behind him that wouldn't let me see his face.

"I'm going back out to the party. I'm too pissed off to sleep right now."

He shocked me when he just left.

I couldn't sleep either.

I didn't last ten minutes, throwing on my clothes, and following him.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### DANIKA

I found him talking to Frankie and Estella and a small crowd of strangers.

I was a little confused about Frankie and Estella, since Frankie swore up and down that they weren't technically dating, even though they were spending plenty of time together. Estella stood very close to Frankie, her body language revealing her crush at a glance.

Frankie, on the other hand, stood very aloof, arms crossed over her chest, barely seeming to notice that the other woman was practically fawning over her.

I moved into the small circle of people, slipping under Tristan's stiff arm without a word.

He didn't so much as twitch, not sparing me even a glance. His arm was held stiff,

barely touching my shoulders, in fact making an effort to avoid as much contact as possible.

He was pissed.

I leaned into his side, my hand going to his abs, rubbing at the hard ridges prominent under his thin T-shirt as Frankie explained her filming schedule with the small crowd of L.A. hipster people that I didn't know.

I watched in rapt fascination as Tristan's other hand moved to mine, and pulled it carefully away from his body, keeping me from touching him.

He was so pissed.

Men were strange creatures, I thought. Crazy aliens, really.

I waited a few minutes after he released my hand, then took up rubbing his stomach again, kneading at the firm flesh, working up his ribs to rub at one swollen peck. I was getting myself worked up by the time he grabbed my hand and slowly pulled it away. Again.

I patiently waited him out, pretending to listen to the group conversation with interest, slowly bringing my hand up to rub his abs again. I knew for a fact that even a pissed off Tristan couldn't turn me down for long. The last time I'd put him in a pissy mood, all I'd had to do was go braless for a morning to get him to completely forget about it. He tugged me away again. I waited him out. Again.

The next time I slipped my hand under his shirt, rubbing directly against his skin, pressing my breasts into his side. It was taking him longer each time to pull my hand off, and this time it took him the longest of all, and I heard his breath hitch when he did it.

I waited patiently, then began to rub him again, over his shirt. He just let me, and I knew I'd won. We'd had plenty of stupid fights, but I was determined that this was not going to be one of them.

I continued to touch him, not looking at him, just pressing hard against him, my hand softly rubbing.

I loved the feel of him like nothing else, his firm flesh flexing under my fingers. I dragged my hand up every hard ridge in his abdomen, then back down, over and over, working myself into a state, becoming needy for more. More skin, more privacy, just more. I used the heel of my hand to rub harder.

Finally, my body wound tight, I turned my head the slightest fraction, and quickly, furtively, I bit softly into his chest, loving the feel of him under my teeth.

I wasn't quick or furtive enough.

"Don't mind us. Go right ahead and maul each other," Frankie called out casually.

I ignored her.

She laughed.

"Excuse me," Tristan said in a hard, quiet voice. He extricated himself from me, turned on his heel, and strode away. I stared after him, a little dumbstruck. What the hell was his problem?

Frankie moved closer, and spoke more quietly. "What's up with him?"

I shrugged, giving Estella a small wave where she'd remained standing, chatting with hipster number whomever.



“How’s it going with Estella?” I asked her, changing the subject.

Frankie’s expression became very neutral. “Who knows? We’re just hanging out. She’s hard to read, but I think she’s just curious about me. I am a curiosity.”

“I don’t think that’s it. I think she’s into you. Like, really into you. What’s hard to read is if you’re into her.”

Frankie didn’t look at all convinced. “I’m not investing myself either way. Like I said, we’re just hanging out. She’s fun to spend time with.”

I studied her, not believing it. I’d have bet she was more cautious than disinterested, but that obviously wasn’t the way she wanted to present it.

“Does she like...that stuff you like?” I asked.

She laughed. “No, I don’t think so. At least, she’s never done any of it, which is about the same thing. Like I said, we’re just hanging out.”

“So you don’t do anything? Like whatever you were doing in the back of my car type of stuff?”

She made a dismissive motion with her hand. “We do some of that stuff, just messing around, though. Friendly type of stuff.”

I felt my mouth curving wryly. “That sounds familiar. Here’s some advice: If your friendly stuff ends in any orgasms, you are kidding yourself that you are just hanging out.”

She nodded at me, her smile mocking. “Well, I guess you would know. What’s going on with you and stud muffin, anyway? He’s in an odd mood.”

And here we'd come, full circle. Frankie was too tenacious to accept a subject change for long.

"He's mad at me over something stupid."

"How stupid?"

"Really stupid."

"Alright, spill it. What stupid thing did you do? Let me guess! Since this is Tristan, and he is mad at you, and not punching somebody else, it's gotta be something where you, like, hurt his feelings? Am I getting warm?"

I curled my lip at her. "I won't be telling you, since you're in a snarky mood."

"I was kidding! Now tell me!"

"Let me go find him and make up first. It's no fun to tell you about it while it's still going on. Maybe after we make up."

"Puh-lease! If you find that man, I won't see you again tonight. You'll be too busy 'making up' again."

I could only hope she was right.

I didn't find him for a long time, searching every room in the house. I paused outside of an ajar door as I heard familiar voices speaking on the other side. One of them was Dean, and just from his tone, I could tell he was up to no good. Dean stirring up trouble was something I would recognize from a mile away.

"I'm telling you," he was saying emphatically, "Tristan didn't used to be like this.

There is just one thing that has turned him into a pain in our ass.”

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“One person,” another deep male voice corrected. This voice I recognized as well, since I’d just been introduced to the man. It was the band’s record producer. He was a white man in his forties that wore his baseball cap sideways, overused words like swagger, and tried to freestyle rap. He called himself The Dutchman, and in my head, I’d already started thinking of him as The Doucheman.

I hadn’t been impressed with him, and where I saw this conversation leading just reaffirmed my opinion.

“Single Tristan wouldn’t be going back to Vegas every chance he got,” Dean continued. “Single Tristan wouldn’t be refusing to go on a debut tour with the band because he couldn’t leave his girl for that long of a stretch. There’d be no more fights, no more hissy fits. I’m telling you, we’d have a brand new lead singer on our hands, if that bitch was out of the picture.”

“Getting rid of girlfriends is not part of my job description.”

“It’s not that complicated. She’s a jealous mess. The right combination of circumstances and one visit from our girl Nat would do it.”

I was glued to the wall, openly eavesdropping.

“Nat? That blonde with the big fake titties? The chick I banged last week?”

“Yeah. That one. She’ll help, I guarantee it, and there’s no one that could make Danika more jealous than Nat.”

“Oh yeah? Why? That Nat chick is busted.”

“Hell yeah. You know Tristan used to be engaged to Nat, right?”

“Why the hell would he get engaged to Nat? That chick’s a whore.”

I felt myself nodding agreement, even though I was by myself.

“She didn’t used to be like that. It’s a long story. The Nat you got and the Nat Tristan got are in two different leagues, but that’s beside the point. What I’m saying is, no one can make Danika more jealous than Nat, since Nat used to have Tristan’s ring on her finger. And Nat is cooperative. She’d do anything to break those two up. All we have to do is set it up. Get Danika to catch those two naked together, however we make that happen, and no more Danika. Just that easy, we’d have our lead singer back, full-time.”

“That’s fine, man. Set it up. You guys need to go on tour, so do what you need to do to get Tristan on board.”

I moved quietly away, more disgusted than worried. I’d known Dean was a dirtball, but this was too low, even for him.

My first instinct was to tell Tristan about what I’d heard the second I saw him, but the longer I looked with no luck, and thought about Dean’s plan, the more I was inclined to keep it to myself.

Their entire sordid scheme was based on my reaction, and now, with me expecting it, and hearing first hand just what lengths they were willing to go to, I knew they’d be that easy to predict. I had it all settled in my mind before I found Tristan. I’d watch, and wait, and expect a setup. There was no way in hell I’d give them what they wanted. Now if I thought of Nat with Tristan, my gut didn’t twist up with anxious

jealousy. Now I was just disgusted. And prepared.

I continued to search through the house, and the backyard, even combing some of the beach that attached to the property from one long wooden walkway.

Finally, I tracked Tristan down back in our room. He was laying on the bed, still fully clothed, one arm thrown across his eyes, the room dark.

I sighed and shut the door behind me. “Where’d you go?” I asked. I’d checked in here twice during my search.

“I took a walk on the beach. More of a run, actually.”

“You still mad?”

He didn’t answer, which was answer enough, if his toneless voice hadn’t been enough of a clue.

I switched on the lamp by the bed, then sat at his hip, my hand going to his stomach. “Do you want to talk?”

“No. Talking is exactly what I don’t want to do.”

“Then what can I do? You’re obviously upset, and I wasn’t trying to upset you.”

“I know. I think that’s almost worse.” He stood up, and began to pace. “Here’s what I want; I want you to quit treating this, us, like less than it is. Quit analyzing us to death, and for the love of God, stop thinking that our sex life is not enough for me. I have a lot of fucking problems, and to say that isn’t one of them is the understatement of a lifetime.”

I kept my eyes on him as I reached for a pillow, tossing it on the ground, directly in his path. It made him stop, glancing down at the pillow, then at me, his annoyed expression working itself into a puzzled one.

I smiled as I moved to the pillow, dropping to my knees.

His breath punched out hard as my hands went to the fly of his jeans, working it open. I had him loose and hard in my hand with a few quick movements, never looking away from his shuttered gaze.

“I didn’t mean it the way it came out. I wasn’t trying to belittle anything about us. It was just a misunderstanding. Is there anything you can think of that might get you out of this black mood I put you in?”

“Fuuuck,” came out of his mouth as a long curse, even as he shrugged off his shirt, tossing it aside, and buried his hands in my hair. “Show me what you had in mind?”

I smiled, pleased by his about-face. I ran my hands up and down his stomach, just reaching to the bottom of his chest, and feeling my way down again.

I knelt at his feet, looking up at him, running my eyes over his tall form. I traced his abs with my fingertips, running my hands over his body until I reached his lean hips. He was ripped and huge, but I’d have sworn there wasn’t an ounce of fat on him. I was rubbing the V-cut of his pelvis, utterly fascinated by the shape of it, when I asked, “I take it you’ve been getting plenty of gym time out here?”

The question was rhetorical. His body was as impeccable as ever. But he answered me anyway.

“As much as I can. That’s the only way to blow off steam over here. That and jacking off in the shower.”

I smiled, leaning my cheek on his thigh and gazing up at him mischievously. “And how many showers do you take a day over here?”

“Not nearly as many as I did back in the day when you were shaking your little ass at me, and then not letting me touch it.”

I giggled.

“I’m not gonna lie, though. I take a shower the second we get off the phone with each other.”

“And what do you think about us doing while you’re getting off?”

He grabbed one of my hands, gripping it around his base. “This is a good start. Having you on your knees is definitely on my playlist.”

I licked my lips, using a firm touch to stroke him. “Do you want to know what’s on my playlist?”

He gripped my hair in his fists. “I do. But don’t expect me to last longer than two seconds if you start talking dirty.”

“That’s okay. You’re always good for a round two, right?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“Well, then...I like to get off to fantasies about you tying me up and blindfolding me. I pleasure myself to the memory of being completely at your mercy.

His breath punched out of his lungs in a powerful whoosh. “Fuck.”



I never stopped touching his spectacular body as I took him in my mouth.

I moaned at the delicious feel of his tip slipping past my lips, the hard velvet heat of him between my lips making moisture pool between my thighs. I stroked him with my mouth, my throat, savoring every thick, turgid inch of him that I could take, bobbing my head.

He gripped my hair hard enough to sting, cursing, praising, and as he pushed deep enough to make me gag, apologizing profusely. I never stopped, sucking in hard pulls, taking as much of him as I could handle.

He never was one to last long for a blowjob, and he was cursing as warm liquid shot down my throat less than two minutes after I'd taken him in my mouth.

He was also never one to be selfish, and so he had me on my back on the bed, skirt up, panties down, working me with his clever, busy tongue, and those magic, rapid fingers.

I doubted I lasted two minutes.

I was still panting from my orgasm when he crawled on top of me, his hips sliding between my thighs. He took me languidly, leisurely, whispering sweet somethings in my ear.

"I love you too," I told him, kissing his neck, when we'd finished.

He reared back, cupping my face in his hands. "It's one thing to be jealous in the present. That I can handle. But this fixation on who I used to be, on things I can't go back in time and change, this I can't take, especially when you're using it to belittle what you and I have.

“Just do me this favor, sweetheart. Quit comparing what we have to anything I’ve had before, or anything you’ve had before. You and me, we’re different. This is different. More.”

I nodded, kissing him. There was no question; it was incalculably more for me.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### DANIKA

Every single time he came back from L.A., be it days or weeks after he’d left, it felt like the distance between us had gotten just a little bit bigger. It killed me, and I obsessed constantly over ways to change it.

“How is it going over there?” I asked him, as I often did.

It was a very casual question that was not at all casual for me.

“It’s a rough fucking scene. The album is getting done, but not fast enough. Dean and Kenny aren’t getting along. Hell, all of us are pretty much fighting constantly. Drugs are going around like candy, and I’m drinking Jack for breakfast.”

“You need to take better care of yourself,” I chided him, feeling sick to my stomach.

He gave me a rueful smile. “Yes, I do. And if I really wanted to do what’s best for myself, I’d never leave your side. I’d just stay here and never go back.”

I felt selfish for asking, but I couldn’t keep it in. “So why do you keep going back?”

“I don’t know what else to do. For better or worse, this is the only thing that gives me direction in my life right now. Otherwise, I’d just be following you around like a

lovesick puppy every day.”

I wanted to shake him and tell him that I didn’t care about that. He could follow me forever. I didn’t care if he worked. I’d take care of him. Anything he needed, I’d try to provide.

But I knew him better. He had too much pride to ever let me do that.

While the emotional gap between us seemed to build, our wild craving for each other never waned, just becoming more desperate with every reunion. Sex was never, ever the problem for us. But it also wasn’t enough, not on its own. But sometimes, occurring more and more often, it felt like it might be all we had.

He would come to me strung out, and uncommunicative, serious and unsmiling. Where had all those easy, readable smiles gone? Nowadays, I had to work for his smiles, and it was killing me.

“I can feel you slipping away from me,” I’d say, or, “What can I do to make you feel better?” Often, in fact, most times, that would draw him out of it, and if he spent a few days with me, he was more sober than not and never partook in anything harder than liquor.

But he was with me less and less.

## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

It had become a pattern; waiting for Tristan. He was always late, never rushing to see me anymore.

The fight started because of one drink too many, as they tended to be these days.

We were planning on going to go to a Halloween party at Cory and Kenny's apartment. Tristan was supposed to pick me up at Bev's house, but he was two hours late, and I wound up going to pick him up.

He was passed out on his bed, lights out. With the hallway light flooding in from behind me, I could see that he was wearing an Iron Man costume T-shirt.

I'd gotten dressed up in costume, and was all set to go out, but one look at him and I gave up. He'd obviously had a rough week, and come to think of it, so had I. Just as well to get some rest, and hopefully spend some time together in the morning.

I went to use the bathroom, and when I came back out, he was up, leaning against the wall, the lights on. He looked tired, but awake at least.

He studied me, his eyes hooded. "What kind of a costume is that?"

I was wearing a pink wig with a ninja headband, and a little red kimono. I thought it was a great costume.

I did a little twirl for him on my ninja sandals. "I'm Sakura."

"What the hell is a Sakura?"

I fluffed at my wig. “Well, sakura means cherry blossom in Japanese, but what I’m dressed as is the character Sakura from Naruto. She’s a cute little ninja with pink hair.”

“What the hell is Naruto?”

I rolled my eyes. “Only the most popular anime like ever. Cute little blond fox boy with a tragic past that has mad ninja skills? You’ve seriously never heard of it?”

“Never.”

“Shut the front door! That’s the next show on our list!”

“Yeah, no, that ain’t happening. I don’t watch cartoons.”

“It’s an anime. It’s good. There’s action, love, tragedy. A lot of tragedy. Poor Naruto loses both of his parents when he’s a baby, and his whole village shuns him. And then his best friend joins the Akatsuki, this evil shinobi gang. Oh, and there are so many characters that it’s virtually impossible to keep track.”

“Not selling it, sweetheart. And I won’t even ask what the hell a shinobi is. Well, you look adorable, even if I’m still not sure what you are. Let’s go check out this stupid party.”

“We don’t have to. You look really tired. Why don’t we just stay in? Catch up on sleep.”

He shook his head, looking resigned. “No. I said I’d go, and Dean will be relentless if I miss it. He’ll say you made me stay home again.”

I hated that Tristan still cared so much what that jerk thought about him. About us.

Dean was like a slow acting poison, the effect he had on the people around him getting stronger and more apparent over time.

“So what? Don’t you get that he’s going to instigate and talk trash and try to make us both look bad? That’s what he always does, and you’re a sucker for falling for it after all this time.”

He held a hand up, looking annoyed. “Enough. I don’t want to hear it. We don’t need to go over this again. Let’s just go to the party.”

I dropped it. I knew that tone. He was not to be messed with at the moment.

He grabbed his Iron Man mask off the bed, and we took off for the costume party.

If I’d hoped the party would draw him out of his mood, it was not meant to be. He snagged a drink the second we walked in the door, though I could tell he’d been drinking long before I’d shown up at his place.

Still, I held my tongue at the first drink. The second one that Dean passed to him, I intercepted, trying and failing to be subtle about it.

Tristan gave me an unfriendly eyebrow lift.

Dean hooted, pointing at Tristan. “See what I told you, man? Pussy whipped. Where are your balls? She carry them around in her purse now?”

I ignored him. “You’ve had enough, don’t you think? You already passed out once tonight, and I can’t carry you home.”

Dean kept going, and Tristan’s glower grew darker by the second.

I couldn't believe how pigheaded he was, how unbelievably easy it was for Dean to get under his skin. It was too much, to have what little time we had together spoiled by Dean like this, and my temper began to boil. Add that temper to Tristan being drunk and belligerent, and us rarely seeing each other and we had the ingredients to a pretty nasty fight on our hands.

"Seriously, how much of our minutes per week together do you want to be passed out for?" I asked him, my voice quiet.

Dean still heard, and of course made a few inflammatory comments.

"Enough," Tristan told me, his voice low and mean. "Not another word. I don't want to hear it. You've sucked my dick way too many times to be acting like my mother."

That was it. I was done.

Without another word, I turned on my heel and left.

I was at the car when I felt him behind me.

I whirled on him, glaring.

"That was so completely out of line," I told him, my voice near a shout.

He threw his arms up in the air, his expression conciliatory. "I know. I'm sorry. As soon as the words left my mouth, I was sorry. I've been in a foul mood, and I didn't mean to take it out on you. Dean is more than I can take right now."

"Forget Dean. He's bad for you. Can't you see that? You should be staying as far away from him as you can."

“It’s a bit late for that now. I’m fucking stuck with him, thanks to this record deal.” His tone changed, his eyes getting soft. I could never fight those soft golden eyes of his. “But you’re right. Let’s forget about him.” He moved close, pulling me against his chest, his big hand stroking over my hair with a feather light touch.

I let myself relax against him for a moment, unable to resist him for long, as usual. “The drinking has gotten out of hand, Tristan, and I don’t even want to know what else you’ve been using. Can’t you stay away from it all for even the few days you see me? Because if you can’t, that’s a good sign there’s a problem.”

“No, no, I can stay away. You’re right. I’ll lay off it, sweetheart. I’m just wound up so tight. Things have been tense. I can quit any time, though. Stopping on the weekends is no problem.”

My stomach tried to tie itself into some elaborate knots. Even he didn’t sound convinced.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, his hands rubbing my shoulders. “I love you, sweetheart.”

“Do you have any idea how much shit I will take from Dean about that comment you made?” I complained after we’d been standing like that for a while. “He didn’t need an excuse to talk nasty to me, but you’ve given him one.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” he said tersely, pulling back, his mood changing with a few short sentences. “What’s he been saying to you?”

I immediately backpedaled. Someone needed to kick Dean’s ass, but it didn’t need to be Tristan.

“Never mind,” I murmured, cuddling back into his chest.



He backed away. “No. I want to know what you’re talking about.”

I dug in stubbornly. “It’s stupid. Pointless to talk about when we have so many other things to discuss.”

“What things?”

“The fact that you’re always late. And more and more, you don’t answer my calls. The fact that you’re abusing your body on a regular basis. I’m not even seeing the half of it, but what I’ve seen is worrisome, and you tell me all the time that it’s worse when we’re apart. I think we need to look into some sort of grief counseling for you...and I think you need to start looking into getting some help for the substance abuse.”

He went stiff, his eyes going icy. “You just can’t help it, can you? Will you let up on the nagging for five fucking minutes?”

Without another word, he stormed off.

I felt like I’d been slapped. I stood there, stunned, for a long time, before I followed him.

I couldn’t figure out where that had come from. I didn’t think I nagged. In fact, I’d gone out of my way not to mention any of his bad habits, especially where alcohol was concerned, for a long time. I felt almost guilty at all the things I’d overlooked in my sympathy for what he was going through.

I was hurt by his words, but even so, I followed behind him.

He had too many weapons against me. Showing me his worst, then his best, followed by his withdrawal. Cold, then hot, then gone. His arsenal was too much for my

smitten self, custom set to push all of my buttons.

It was a fact that I'd do just about anything to get more of his best.

It took me a long time to track him down. The apartment was small and crowded, and I kept getting stopped by the people I knew at the party to talk about costumes and the band.

I finally found him in the kitchen, talking to Kenny. I nodded at Kenny before moving to Tristan's side, eyeing him carefully.

His face was stiff and blank, but he threw his arm around my shoulders as soon as I was within reach, kissing me on the head, and murmuring a barely perceptible, "I'm sorry," into my hair.

"S'okay," I whispered back.

"I'm an ass."

I smiled in spite of myself. "Only sometimes."

"Let's do something special next weekend. I know a guy with a place on the beach. Let's go take a weekend for ourselves."

I turned on him, smiling brilliantly. "I can't think of anything I'd like more."

"And I'll cool off on the booze. For you."

I hugged him as hard as my skinny arms were able to. "Love you. More than you know."

“Right back at you, sweetheart. I’d be lost without you.”

I stood on my tiptoes to kiss him. An affectionate peck had been my intent, but it wasn’t Tristan’s. We were making out with no shame between one breath and the next.

Kenny had been standing somewhere close to chat with Tristan, but we never even excused ourselves. In fact, we never got another glance at him after that.

My arms wrapped around his neck, my fingers threading through his hair.

His hands went to my ass, pressing our bodies as close as they would go. We were nowhere close to private, but his hands working on my butt had me moaning out loud.

He pulled back, cursing, laughing. “Come on,” he muttered, tugging me out of the kitchen with his hand. He led me into the hallway bathroom, slamming the door shut behind us, and pulling me hard against him.

“I can’t wait. It’s been so long,” he muttered, turning me to face the sink.

“We should have taken the edge off before we left your place.” I smiled.

“No shit. What were we thinking?”

I didn’t mention that he’d been drunk. I didn’t want to spoil the moment.

He bent me over the bathroom sink, pushing up my red kimono and rocking hard into me.

I gripped the faucet for dear life, crying out his name. Even knowing we’d get grief

for it later, I couldn't seem to keep quiet. It just felt too good, too perfect, the rough glide of him, in and out, in and out, his hands gripping my hips, holding me perfectly still while he rammed in and dragged out, over and over.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“This right here,” he rasped out with one long thrust, “this is what I fucking live for. So good, Danika, so fucking good.”

I was embarrassed after. We’d made a scene and then a racket. I blushed even as we cleaned up. I didn’t want to show my face after that, but there was no emergency exit out of the bathroom, so we didn’t have much choice.

Tristan was grinning like a fool when he saw my pink cheeks. “If anyone harasses you about it, I’ll kick their ass, okay?”

I rolled my eyes. “I hope you’re joking.”

It was hours before we got out of there, and I could have sworn I was blushing the whole time.

Tristan lay on his back, hands folded behind his head. We were back in his apartment, in his bed, and I was cupping him in my hand, laying half on top of him to watch his face.

His eyes were hooded, his tone unreadable. “Go ahead, Danika, make it all better.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that, aside from you, my life is shit. So please, if you love me, do what you do, and make me forget that for a while.”

He broke my heart when he said things like that.

I kissed his chest, his hands, his abs, soft, loving kisses. If I could have healed him with my devotion, he would stop hurting, and I tried to show him that with every tender touch.

My touch was just as soft as I gripped his hard length, and took him into my mouth. His touch was not soft at all as he gripped my hair and growled for me to suck harder.

Normally, in fact, always that I could remember, he would have reciprocated, but he didn't that night. Instead, the taste of him lingering in my mouth, he fell asleep, still cupped in my hands.

I lay awake for a long time, stroking his hair, watching him sleep, like a mama bear with a cub, knowing he was slipping away, knowing he was on the wrong path, a path that was bad for him and agonizing over what I could do to help him.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### DANIKA

The woman caught my eye as the waiter led us to our seats. It was a beautiful day, with the sun shining down and an ocean breeze that made it pleasant rather than hot. The California coast was a marked and pleasant change from Vegas.

She was an attractive woman, with dark hair and an engaging smile, but that wasn't why I couldn't seem to look away. She was pregnant, her hand stroking over her belly lovingly as she laughed over something with her girlfriend. I'd always thought pregnant women were adorable, and, more and more, I got an ache in my chest just seeing a woman heavy with child.

Tristan noticed my distraction before I'd even had time to unfold my napkin into my lap. He caught my hand across the small table to get my attention, giving me a

questioning smile. He wasn't drunk or strung out today. In fact, he looked healthy and sober, smiling and tan.

"Penny for your thoughts," he teased.

My mouth twisted ruefully. "Not worth it. You'll just make fun of me."

He squeezed my hand. "I will not. I promise. Now tell me what has you so distracted from me on our romantic getaway."

I nodded my head subtly toward the woman across the courtyard.

He followed my motion, but just looked more confused.

"I was just thinking that a happy pregnant woman has it all. What could be better than that? Having a life growing inside of you, knowing that you'll have this little soul to love for the rest of your days."

His smile turned so soft on me. Melt your insides soft. "You want a baby, sweetheart?"

I frowned at him. "Don't joke about things like that. It's cruel."

"I wasn't joking. The second you tell me you want a baby, I'll get to work on it. I thought you'd want to wait a few years, maybe finish college, but I'm more than fine with starting a family now. Whaddya say?"

My heart had started trying to pound its way out of my chest at his first sentence. I sat in stunned silence for a good five minutes while I processed his words.

"I have to say, dead silence was not the reaction I was hoping for."

I chewed on my lip, still silent, just studying his face like it held all of the answers. Finally, when I did speak, my voice was less than steady. “I still can’t tell if you’re joking.”

He leaned forward, no hint of a smile on his face. “It’s not a joke. That’s what I want, what I’ve wanted from the moment that I realized I was in love with you.”

“Isn’t that a little backwards? Aren’t there a few steps we’ve missed before we start talking about babies?”

My hands moved in slow motion to cover my mouth as he reached into his pocket, pulling out a little white box that I told myself couldn’t be what I thought it was.

His head was bent, and his dimples popped up at me as he shot me a rather pained grin. “Please don’t cry, sweetheart. If you cry, I’ll lose my shit. If you really love me, you won’t make me embarrass myself in front of strangers.”

A little whimper escaped me, my vision getting a touch fuzzy as the world shifted into dream territory.

“You’re going to do it, aren’t you? You’re going to make me lose it in front of this crowd of innocent bystanders.”

“Tristan,” I sobbed, burying my face in my hands. “Is that...?” My voice cracked on the question.

His laugh was a gentle rumble that made me want to hit him and kiss him and sob like a baby all at the same time.

“What is that?” I asked, still not looking at him.



He tried to tug my hands away from my face, but I didn't budge. "Danika...look and see."

I shook my head, crying as quietly as I could, which wasn't quiet at all.

He sighed, but his voice was thick with tears when he spoke. "Marry me."

I sobbed harder, thinking that this couldn't be real. I was dreaming, except that in a dream, I'd have been able to stop crying like a lunatic and say yes.

"Shouldn't you be on your knee or something?" I sniveled.

"Goddammit, you're crying like baby and still you manage to sass me," he said wryly.

But he was moving, kneeling down in front of me, his hand going to my thigh to rub soothingly.

"Marry me," he said again.

I threw myself into his arms, burrowing my face in his neck as I bawled my heart out.

"Aw, sweetheart," he soothed, running a hand over my hair, making little sympathetic noises in his throat.

I kept sobbing, great, loud, gasping waves of them, and he just held and soothed me. In that moment, I'd have sworn there was not a more perfect man on earth.

"Is that a yes?" he finally asked.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes," I cried, still not looking at him, still carrying on like a crazy

woman. Gently, almost sneakily, he slipped a ring I'd never even set eyes on onto my finger.

Finally, after I'd taken long enough to calm down and look at him, saw the sheen of tears in his eyes, the gentle smile on his face, I went and lost it again.

"We shouldn't have done that in public," I told him later, when we were finally alone in our borrowed beach house. "I was a mess. That was a horrible idea."

I couldn't stop smiling, studying the shiny rock on my finger like it held the secrets of the universe.

We were sitting side by side on a large beach settee, watching the sun set on the ocean. I couldn't remember a more perfect day.

"Well, I know that now. I had this strange notion in my head that you'd like a romantic gesture in public, and...I stand corrected."

"It's a beautiful ring." It was a princess cut, surrounded by baguettes on a white gold band. I didn't know a thing about diamonds, but it looked big to me, and it sparkled brilliantly.

"I've been saving up. I wanted it to be perfect."

"This is insane. You know that, right? What are we going to tell people." I was thinking of only a few people in particular when I said that.

"Bev won't be too happy about this," he observed, basically reading my mind. "She'll say you're way too young."

"Yes, she will. She doesn't think anyone should get married before thirty. She says

that all the time. I know this sounds weird, but can we not tell her? Just for a little while. I want to show her that this is not a rash decision, and the only thing that will prove that to her is time.”

“Whatever you need to do, sweetheart. As long as I’ve got my ring on your finger, and you have my name.”

That sounded so divine I could hardly stand it.

“Do you mind if I wear it on a chain around my neck sometimes? Just for now.”

“Not at all, but you have to do something for me. Don’t make me wait. Let’s get married as soon as we get back to Vegas.”

“Danika Vega,” I said dreamily, practically floating on my own sense of contentment. What else could I ever want, if I had Tristan forever? I couldn’t come up with one thing.

“Is that a yes?” he asked, a laugh in his voice.

“I already said yes.”

“I mean yes to getting married the second we get back into town.”

I had to turn my head and look up, and up, to meet his gaze. “If that’s what you want, then yes. What’s the hurry though?”

His mouth curved. “This is old-fashioned, especially considering that I don’t even know my own dad, but I want to get married before we get you pregnant. I want to do it in the right order, yanno?”

I wanted to pinch myself. I honestly thought I might be dreaming. “You meant it about wanting a baby now? You really want that?”

He squeezed my hand, looking earnest. “So bad, sweetheart. Is it what you want?”

It was all positively insane, but I didn’t even hesitate. “Yes.” Career, school, dancing. Everything would work itself out, in my deliriously dreamy mind. Bev managed to balance it all. I was a little young, but so what, why couldn’t I? I was willing to work around the clock to have it all, with Tristan.

“I’ll get off the pill,” I heard myself saying, as though it wasn’t even me talking.

He smiled like I’d just made his fondest wish come true. “Perfect. We can start trying immediately. No harm in getting some practice rounds in.”

“I’d say we’ve had plenty of practice.”

“Ah, true, but never enough, wouldn’t you say?”

“I’ll defer to your superior judgement on the subject.”

“Well,” he began wryly. “At least I get to be right about something.”

We enjoyed our two-day getaway to the fullest, sleeping in, walking on the beach, and spending plenty of time in bed. We had a baby to make, after all. I still couldn’t believe it.

We were wed at the courthouse just days after we got back into town.

I wore a sleeveless little yellow sundress with white flowers, and Tristan wore a white polo shirt and khakis. It was simple, but it was perfect.

I cried like a baby through the entire thing.

Tristan's eyes were shining and bright, his smile radiant.

I remember that I had no reservations, not one single doubt that what we were doing was right.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

We didn't tell a soul. What was the rush? We had the rest of our lives to tell them. For now, this happy news belonged only to us. It was a secret that took no toll on our souls. The best kind of secret.

We went out to dinner afterwards to celebrate. Halfway through the meal I went to the restroom, and on the way back to our table, I bumped into a man. It was perfectly innocent. We both said excuse me, and went on our way.

When I got back to my seat, Tristan was glaring at something behind me.

"Need me to go straighten that guy out?" shot out of his mouth the second I was seated.

"Of course not. We just accidentally bumped into each other."

"Bullshit. He was coming on to you."

"We're married now. When is this jealousy of yours going to get better? I'm yours now, until death do us part. Doesn't that help?"

He laughed, threw his head back and laughed like a crazy person. "You thought that would make it better? You don't get it at all. You've turned me into a psychotic jealous monster now. Better?" He laughed again, shaking his head.

I reached across the table and punched his arm. "Incorrigible," I muttered.

TRISTAN

She was stroking me, and I wasn't so much as twitching. That was definitely new for me. "Seriously. I don't know how a little thing like you did it, but you broke my dick."

She pouted up at me, her hand still busy working on my flaccid cock. "What's going on? I don't think I've ever seen it do this."

"I don't know if you've been counting, sweetheart, but there's nothing left there for you right now. I'm all out of juice. I'm not sure it's physically possible for me to try any harder to make a baby today."

She straddled one of my thighs, moving her wet cunt against my skin, rubbing hard and making little noises that had me stirring in her hand.

"Fuck, you're insatiable."

She shot me a seductive smile. "Apparently, I'm not the only one."

"If this is all for the sake of baby-making—"

"Um, you do realize that I likely won't get pregnant for months? I barely stopped taking the pill."

"So this is just good ol' nymphomania?"

She nodded, running her tongue over her teeth.

I groaned, growing in her hand.

"Well, it's not just that," she allowed. "You know I own you now? It's just hit me that you're lawfully mine. It makes sense I'd want to test out my property, right?"

“Test your property, huh?”

“Uh huh. So that’s what I’m doing.” She moved as she spoke, stroking me as she moved on my thigh. “Thoroughly testing out my property.”

Who could resist that? Not me. “Test away. I’m all yours. Do your worst.”

I buried my hands in her hair as she took my cock in her mouth. It felt so fucking good, but I honestly didn’t think I’d be coming again. I wondered what the etiquette was on letting your wife suck your cock indefinitely, enjoying the sucking pull of her mouth to the fullest.

She pulled back before long, licking her lips as she climbed up my body. I groaned as she straddled me, shoving my thick tip against her sopping entrance. I surged up, impaling her.

She shuddered, and I almost came right then.

I plucked at her breasts as she started to move. “You realize that it’s just a prop at this point,” I told her as she rode me. It didn’t help make my point that I was panting out the words. “Just because it’s hard, doesn’t mean it can give you what you want.”

She smiled and hitched up her shoulder in a sexy little shrug. “It’s giving me what I want right now. It’s a mighty fine prop. I’ll just make use of it while you lie there. I promise I’ll leave you alone after I get off again.”

I groaned, my hips bucking her. There was something so luscious about her taking her pleasure, with or without mine. But in the end, we both got ours.

I fell asleep under her, still buried deep, and woke up the same way.



This marriage business suited me just fine.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### FRANKIE

This was not your standard cheesy fetish ball. This was an exclusive gathering of BDSM practitioners, not as a novelty, but as a lifestyle.

Aside from the woman on my arm, there were no novices here. This was the hardcore scene. I was taking it very slowly with her, as she had never done any of this before, and I was more than a little hesitant to be the one to break her in.

Typically, I liked a seasoned sub, who knew how to act and what behaviors to avoid, but something about her drew me in, made me break my own rules, and indulge her whims.

Unfortunately, I had feelings for her, but the verdict was still out on whether she wanted me as a novelty or an actual person.

Estella was avidly curious about the lifestyle I led, and so, after a million questions, I'd decided to just let her see for herself. This gathering would undoubtedly shock her, but there was not a soul here that didn't follow all of the necessary rules to the letter of the law. That was the important part, because here she could observe with no potential threat of harm to her.

It was held in the penthouse of an expensive, exclusive apartment complex just off the strip. I had no idea who owned the place, but it didn't matter. If James was attending that meant it had been vetted well, since he would never attend a gathering that could potentially 'out' him. He was too public a figure not to be careful at maintaining his privacy.

A bald, muscular man met us at the door. Deuce. I knew him. I nodded politely at him as I walked through the entrance. He was a wealthy Dom, and we'd been attending many of the same functions for years.

I didn't look back at Estella, expecting her to follow.

The decor was sparse but modern, almost every surface black. It was a very large suite and not overcrowded. These types of functions never had more than thirty participants, and even that high of a number was rare.

Generally, you could tell the Doms from the subs at a glance. Subs almost always wore less clothing. I was one of the few exceptions, with my ripped up jean skirt, and a shredded black half-shirt that showed off some serious under boob. Estella, in contrast, wore a rather conservative black dress that hugged her soft curves to perfection.

I'd never been a huge fan of covering up my ink. I saw it as art, and displayed it accordingly, my clothes framing my tattoos rather than covering them.

I smiled big when I saw James. I was blessed in the friend department, having many that I was close with, but James would always have a special place in my heart. There were few I admired more, or had so much in common with. I remembered him as a tortured teen, and now, at only twenty-four, a formidable man. I felt pride in him, like a big sister might.

He had Jolene with him. She was his go-to sub. I didn't care for her, but they were compatible in the most rudimentary, base way, and so I understood his attraction to her. He'd never have a complication with that one that his checkbook couldn't cure.

I gave him a big hug and a kiss on the cheek, completely ignoring Jolene, as that was my prerogative. She was no conversationalist.

James had his eye on Estella the second he spotted her behind me, and it barely wavered as we made polite small talk. He wasn't one to mince words, and quickly put the spotlight on her.

“Are you going to introduce us? Where did you find her?”

I smiled. I couldn't really tell if he was interested in her on a personal level, or interested in my interest in her. You didn't often see new faces at these things.

“This is Estella. She's a...friend, who is curious about the lifestyle.”

He didn't question if I trusted her. He had enough faith in me to know that my judgement was sound.

“Is she yours?” He sounded just a touch bored, as he often did. Some of that boredom was cultivated, but just as much of it was a sad sort of ennui.

I sent Estella a cursory glance. She was eyeing up James as most women did the first time they saw him. He was a God, even I could see that, but it still stung to see her display such blatant admiration for someone else, and a man, to boot.

“No. We have no ties. Not like that.” Especially if she was bi. Bi girls were nothing but walking heartbreak for girls like me.

“Well, that's a pity. You two look good together.” His voice was amused.

I shrugged, looking around. “She's new to this, and wants to experience the lifestyle. I'm just her guide, for the moment.”

“May I kiss her, Mr. Cavendish?” Jolene broke in, her voice low and throaty.

That had me clenching my teeth, but Estella wasn't mine. She'd told me clearly that she wanted to experience the lifestyle, and this was certainly a part of that.

"If Mistress Abelli allows, you have my permission to kiss the new girl," James told her, looking at me, his perfect eyebrows lifting in inquiry.

I didn't look at Estella, barely glanced at Jolene. I watched only James as I answered. "Why not? Estella, you may kiss the girl."

I didn't look at first, only catching the movement of Jolene approaching Estella out of the corner of my eye. I turned to look as I heard Jolene moaning obscenely. She was too over the top for my taste. It always seemed to me like she was trying to get attention above all else, even pleasure.

Estella was holding very still, her hands down at her sides. And stiff. The sight of those red lipsticked lips touching Estella's soft, lush, generous mouth made my stomach roil.

Jolene went right for it, burying her hands in the other woman's hair and kissing her hard.

"That's enough," James said quietly.

Jolene instantly pulled back, looking up at him with a seductive smile, blood red lipstick smeared all over her mouth. She looked like a savage little bitch, and I hated her in that moment. But it wasn't my right to be jealous, and I quickly squelched the feeling rising like bile in my throat.

"She tastes delicious, Mr. Cavendish. You should try her."

James arched a brow at her, still just looking bored.

“Do it,” I heard myself saying.

All of us sadists had a masochist hiding inside of us somewhere.

“I haven’t asked, but I have a feeling she doesn’t mind men, either. So taste her, if you’d like.”

He looked surprised, studying me for a long moment. Finally, he shrugged, crooking a finger at her.

He took his time, pulling her to him very slowly, settling a hand in her hair, and one at her waist.

Jolene, ever the attention whore, moved close behind Estella, rubbing her breasts against the other woman’s back. Her delicate hands reached up without asking, and fondled Estella, her tiny hands overflowing with my Estella’s perfectly rounded tits.

I seethed, but kept my silence.

James was looking down at Estella’s downturned face when he barked. “Back off, Jolene. She doesn’t like that, and you know better than to touch without asking.”

Jolene backed off, but she pouted while she did it.

He kissed her. It was the perfect kiss, of course. Soft, sensual, and full of finesse. James did everything well, and I found myself resenting him for that for the first time ever.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

He pulled back rather more quickly than I'd have thought he would, sending me a partly amused, partly chastising look that had my brows drawing together in a question.

Estella was facing mostly away from me, and he turned her very gently with the hand still buried in her wavy hair. His other hand came up and his index finger wiped her cheek. He held it up, as though to show me something, pushing Estella's other cheek softly against his chest.

I stepped forward to look. It took me a moment to realize he'd wiped a tear from her cheek.

"I don't know what kind of things you think I'm into nowadays, Frankie," he told me, sounding exasperated, even while his hand stroked over Estella's hair comfortingly. "But traumatizing your date is not one of them. I think you hurt her feelings. This one likes you."

My mind reeled. Almost reluctantly, I reached out a hand, grabbed her arm, and tugged her out of his arms and to me. I pulled her into my side, closing my eyes as her soft, full breasts pressed into mine.

Without asking, she buried her face in my neck, kissing the pulse there, her wet face touching against my skin, as though to illustrate her tears, and inadvertently reprimanding me.

James sighed, shaking his head, the faintest smile still touching his mouth. "This looks like a private moment to me. We'll leave you to it."

“You don’t have to,” I protested.

“It’s all right. I need to prepare for our demonstration. We’ll talk later.” He walked away, Jolene following in his wake.

Estella’s arms latched around my waist, her breath gasping out of her. Not sobs exactly, more the thing you would do to keep from sobbing.

She was in a state.

“Estella,” I said quietly. Besides my arm thrown over her shoulder, I didn’t touch her. I wasn’t sure what to do with her. “You don’t need to be scared. I won’t tell you to kiss anyone else. You don’t have to touch anyone you don’t want to, okay? I just thought you wanted this whole experience, so I was providing it for you. Most subs take a kiss from Mr. Cavendish as a real honor, and you certainly seemed to be interested in him.” I tried not to make the last bit an accusation, and didn’t know if I succeeded.

She sniffled a bit, pulling back to look at me, her big dark eyes wet and shiny. “I didn’t just want the experience, Frankie. I wanted the experience with you. I’m fascinated by this lifestyle, but more than that, I wanted to see what you were looking for, what you needed me to be for you. I have no desire to be passed around.”

That had me feeling like a real piece of shit, because she wasn’t that far off.

We’d been seeing each other, in a friendly kind of way, for just a few weeks. We’d kissed, and touched, and I’d gotten her off countless times, but I hadn’t thought it meant anything.

In fact, I was half convinced she was a bored little bi girl looking for a walk on the wild side. She wouldn’t be the first.

I'd just kind of assumed, as much as I hated the thought, that she'd want to be passed around at this thing, especially if I was passing her to someone like James, who could questionably make anyone's sexuality flexible.

"I'm sorry," I told her quietly, something I'd likely never said to a sub, though she wasn't quite that. Not yet. Perhaps not ever. I wasn't going to let myself invest in the idea either way. "We can just observe, and later, you can tell me what you liked, what fascinated you."

"I want to know what you like. I need to learn how to please you."

I kissed her, a deep kiss, a distracting kiss, where I tried not to notice that I could taste another woman's lipstick on her mouth.

We'd basically stuck to vanilla so far. It was not my preference, but I liked her company, and I wasn't ready to give it up just yet. Breaking her in ran the risk of losing her.

I pulled back, breathing hard, feeling way too much for this woman I barely knew. The look in her eyes had me wanting to kiss her again, but I restrained myself, instead pulling her back into my side, and pointing at a small platform that had been erected in the corner of the room. Our entertainment was about to begin.

"If you want to know what I like, you should watch this. No one can put on a show like James. This is a real treat right here."

He strode onto the well-lit makeshift stage, shirtless now, his deeply tanned skin, his sleek muscles, set off to perfection under a spotlight.

"Wow," Estella breathed.



I didn't blame her. At least, not too much. James was a sight, hard even for me to look away from when he was putting on a show like this.

His dark gold hair was tied back, setting off his perfect face. He was a combination of utter masculinity and enough stark beauty to make anyone stare. And those eyes of his burned through a person, even at a distance.

Jolene followed him up onto the platform, wearing nothing but a corset that cinched her waist in but left her, aside from some piercings, completely bare above and below.

They were striking together, but I always thought to myself that he could do so much better. He wasn't only a beautiful shell, like her. With James, there was just as much to admire on the inside.

He used a firm hand on her neck to lead her to the St. Andrew's cross that had been erected at the back of the stage. It said a lot about his presence that Estella only seemed to notice it then.

"What is that thing?"

"A St. Andrew's cross."

"What is it for?"

"You'll see."

It was shaped like an X, and slightly tilted back, so when he pushed Jolene against it, face first, she was leaning far forward, showing us everything we needed to see of her privates. She was pierced there, too.

“She’s very beautiful,” Estella told me quietly. I didn’t particularly want to hear that from her, but I kept that to myself.

“Yes, very.”

“Do you like her piercing? Is that something you’re into?” she whispered. I was going too easy on her. She should have been addressing me as Mistress Abelli and staying quiet, but I found that I wanted to indulge her curiosity, wanted to know the reason for it.

“I like piercings,” I allowed.

“I don’t have any.”

I smiled. I’d seen enough of her that she had to know I’d have noticed that. “No, you don’t.”

“Would you like me to get some?”

I tugged lightly on her hair, making her look back at the stage, since I knew she’d been staring at my profile. “If you want to get some, I’ll do them for you, but only if it’s what you want. Don’t do it for my sake.”

She went so still that I tilted my head to study her. Her expression was stiff, as though I’d said something to wound her. I couldn’t imagine what.

I brought my attention back to the stage. This was no time for a chat about her feelings.

James tied his sub’s ankles and wrists to the posts, spreading her wide for our viewing pleasure.

“Have you...been...with her?” Estella whispered, and I could feel her staring at me again.

I pursed my lips, wondering if I should chastise her for talking during a presentation. In the end, I didn’t. It seemed counterproductive to, since she’d come here because of all of her questions.

“No. She’s his. We don’t share like that. And I don’t like her.”

“You shared me.” It was an accusation.

My mouth hardened, with guilt as much as annoyance, I knew. “That was just a kiss, and I wasn’t talking about kisses. And I got your point. I won’t pass you around again unless you ask me to.”

I felt her stiffen, and then, unbelievably, impertinently, she was kissing me, rubbing her tits against mine, and moaning into my mouth.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### FRANKIE

I pulled her back, turning her until I was hugging her from behind, essentially forcing her to look at the stage. “What was that?” I asked her through my teeth.

“I want you. I want to get you off. You never get off with me, and I want you to.”

“Well, then, my sweet, watch the show. There is only one way to get me off, and if you’re interested in seeing what it is, it’s about to go down on that stage right now.”

“Touch me,” she whispered, bringing my hands to her breasts. She was being

completely impudent again, but I fondled her. She was getting a pass tonight. If anyone had a problem with it, they could talk to me. And of course, I loved her tits.

“Don’t you ever wear a bra?” I said into her ear, pinching her nipples hard. Her little black dress was not the sort of thing you were supposed to go braless in, with a chest her size.

She moaned and rubbed against me. “Not for you. I know you love to see them bouncing around. I’ve seen how it distracts you. I’m not wearing panties either. I wanted to give you easy access. I love it when you touch me.”

I shushed her, because she was driving me wild, and because James had just pulled out a large flogger, showing the crowd. It was a heavy-duty cat o’nine, with braided tails that ended in small silver balls. Some hardcore shit.

He said something to Jolene, his voice sharp, as I nuzzled into Estella’s neck, and Jolene responded in the affirmative, her voice pleading.

“I love it when you call me your sweet,” Estella whispered, distracting me again. “It makes me feel pretty.”

“You are pretty, you silly girl. So pretty it hurts.”

“You really think so?” she asked, sounding downright ecstatic about it.

She was distracted, we both were, by the loud sound of the flogger making contact with flesh.

Estella gasped, and I brought one of my hands up to her neck, gripping, the other still kneading at a soft breast. “Watch,” I breathed into her ear.

He struck again, and again, the sound startling and arousing. I glanced up at him briefly, watched his stark muscles playing across his back as he worked his sub over harshly. I'd seen it before. I wasn't looking for me, but more wondering what Estella thought of him, how he moved her, how this moved her.

James worked Jolene over with textbook accuracy, reddening her perfect little ass and thighs, using less force on her back and shoulders. He knew exactly where to strike and in what order. He was a pro.

When he finally let up on Jolene, she was quivering and moaning loudly enough that he barked at her to be quiet.

He acknowledged the crowd with the slightest lift of his brows as he undid his dark trousers, pulling out an impressive erection. The man certainly didn't have stage fright.

"Holy shit," exclaimed Estella.

"Yes, I know," I said wryly. "He even has a perfect cock."

"He's big...and very nicely shaped."

"He's basically the most perfect man on the planet if you don't mind a bit of pain," I told her tonelessly. "He's even a billionaire. Basically God's gift to women."

He pulled a condom from his pocket, opening the packet and rolling it on with swift, economical movements. He didn't bother to take off his pants as he moved back behind Jolene, gripping her neck and driving into her, flogger in hand, whipping hard at her hip as he fucked her.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“I’m not sure I have that kind of a pain tolerance,” Estella said, her voice small and afraid.

“The amount of pain you receive from your Dom is purely subjective. A good Dom will never give you more than you can handle. A good one will know how to read you. Jolene is a glutton for punishment. Those two are demonstrating an extreme, rather than what I would consider the norm.”

“I’d like to try it, but maybe not with that whip he’s using. It looks very...harsh.”

My heart tried to pound itself out of my chest. I couldn’t believe that she had watched that, and still wanted to try to please me. I’d been so certain it would scare her off. Her reaction was more than I could have hoped for. “As your Domme, you’d need to trust me to know what to use. I’d never start you out with something like that. I don’t need anything that extreme, either. Not ever. But I do need something. I’d probably begin with a riding crop, since that can be one of the softer ways to break you in.”

“Okay. I’d like that. Can we try tonight?”

I pinched her nipple hard enough to make her yelp. “You need to learn how to behave yourself. I’ve been spoiling you, when what you need to be learning is that I am the one in control here.”

“Please, Frankie—“

“Mistress Abelli.”

“Please, Mistress Abelli, take control. Do whatever you want with me. Whatever you need. Whatever it takes to please you, because that’s what I want. I can’t stand the way it’s been, with only me enjoying our...encounters.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” I warned her.

“I’ve seen it tonight, right? I think I do know. I want to be with you.”

I began to kiss the side of her neck, one hand moving down, tugging up her dress until I found her hot core, fingering her.

Jolene got really loud with her pleasure and, annoyed, I pulled my hand free. I didn’t want to get Estella off while we were listening to that. It would surely tarnish the beauty of it.

I watched, my hands on her hips now, as James pulled out of Jolene, still hard.

He untied her, pulling her to the front of the stage, then pushing her to her knees, in profile to their captive audience.

“Open your mouth,” he told her, his tone indifferent. He was completely submerged in his Dom role, all of his emotions turned off.

She opened wide, and he shoved himself down her throat. It was an impressive display. Jolene certainly had some oral talent.

After an impressive amount of deep throating, James dragged himself out of her mouth, pulled off his condom, and promptly came all over her face.

The small crowd burst into enthusiastic applause.

He barely spared Jolene another glance as he tucked himself back into his pants, giving his audience a self-deprecating little smile, and a slight bow of his head.

“That was...interesting.” Estella sounded as appalled as she was impressed. The money shot had perhaps taken her out of her comfort zone.

“These demonstrations are generally...over the top. He was showing off, the hedonist.”

“Do you do...demonstrations?”

That had me studying her intently, because I thought I’d detected a hint of more than idle interest in the question. “I’ve had quite a few brushes with exhibitionism. Is that something that might interest you?”

She chewed on her lip so hard that I raised my hand to her face, making her stop by tugging it out of her mouth. “It does, as long as no one else touches me.”

I flushed, feeling more and more shitty about what had happened with Jolene and James, seeing for the first time that she had a keen sort of vulnerability about her.

“I told you. That won’t happen again. I misread you. Badly.”

“I only want you to touch me, but I want you to do it absolutely anywhere you like, in front of anyone you please.”

I took a few deep breaths, then tugged her to the nearest vacant sofa. “Lie on your back, and put your hands above your head.”

She obeyed, and I sat down at her hip, my hand rubbing her stomach through her dress. “Now, no matter what happens, who you feel watching us, I don’t want you



looking at their faces. You understand? If you make eye contact with any of them, I'm going to punish you."

She cleared her throat, her eyes on my hand. "I understand, Mistress Abelli."

That was uncharacteristically proper for her, and I smiled. She was learning.

I inched her dress up over her hips, and then her chest. She was completely bare underneath.

"Keep your hands where they are. If you move them, I'll stop what I'm doing it. Understand?"

"Yes, Mistress Abelli."

I moved down her body, parting her legs wide, fitting my shoulders between them.

I ate her out, leisurely and thoroughly, teasing her until she moaned loud enough to draw the crowd.

I felt someone hovering too close to us and then heard James speak, authority in his voice. "Don't touch her. She belongs to Frankie."

"Oh, I apologize," a very polite male voice responded. "I thought she was available."

"She's not available now," James replied, sounding amused. "And won't be again, I'd wager." He was nothing if not perceptive.

"Well, she has magnificent tits," the other man mused.

I played her with my experienced tongue until she was begging me to make her come,

pulling back to nuzzle her thigh every time I thought she was close. I was torturing her, a delicious sort of torture, the torture of unrequited passion. I wanted badly to tie her up, but I refused to do something to her in front of a crowd that we'd never even tried before in private.

I didn't let up until I heard a tiny sob escape her throat. Then I pulled back to look up at her. I climbed up her body until I was straddling her waist. I fondled her breasts and watched the tears trail down her face, her lush lips trembling, turned on by the sight.

"Why are you crying, my sweet?" I asked her.

"It's too much, Mistress. I need...I need—"

"To get off?"

"Yes, I need it," she sobbed.

"Imagine how I feel, touching you like this. You think I don't need to get off?"

"Please do. Do it. Whatever you need to do to me. I want it." Her lovely accent made the words into poetry.

I patted her cheek, then wiped away each tear. "Later. Later I'll take what I need from you. For now I'll let you have your pleasure." I climbed back down her body.

When I finally let her come, she sobbed and keened, her body jerking.

Our audience cheered enthusiastically.

We were driving home in silence when Estella burst out with, "I don't want you to

share me. I want you to be mine, just mine, and moreover,” she swallowed, her accent noticeably thickening, “I want you to want me all for yourself. I don’t just want to be exclusive. I want you to want it as badly as I do.”

“Well, if you’re bi—“

“I’m not a confused little bi girl, Frankie. I haven’t been with a man since I was too young to know better. James, that man you made me kiss, is the first man to have his mouth on me since I was fifteen.”

“You were looking at him like...”

“He was lovely. Beauty is beauty, but that doesn’t mean I wanted him.”

“Okay,” I allowed, not really believing her, not wanting to. I already felt too in over my head. “When you say you don’t want me to share you, does that mean you’d like to avoid the exhibitionism, as well? Was that too much for you?”

Her hand slid over my thigh. “No, I don’t want to avoid that, and it wasn’t too much.”

“Good. I’d have done more to you, but there are some things I’d like to try in private with you first. And yes, I’d very much like to become exclusive. I’ve wanted you to myself from the start, Estella.” I meant it, and I realized that I didn’t really have a choice but to try with her, even at the risk of being hurt. I was already in too deep.

She was suddenly plastered to my side, nearly making me swerve off the road. She kissed my cheek, again and again, saying something fast in Portuguese and then in English, “I love you. I’m in love with you.”

I pulled over, unbuckling my seatbelt and climbing over her, until we were face to face. “Well, now you’ve done it, my sweet. We can’t go back now. I’m keeping you.”

I kissed her, feeling happier than I could remember.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

DANIKA

“A surprise?” I asked him as he led me to his bedroom. We’d been apart for five days, but as always with our separations, it felt like longer.

I gasped in delight as I saw the picture hanging above his bed.

It had been taken on our wedding day. I was clutching my bouquet of white roses, wearing my little yellow dress. Tristan had his arm around me, and we were both grinning like fools.

He’d blown it up and had it framed. He could be so sweet. The sweetest.

“What a wonderful surprise!” I exclaimed.

“That wasn’t the surprise,” he said into my ear. His tone alone made me shiver in delighted anticipation.

I didn’t have to ask, as he was fitting a blindfold over my eyes. It had been a while since we’d played like this, and I’d found myself fixating on it when we were apart, fantasizing about it more than any of the other things we did.

I held perfectly still as he stripped me down to nothing and took control.

He pulled me to the bed, pushing me down onto my back. His hands were gentle but firm as he pulled my legs wide apart and began to tie both ankles to his bedposts. He kissed the arch of each foot when he was done, and moved on to my hands. He bound

my wrists, then kissed the tip of every finger, making me shiver, my breasts tightening.

He moved away and even through my blindfold, I could see the slight change when the light in the room was dimmed.

I heard him light a match. Almost immediately, the sweet scent of almonds filled the air.

The bed dipped as I felt him sit beside my hip, his hand going to my stomach, rubbing, kneading. I couldn't help myself; I moaned.

He fondled me. He stroked my thighs, rubbing close but staying just shy of my sex. He used his magic hands to play with my body, but only to tease, until I was gasping and begging him in short little breaths for more.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, his voice thick with some emotion that's root eluded me.

"Yes," I said without hesitation. Like this, under his hands, Tristan had taught me that he would always take care of me, pleasure me, satisfy me.

Under his hands, I felt healed of all of the fear for this act that had once defined me. So when tied to his bed, yes, I trusted him implicitly.

"Good," he said, and moved away.

He was gone for a few minutes, and the sweet almond scent became stronger, permeating the room in a delicious, invasive way.

He came back, the bed dipping with his weight again, and he set something warm and

metal onto my stomach.

I gasped.

He chuckled.

“What is that?” I asked.

## Page 23

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“I’m not going to tell you. I’m going to show you.”

The blindfold was secure, but I could see dancing light just bleeding through the bottom. He’d brought the candle close.

I sucked in another hard gasp as I felt hot liquid dribble onto my collarbone. It didn’t hurt, but it was shocking.

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s hot wax.”

I was trembling as I waited for him to do it again.

It landed on my stomach that time, and I writhed, pulling against the restraints. It still wasn’t painful, just so intense I could hardly stand it.

I moaned as he poured a few drops onto my inner thigh, my upper arm, the inside of my knee, alternating to the sensitive spots on my body, but avoiding all of the blatantly sexual ones.

He trickled more wax onto my neck, my wrists, my open palms, and the tops of my feet.

I panted, in a state.

He dripped tiny amounts onto my fingers, my ankles, my hips, my ribs.

I was close to begging for just one touch of his fingers.

He drizzled just drops onto my knees, the bend of my arms, the valley between my breasts.

“Please,” I uttered, wanting, needing anything beyond this delicious teasing game of his.

His answer was to drip a generous amount onto my quivering breasts. I cried out. It still wasn’t a cry of pain, but one of want.

He splashed some directly onto my pelvis, making my hips jerk, then circle in a plea.

Finally, mercifully, he put his hands on me, rubbing the soft wax into my skin, massaging, caressing, squeezing, working.

His hands were reverent, worshipful, devoted, loving; magic.

When he finally moved on top of me, and pushed his hips between my thighs, I was primed.

He buried himself to the hilt with one deep thrust. I’d already been on the edge, and I came, crying out, with a few heavy thrusts.

He pulled out of me, and I moaned a protest, but he returned to me quickly.

I stilled, listening intently as I heard the faintest buzzing sound from directly in front of me.

He positioned himself at my entrance again, working himself in more slowly this time, but just as deep, and when he was buried, I felt what the buzzing sound had



been. Some sort of vibrator that was attached to a cock ring, I assumed, because it left me as he pulled out, then made startling contact again when he was buried home, making direct and perfect contact with my clit.

He was relentless, taking me over the edge again before he took his pleasure, spilling deep inside of me and staying buried deep for a long time, kissing my neck, my mouth, murmuring the sweetest things to me. "I love you, Danika. You being mine is the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"Yes. Yours. Every one of my heartbeats is for you. Every breath, Tristan."

"Oh, boo. You beautiful girl," he groaned. "You're giving me too much." He trembled. "You're spoiling me rotten."

"Every heartbeat. Every breath, Tristan. Yours."

After, as we lazed in the bath and scrubbed the excess wax off, he asked me, "Did you like that?"

"Yes. I'd have guessed that it would hurt more."

"It's a low temperature candle, very soft wax. I know you don't like pain, so I thought it would be a good balance. Frankie suggested it."

"And what about the other?"

"The vibrating cock ring?" His grin was a wicked white flash of teeth. "That one was my idea."

I grinned back. "I figured."

## TRISTAN

I was late again.

I felt like a jerk, as I'd missed her last two performances, and I seemed to be late to everything these days.

I wasn't sure how it happened, but time had just become less and less important to me. Days disappeared in a blur, and I kept telling myself that tomorrow I'd be better, I'd pay more attention, and be on time, but then a few more days would pass, and I'd realize that I'd done it again.

Danika was a saint about it most of the time. She'd look at my face, her eyes getting soft, and ask me if I was okay, and what could she do to make it better? There was always something. Just that soft look in her eyes made it better.

I'd bought a suit for the event, since it was being held in one of the swankier casinos. It had been way more than I thought any piece of clothing was worth, but I'd paid the price, even had the thing tailored. It was all black, from the jacket to the tie, but at least I wouldn't embarrass her in front of her dancing peers by going with the dirty rocker look. I was always proud to have Danika on my arm, and I wanted to return the favor.

Frankie and her new girlfriend, Estella, were waiting for me in the lobby, even though I was late.

She rolled her eyes when she saw me rushing in, but she got over it in a hurry, introducing me proudly to her new girl. I smiled at her. She was a cute little thing. They looked good together.

I thought I must make Estella shy, either that or she was very soft-spoken, because

she barely spoke, just letting Frankie and I catch up.

Frankie's eyes got serious as she studied my face.

She touched a hand to my cheek. "What am I going to do with you, Tristan? You look strung out and tired. What's going on with you?"

I shook my head, pulling away. "I'm fine. Let's just go in, okay?" I didn't need to be told that I looked bad. I knew it. I just needed a little dose of Danika, and I'd be better for a while.

The venue was not what I was expecting. It was bigger, with stadium seating, and a big enough dance floor for several couples to be dancing at once, which they currently were. We were late enough that they'd already started, though I didn't see Danika.

We took our seats, just a few rows back from the judges, and I asked Frankie quietly, "Do you think we might have missed her?"

She shook her head. "No, but she'll be out soon. Good thing you showed up when you did. And it's about damn time, by the way, that you showed up to one of these."

"Tell me about it. Trust me, I don't need to hear it. I know I've screwed up."

"Good thing Danika would forgive you just about anything. That girl is so far gone in love with you, it scares me. You know you're a lucky bastard, don't you?" There was a clear reprimand in her tone.

"I do," I said quietly.

"You know you need to get your act together, don't you?" she asked very, very

quietly, so even Estella, who sat on the other side of her, couldn't catch it. "I hear you've been using some shit that is unacceptable. Lay off the hard stuff, okay? If you won't do it for me, think about Danika, and how she fucking worships you. Do it for her."

I nodded. "I know."

She was right, and I did know it. I resolved to do better. It was just so nice to forget sometimes, to escape into numbness, but I knew that I could quit anytime, and soon was that time. Very soon, I promised myself.

We didn't have to wait long before Danika and her partner took to the floor, walking the circuit hand in hand, their postures very proper.

She wore a red dress, though I wasn't quite sure you could call it that. It was skin tight and backless, with the sides cut out all the way to the front, showing off her sexy little hips, and the top dipping low, showing a deep V between her breasts that had me salivating.

I had no idea how the thing even stayed on, there was so much material missing. A slit in the flowing skirt reached high up on her thigh. The only part of her that seemed to be fully covered up was her arms, and even those were only covered by see-through red lace.

She was luscious. A Goddess.

Her hair was pulled back into a sleek chignon, leaving her exquisite, delicate features prominent, her rosebud mouth painted red. Her eye makeup was black and dramatic, and even from several feet away, I could see how it made her pale eyes stand out, more striking than ever.

She was so beautiful it made my chest ache.

Her partner was slight but muscular, and almost exactly her same height with the heels she was wearing. He was wearing tight pants and a shirt that was open almost to his naval. His hair was brown, his face nondescript.

I thought he looked like a punk.

They began to dance, and it was instantly captivating.

It was an intense, dramatic dance, full of sharp turns, cutting movements, precise swivels, and sweeping, sensual turns. Danika would lift her leg high in the air, and her dance partner would catch her ankle, and lower it softly back to the floor before they swept off again, into another turning, twisting round across the floor.

Her hand would often hook behind his neck, or he would throw her back over his arm until her body was contorted beautifully into a perfect arch.

It was a passionate dance, full of anger, tension, and desire. At one point in the routine, he grabbed her face rather roughly in both hands, and I'm not sure how that made me react outwardly, because I was so up in my head, but Frankie reached over, gripped my arm, and murmured, "Easy there, tiger."

Danika was a seductress out there, each twist of her hips, every dramatic thrust of her shoulder sucking us all deeper into her spell. She captured the audience. Enslaved them.

Even I wasn't immune, though she already owned me. Completely.

Was that sexual tension between them? I knew there was some, at least on his end. With the way that punk looked at her, I was going to be counting to ten a lot tonight.

The lines their bodies made together were dramatic, and undeniably sexual. Was it possible that she wasn't attracted to that punk, at least a little, considering how much time they must have spent together, practicing this?

The lifts made my fists clench, but I told myself I was being a caveman, as Danika would have said.

She moved with such a bewitching elegance that at times I hardly even noticed she had a partner, but at other times, I could focus only on how close that partner of hers was, on how much he touched her. The way his hands moved over her was very free, very familiar.

There was one long twirl at the end. It went on and on, and Danika's leg was lifted over that punk's hip, their bodies flush. She was basically straddling his thigh.

Their bodies made full contact for a complete fifteen seconds.

I counted.

I clapped longer and louder than anyone when it was finished.

They got third, which I thought was complete bullshit. There hadn't been a woman out there that could hold a candle to Danika, in beauty or in talent.

"That's bullshit," I muttered, not quite under my breath.

Frankie heard me, and elbowed me. "Calm down. Third is really good. You will say congratulations, and tell her she did a great job, like a good boyfriend."

I shot her a disgruntled look. "Of course she did a great job. I'm talking about the judges. Third is bullshit. I don't have to know a thing about the tango to see who

looked the best out there.”

Frankie shrugged. “Third is great. They’ve got to put in their time, and they’re both pretty new at this. Getting third as an intermediate at only their third competition is really good. Subtle imperfections we can’t even see, which our amateur eyes don’t even pick up, are what the judges are trained to spot. So pipe down, and don’t cause a scene.”

## Page 24

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“I’m not going to cause a scene. I’d just like to meet the judges, and tell them that they’re full of shit with that third place fucking nonsense. This thing was fucking rigged.”

She patted my arm. “You’re impossible, you know that?”

“Fucking rigged,” I said again, under my breath, but I did drop it. Even more than I wanted to say my piece, I wanted not to embarrass Danika on her night.

At the after party, I dragged her out into an empty hallway for a moment alone. I was all over her in that sexy fucking dress.

“I’m going to fuck you standing up in this little scrap of nothing you’re wearing. Where’s the closest closet? I swear I’ll be quick.”

She laughed, kissing my cheek. “So you liked it? Thank you for coming out. I know this isn’t really your thing.”

“If it’s your thing, it’s my thing, and you were amazing out there. It’s art, what you do. I loved it.”

She blinked several times, then wiped at her eyes. “Thank you. You’re so sweet. I’m so happy you enjoyed it. Frankly, I thought you might be bored.”

I shook my head emphatically. “Show me where that closet is, and I’ll show you just how bored I wasn’t. I could watch you dance forever. It’s my favorite thing in the world that doesn’t involve touching you. Seriously.”



She kissed me, her smile exuberant. “You can be so sweet,” she said into my lips.

I groaned, dragging her against my erection, grinding it into her stomach, my hands on her ass. She kept calling me sweet, but I wasn’t feeling sweet, I was feeling ravenous, and maybe a bit violent.

“We have to get back,” she gasped.

“Give me five minutes,” I growled, inching her skirt up, “I’ll make it count.”

“Not here! Let’s at least find someplace private!”

I stepped away from her, panting. I was holding onto the last piece of my self-control by one tiny thread. “Lead on. I wasn’t kidding about a closet.”

“You can’t mess up my hair, okay? This party will go on for hours, and I want to look my best when I’m meeting all these new people.”

I laughed. She had no problem with me screwing her brains out in a closet, but she was worried about her hair. I thought it was too fucking adorable.

Her nose wrinkled as she saw me laughing. “Shut up. It took the hairdresser two hours to get it just right, so I want to get full use out of it.”

I was still laughing as she led me down the hallway.

She tried each door we passed until we found one that was unlocked. After we got in, it was another chore to find the lights.

I took vague note of the fact that it was some sort of office before I was pinning her to the door, lifting that wisp of a dress up to her hips.

I freed myself with one hand, the other fumbling with her top, trying to pull it down off her shoulders.

She shook her head. "It's taped on in a few places," she explained as she took my hand in hers, sliding it through the opening in her side so I could touch her, skin on skin. My hand snaked up to grip her breast.

I groaned, shifting my hips, rubbing against her until I felt her warm, wet entrance. I pushed in deep, deeper, going until I was buried to the hilt. I didn't move for one beat, two, just enjoying the perfect feel of it.

With a rough groan, I began to move.

I loved her response, her writhing hips, her gasping, ragged cries. I loved the smell of her sweet breath as it panted unsteadily against my face.

My movements became rough, jerky, as I got close. I growled and pawed. My eyes closed as I savored every tight squeeze, every wet slide.

"Oh God Tristan, I love you!" she cried.

Buried deep in her, utterly submerged, body and soul, I came.

Pulling out of her just about had me attacking her again, but I controlled myself. This round had been enough to take the edge off. I could wait a few hours for the rest.

We cleaned up in the nearest bathroom, and Danika took a few minutes to straighten her clothing, and refresh her makeup.

"That dress," I said slowly, letting the words drawl out of my mouth like a caress.

She smiled her seductress smile. It was overkill, at this point. “I knew you’d either love it or hate it.”

“Can’t it be both?”

She laughed. “Or that. It’s part of the show. It’s to catch the judges’ eyes.”

“So you’re saying that I need to go take out some judges?”

She shook her head, still smiling. “You’re impossible.”

“So I’ve been told. In case I didn’t tell you, you look beautiful. That dress is infuriating, but it is ravishing on you.”

She flushed in pleasure. “Thank you. Compliments from you are my absolute favorite.”

I let that one roll around in my head, taking it to mean that she’d gotten a lot of compliments from people that weren’t me.

That was hardly surprising, but still not reassuring. The caveman part of me that she liked to tease me about would have preferred to keep her locked away, for my eyes only.

“Your partner,” I began.

She waved me off. “He’s harmless and a very nice guy, so please don’t scare him off. We’re learning together, and it’s been a good partnership so far.”

I nodded, but my jaw clenched, and I considered dragging her into another room to help me cope with my temper in a way that made us both happy.

I missed my chance, and we were in the party again, mingling with dancers. Somewhere along the way, she was separated from me.

When she reappeared, and she wasn't alone.

"Tristan, this is Anthony, my dance instructor, and my partner, Preston."

It's a punk name, I thought. I smiled at him. It felt unpleasant. "Nice to meet you." I managed not to say it through my teeth.

He tried to smile back, but he had to tilt his head back to look up at me, and I could tell that I intimidated the hell out of him. Good. I planned to scare the shit out of him before we left tonight. He may as well know what I'd do to him if he made a move on my girl.

Danika moved just out of earshot as her instructor introduced her to some other dancers.

"Two cops Tasered me at the same time once, and it barely phased me," I told Preston the Punk, my tone quiet and idle, my smile nasty.

He turned an interesting shade of green.

Danika and Anthony rejoined us, introducing us to someone or other, and I watched Anthony's hand at her waist. I didn't much care for him, either, but at least he hadn't been pawing her on the ballroom floor mere hours before.

The group made small talk, but I stayed quiet, watching Danika, and the way she smiled, the way she laughed. She seemed happy here, with these people.

Preston was hell-bent to get on my shit list, and he sidled close to her often. Once he

even went down on a knee in front of her, handing her a red rose with a flourish. When she moved her hand to take it, he grabbed and kissed it, making some comment about how he loved working with her.

She waved him off, but he stood, embracing her to whisper in her ear.

I don't even remember moving towards them, but I was suddenly there, close enough to touch.

I moved between them, bumping him away from her.

"That's enough," I said, wrapping my arm around her waist.

She gripped my shoulder. "Please, Tristan, don't—"

"Okay, I won't, but tell him not to touch you again."

"We're dance partners!" Preston said, flushing hotly. He still looked scared of me, but not scared enough, clearly. "We have to touch!"

"Not now you don't. You aren't dancing now."

"Tristan, please!" Danika said quietly, sounding mortified.

"Okay, okay," I said, to calm her, but I was looking at Preston.

I let her go, giving him a fake smile as I held out my hand to shake. "Sorry, man," I offered.

He reached his hand out to shake mine, looking none too happy about it.

I grinned as I gripped his hand tight, moving a step closer to give him a pat on the shoulder. I squeezed his hand hard, harder, pounding him on the back. I just wanted to give him a taste of what I could do to him, how much stronger I was.

As I pulled back, I saw from his wide eyes that he'd received my message loud and clear: I could crush him.

In fact, I was looking forward to it.

We went from that mingler to another party, and still Preston stayed close. It irritated me. But I suspected that everything he did that might remind me of his existence, of those hands of his handling my woman with such authority on the dance floor, would irritate the hell out of me.

I kept my hands on her, casually, possessively, constantly.

I staked my claim on her with my touch with no reservations, or compunctions.

I'd keep my hand on her waist while she introduced me to a friend or acquaintance, or stroke her hip while we listened to her instructor gush about her. I'd stroke a hand up to her ribs, pulling her close, my fingers skating close to her breast.

She never moved away from my touch, always shifted closer, no matter that this wasn't the appropriate place for it. She denied me nothing.

I met Preston's curious eyes as I let my hand drift over her body, eventually stopping to cup her ass. Mine, my eyes told him. You might borrow her for a spin on the dance floor, but this was all mine.

I smiled at him, showing my teeth.

The first second I caught her alone in a hallway again, I kissed her. I turned my head and took her mouth for long minutes, thrusting my tongue into her mouth in an aggressive seduction.

I pulled back to look at her sweet face. Her eyes were closed, her expression soft, her mouth slack with desire.

There was no subterfuge here. There never had been. Not from her. From the very beginning, I'd been able to read the sweet passion in her eyes, the artless response, the undeserved devotion.

This woman loved me. I kissed her again.

She pulled back with a gasp. "I think we should be going. Let me go tell Anthony and Frankie."

I headed to the bathroom. As though it were fate, I wound up running into Preston on my way out.

He nodded politely to me, waiting for me to move out of his way.

I just stared at him.

He had clear, guiltless eyes. They irked me. He'd probably never done a thing in his life that made him hate himself, which made me hate him a little just thinking about.

Perhaps if I was some blank slate punk of a man, I'd deserve her love.

But I wasn't that. I was a mess of a man, with a list of regrets so long that it haunted my every waking hour, and made sure I couldn't sleep without chemical assistance. But I'd be damned before I let this punk move in on my girl.

“We’re taking off,” I told him. “To be alone,” I couldn’t seem to help adding.

He nodded. “You’re a lucky man.”

My lip curled. “You bet I am. I’m sure you’re wishing you were lucky like me.”

He just nodded again, his smile pleasant. “I can’t deny it. She’s one in a million. Sweet, beautiful, talented. Funny. She’s always cracking me up in the dance studio.”



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

That infuriated me to a ridiculous degree. I took instant offense.

“You think you know her like I do?” I asked him.

His eyes widened in innocence. “I wasn’t trying to offend. You don’t have any reason to be defensive. She’s loyal—“

I didn’t let him finish, gripping the front of his shirt in my hands, lifting him up on his toes. I shoved him back against the wall, getting in his face. “Don’t even think about it! You’ll never have a chance with her. Never. So if you think that if you just put enough time in, that somehow, someway, you’ll get your shot with her, you can forget it. I’ll always be here, in your way. For-fucking-ever, you understand?”

He didn’t have anything to say to that, just looking at me with wide, frightened eyes. I let him go in disgust.

Good, I thought. Anything was better than him talking and revealing just how much he cared about her.

I only realized as I turned away from him that we had an audience.

Frankie, Estella, Anthony, and of course, Danika stood just a few feet away, all looking at me with different degrees of baffled horror.

Frankie’s reaction was the easiest to take. She smacked her hand to her forehead, muttering, “What the fuck, man?”

Estella's eyes were wide and shocked, but she didn't say a word. More intimidated by me by the minute, I thought.

Anthony shook his head back and forth, throwing his hands in the air like I'd done something way crazier than grab a guy's shirt.

Danika just watched me, arms crossed, eyes troubled. After one pregnant moment, she looked away, striding to Preston.

She touched his arm, asking if he was all right.

"I'm fine," he said shakily. "I'm fine. Just a misunderstanding."

Unaccountably, that just made me want to deck him. Hard.

She gave him a quick hug. "Thanks for being cool about this. I'll see you next week." She let him go quickly, turning away.

He stopped her with a hand on her arm, saying something too low for me to catch.

I body checked him.

Danika moved into my chest, trying to shove me away from him. I let her. As long as she was coming with me, I was fine with that.

She ushered me out of there like the place was on fire. We didn't speak until we were driving home in her car. I just left mine behind. I'd get it later.

"Why Tristan? Why did you behave like that? Did he say something awful?"

I shook my head. My excuse was not so solid as that. "He's just so fucking pleasant."

She shot me a wild-eyed look. “Are you kidding me? You attacked a guy, my friend, because he was being pleasant?”

My hand cut through the air in a negative motion. “No, though that didn’t help. He’s just the kind of naive fucker that reminds me how fucked up I am. Life must be a fucking picnic, to grow up and never have a bad thing happen to you, like your Preston there.”

“First of all, he’s not my Preston. And second, you don’t know a thing about him, or what he’s been through.”

“Oh, was I wrong then? Does he not come from a perfect fucking family, with two parents, probably still married, who think the sun sets in his ass?”

Her mouth twisted, and I could tell she was trying not to smile. “How did you know that? What did you guys talk about?”

“I could just tell. The stars in his eyes are too fucking shiny. And we talked about you. You know he has a thing for you, right?”

She grimaced. “He knows I’m not interested.”

“So that’s a yes, you do know. How fucking perfect. You’ve got a bullpen all ready in case I screw up.”

She pulled over, turning to look at me. “What’s gotten into you? Did something happen?”

I closed my eyes, my head dropping back against the seat. I was being an ass, and I damn well knew it. I’d let my jealousy get the best of me, and I felt like a tool because of it.

“I’m sorry, alright?” It was a plea. “I know I was a jerk.”

“Tristan, answer me. Did something happen?”

I hated talking about some things, and this was one of them. “My mom called me earlier just to tell me that she missed Jared, and that she still blamed me. Sweet, huh?” It didn’t matter how old I got, my mother could still make me feel like scum in a few short sentences.

She made a soft noise of sympathy, unbuckling her seat belt, and climbing over to my seat, hugging me tightly.

I squeezed her back so hard that the breath whooshed out of her.

“Oh, Tristan, you know how wrong she is, don’t you? You know she’s just lashing out, right? She’s like a wounded animal, attacking anyone that gets in reach.”

“Yes, I know,” I spoke softly into her hair. That wasn’t precisely true, but it was the easiest answer.

I needed her comfort more than I needed her sympathy.

“Are you mad at me over the Preston thing?” I asked her. I didn’t deserve her forgiveness, but I needed it if I was going to take my next breath.

I’d been out of line, there was no doubt, but she didn’t hesitate. “No, Tristan. I just want you to take better care of yourself, and I need you to work on your temper.”

“I will,” I promised, my tone solemn.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

## DANIKA

I got a short text from Tristan, asking me to meet him at a specific time at his apartment. I'm not sure what got my back up, but I was suspicious right away. The message just didn't feel like Tristan.

Something was up. I knew it in my gut.

I called him. And called, and called. I left him text after text, but his responses were short, each one stressing the exact time I should come over to his place. I couldn't put my finger on why, but the whole thing reeked of Dean.

I made a point of showing up early, letting myself in the door. I was very quiet. Deliberately stealthy, in fact.

I could hear Dean talking loudly somewhere in the house, and a female voice responding. As I got closer, I could tell that it was Nat. I waited on the other side of the wall from the hallway that led to the two bedrooms, trying to make out what they were saying.

I only caught about every third word, but I could tell they were plotting something. Something nasty. And all the while, not a peep out of Tristan.

Dean said a terse good luck to Nat, moving into his room and closing the door. I moved.

The hallway was empty as I made my way to Tristan's bedroom. I knew what that meant, but I still couldn't believe what I was seeing as I slowly opened the door to his dark bedroom.

I switched on the light just as a topless, fake tits barely jostling Twatalie was slipping

her skirt and panties down past her knees. She was a good six feet from the bed, where a passed out Tristan wasn't so much as twitching.

She started when she saw me, looking guilty as hell. The irony was, if she'd actually been hooking up with my man behind my back, I doubted she'd have shown an ounce of guilt about it. Getting caught faking it, though, now that threw her off.

"Are you serious?" I shouted at her, pissed beyond all measure.

The skank didn't even have the decency to put her clothes back on, instead letting her skirt drop completely to the floor and stepping out of it.

She shrugged at me, her guilty look transforming into a nasty sneer in the time it took her to respond. "Sorry, Danika. We couldn't seem to help ourselves. You know we have this long history together."

"Are you fucking serious right now?" I repeated, starting towards her. I wanted to wrap my hands around her spray-tanned little neck in the worst way.

She took a step back, then another. "We couldn't stay away from each other."

I spared my sleeping Tristan another glance. It was alarming how still he was. "What did you do, drug him? Are you really that desperate? And did you really think I'd fall for this, when I just caught you undressing, with him already asleep? Didn't think I'd come early, did you, you stupid bitch?"

"Fuck you!" she screamed.

I backhanded her, making her stagger back.

It was the single most violent thing I'd ever done in my entire life, and I wasn't

finished.

She tried to scratch me as I grabbed her by the hair, and slapped her again, and then again, batting her hands away easily. My white-hot rage had given me the edge of strength.

I shoved her hard to the ground, taking a few steps back, disgusted that I'd even had to touch her. "Did you think that if I broke up with him, he'd want you again? Quit deluding yourself. You've slept with half of Vegas. You are used goods, and he will never want you again, you dumb whore!"

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye and turned my head to look just as Dean filled the doorway, his shit-eating grin completely out of sync with what was going on.

"Aw, busted!" he said, pleased as punch. "Tough break, Danika. Looks like Tryst had a case of the ex."

I grabbed the nearest hard object (an ashtray) and threw it at his head.

He barely dodged it.

"You piece of shit!" I shouted at him. "You thought I'd fall for this? You're as transparent as glass, you idiot. I heard you plotting this nonsense out weeks ago. I saw this coming a mile away. What are you thinking? Do you want Tristan to leave the band? Because that's what's going to happen if I tell him about your part in this."

Now his reaction looked appropriate. He looked worried.

I moved to Tristan, feeling for his pulse. He was just so still, I'd had to check. It was there, steady and sure, though slow, I thought, and he stirred slightly at my touch, but

didn't rouse.

"What did you do to him?" I snarled at Dean.

"Nothing! I fucking swear! He did that to himself. The rest I'll fess up to, but not that shit. He just needs to sleep it off."

He sounded sincere, but I studied him hard, wondering if he was lying. I wouldn't put anything past him, at this point.

"What the fuck is wrong with you? What did you hope to accomplish with that stunt? Do you want him to kick your ass?"

He shrugged, that infuriating grin still on his face.

"Seriously, what do you want?"

"I want you gone," he told me, still smiling. "Ever since he got all caught up in that pussy of yours, he's a different guy. As long as he's with you, every deal the band gets, every opportunity, is going to be fucking ruined by Yoko Ono."

If my stare could have caused him physical harm, he'd have dropped dead on the spot, bleeding from a million vicious wounds.

"I know how it is with you two," he continued. "You think I haven't heard you? What a joke. I've seen you together. You aren't fucking subtle. You think you can fuck in my kitchen and I won't see it? I've watched you. In the living room, against the door, I've seen firsthand how you lead him around by his dick; how you squeeze it so hard when you're coming that it scrambles his fucking brain. You're good, I'll give you that. You've got him so deep inside your pussy that he can't see straight. But I can. If it's a choice between you or the band, and it is, I choose the band. I choose this



fucking sweet deal we've been given, but because of you, Tristan may just throw it all away."

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

I had to swallow down my bile before I could even speak to him.

“Well, that is his choice to make. What did you think would happen tonight? If this plan worked out just how you wanted, do you think he’d thank you for it? He’d never speak to you again, so you’d have blown this sweet fucking deal yourself. How about, you stay out of our business, just leave us alone, if you want even a shot of him finishing up that record with you? And if you’re real good, if you can refrain from speaking to me again, I won’t tell him about this stunt, which is more than you deserve. We clear?”

The bastard agreed readily enough, but still I knew that he couldn’t be trusted, and I debated all night whether or not to tell Tristan what had happened. The problem was, I didn’t know how he’d react, and that scared me. His temper was a volatile thing, especially when it coincided with his protective streak.

I didn’t sleep, too worried and troubled over what I should be doing. I could get him to respond, and I did every few hours, just to be safe, but then he’d quickly go back to sleep. At what point did he need to go to the hospital? When did you know if a person had overdosed? I couldn’t even believe I was having to wonder this. What had I ignored, that he was this far gone, and I hadn’t known it? We were too good of a match in some ways. I was the enabler to his addict, and even knowing that, I’d let too much go for things to get this out of hand.

In part, I blamed myself, and even knowing how screwed up that was, I couldn’t let the feeling go. I needed to somehow take better care of him, so nothing like this happened again. I was always too busy with one thing or another, and I needed to find more time to fix this, to help him survive his demons, because it was clear that they

were eating him alive.

I looked up his symptoms, and kept vigil through the night. He wasn't conscious for any length of time again until late afternoon the next day, and I'd been through so much by then, mood swing after mood swing, that I didn't have the heart to really lay into him.

Even after he woke, it was a while before he was lucid enough to speak to, but when he was, I said quietly, "You can't do this again. It's not fair. You need to start taking care of yourself."

He didn't protest, in fact agreed easily. "You're right. I'm sorry. It won't happen again. Have you been here since last night?"

I nodded.

I didn't tell him that every second had been torture for me.

There was an anchor, tied around both of his ankles, and it was taking him deep, into black fathomless depths, drowning him slowly but surely.

I didn't tell him that he was dragging me down with him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### DANIKA

I was lying on the carpet like a five year old, Mat on one side of me, Ivan on the other.

"Three in a bed and the little one said!" Ivan shouted out of tune more than sang.

“Roll over!” Mat screamed back.

“Roll over!” I sang.

We all rolled and since we weren’t in a bed, Ivan jumped up instead of falling down, backing two steps away with a grin.

“Boo! Your turn!” Mat complained, nudging me.

“Two in a bed and the little one said!” I sang out of tune, but at least I wasn’t screaming.

“Roll over!” Mat screamed, rivaling a death metal chorus with his volume level.

I got up, backing away to let Mat finish the game. I’d promised him one round of Rollover before dinner.

“One in a bed and the AWESOME one said, Rollover! ROLLOVER!”

He rolled, and stood up, grinning. “I win.”

“That game doesn’t have a winner, stupid,” Ivan told him.

“Hey, now!” I chided. “We don’t use hurtful words. I hear that again, you are going to your room.”

“Okay, boo. What’s for dinner? Can I help?”

I smiled at him, thinking he was the sweetest kid in the world.

“Yeah, boo, what’s for dinner?” Tristan’s deep voice called from the front door,

where he'd been standing for God only knows how long.

I smiled. As always, I'd missed him like crazy, but I stayed where I was. We made a point not to practice PDA in front of the kids, and I was pretty sure I'd jump him if I got within ten feet of him, so I just stood there and took him in.

He looked strung out, but his eyes were soft on me and smiling, and since I didn't want to fight, I didn't mention it. "I got dibs on helping you with kitchen duty, though. I'm pretty sure I outrank the eight year old."

"Hey!" Ivan protested.

"You let me help her, I'll make you my famous cookies after dinner. Deal?"

"Kay!" he said, already racing from the room. With the deal made, he was already onto his next amusement.

"We missed you, Twistan," Mat said, giving him a big smile that showed off his recently lost front teeth.

"I missed you too, kiddo. And I love your singing voice. I see a metal band in your future."

Mat's nose wrinkled. "What's that?"

I shook my head. "We'll explain it when you're old enough to care. In the meantime, will you go tell your mom that dinner will be ready in thirty minutes?"

"Kay." He shuffled away, stopping briefly to head-butt Tristan on the leg on his way out of the room. Tristan ruffled his hair in return. It was adorable.

The kids were out of sight and we were in the kitchen before he gave me a proper hello.

“Missed you, boo,” he murmured as he pulled back from a long kiss. “And seeing you with those kids...” He swallowed hard. “I can’t wait to see you as a mom. You were made for it.”

I pulled away from him and got busy with the meal, blinking back sappy tears. He hugged me from behind, his hand pushing into my stomach and rubbing. “That sounded way too general. What I meant was, I can’t wait until you’re the mother of my children. I think I want five.”

That made me smile. I covered his hand with my own, taking a deep breath. “Who knows? I could already be pregnant.”

“Wouldn’t that be something?” he nuzzled into my neck.

“Wouldn’t it though?” Each word was clipped out neatly through my teeth.

I wanted to say more, but lost my nerve, and the moment passed.

We were walking with the kids and the dogs, a leisurely after dinner stroll.

The boys spotted some of their buddies playing in the grass, and ran off to join them.

Tristan and I stopped, letting the dogs roam on the far end of their leashes as the boys greeted their friends.

Tristan had the brunt of the leashes, so I had one hand free, and I was clutching my phone with it. I couldn’t find words. It seemed easier to express myself in pictures for this.

There was something so inherently nerve-wracking about breaking this news to him. We'd talked about it endlessly. And no one could say we hadn't been giving it our best efforts.

Even so, my hand was shaking as I showed him the picture on my phone.

It showed the result of three pregnancy tests. One had a blue cross, one read simply Pregnant, and the third contained two dark pink parallel lines, one line slightly more faded than the other.

Three positive results, by three different brands. I was nothing if not thorough.

He didn't react much at first, as though his brain wasn't making sense of it. Slowly, his brow furrowed, his mouth forming a question. He grabbed my phone out of my hand, pulling it closer to his face, though his eyesight was keen.

"What the...?" he asked, his voice a croak. "What on earth...?"

It shouldn't have been a shock to either of us that we'd been successful, all things considered, but it had certainly been a shock to me. Him as well, it was apparent by the slack-jawed surprise on his face.

Belatedly, I realized that he'd dropped the lone leash from his right hand. The most troublesome one.

I gasped and pointed. Coffeecup had taken off at a sprint and was nearly out of sight.

"Coffeecup!" I exclaimed. "The chickens!"

"Shit!" Tristan shouted, handing me the rest of the leashes, shoving my phone in his back pocket, and tearing off after the hair-brained dog.

“Bad word, bad word!” Several of the kids in the yard pointed out.

I’d have smacked my forehead if I had a free hand.

I didn’t tear off after him, as I normally would have. I wouldn’t be running through ditches, chasing after dogs again, any time soon. Instead, I held onto the rest of the leashes and waited, my heart in my throat.

The boys approached me, looking concerned.

Mat tugged on my shirt. His eyes were wide, his mouth shaped into an O. They’d been talking with their friends, and hadn’t seen the initial escape. “What happened, boo?”

“Coffeecup got loose.”

“Oh no!” Mat cried.

“It’s going to be a blood bath!” Ivan added, sounding a little too gleeful about the notion.

“Ivan,” I chided.

“It looks like chicken for dinner!” he announced loudly, with relish, sending the neighbor kids into peals of laughter.

I rolled my eyes. Boys.

“Maybe he won’t kill too many,” Mat assured me, studying my face. “Don’t worry, boo. I think he ate right before we left the house.”



I couldn't stifle a laugh at that, kissing the top of his head.

Tristan returned quickly, Coffeecup in tow. He was running. I studied Coffeecup, but I didn't see any blood around his mouth, which was good.

"I caught him in time," Tristan gasped as he stopped in front of me. He handed Coffeecup's leash to Mat, and handed off the rest of my leashes to Ivan, his grin so big it was blinding.

After the dogs were squared away, he approached me, finally meeting my stare.

His hands went to my hips, and he hoisted me up high, spinning me.

What I saw in his eyes then...wonder, joy, and undisguised longing. It was all I could have hoped for.

He'd wanted this, truly wanted his, as I had.

"I can't quite believe it," he said softly as he lowered me.

My smile was tremulous. "It's amazing, isn't it?"

His smile was as soft and tender as I ever could have hoped for. "It's wonderful. Best news I've ever had. What a joy you are for me, Danika. A miracle."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### TRISTAN

I cut the engine, staring with trepidation at my mom's house.

Danika gave me a reassuring pat on the shoulders. This had been her idea. My inclination had been to stay away forever, but I knew she was right. This needed to be settled. Whether I liked it or not, my estrangement from my mother had been weighing on me.

“You coming in?” I asked her.

“I’ll wait out here for a bit. I think it’s for the best. Don’t you?”

Did I? I wasn’t sure. If I was honest, I really didn’t want to deal with any of it.

I needed a drink, but I tried not to break out the booze at ten in the morning, when I was with Danika.

“Wish me luck,” I said with a heavy sigh, getting out of the car.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

“Good luck,” she called out encouragingly just before I shut the door.

I knocked on the door, then rang the bell, waited a full minute, then tried again. Finally, I used my key, dreading what I’d find.

The place was trashed, top to bottom. Pictures were knocked off the walls, a colorful vase from the entryway table smashed to bits on the floor. My mom was on a bender. I wasn’t even a little bit surprised.

The kitchen was covered in filth, dishes with rotting food filling the sink. I figured it hadn’t been cleaned since the funeral. I had to cover my nose and mouth to keep from retching as I made my way through.

The rest of the house that I saw wasn’t much better, though none of the rooms were as ripe as the kitchen, they’d all been through hell. I’d seen her do this before, after particularly bad break-ups, but never this extreme.

I found her in the living room, sprawled out on the couch, wearing sweats and a robe, an open bottle of tequila within easy reach of her open hand.

She was conscious, and just coherent enough to recognize me at a glance. “You,” she began with a sneer, “you’ve got a nerve, showing your face around here.”

I had to remove a pile of clothes to take a seat in the armchair across from her. I met her malevolent gaze squarely, though it was an effort. “I came to check on you. Danika thought you might need some help. I see she was right.”

“Don’t bring her into this! This is atween you and me!” she slurred.

I sighed. I’d hoped giving her time would make her see some reason, but it was apparent it had not. She was determined to blame me for this. “What’s between you and me? Go ahead. Let’s hear it.”

“You killed my baby! You and your friends and that stupid band. Always out partying, always drinking, and whoring, and corrupting my baby boy.”

I shook my head, glancing around the room. If she wanted to blame someone for her youngest child overdosing on a combination of drugs and alcohol, she hadn’t had to look beyond herself. I tried hard not to tell her that, though. I’d come to try to help her, not make her worse, but it went against every instinct I had not to go on the offensive when I was under attack.

“I loved Jared, Mom. You think this isn’t killing me, too? I’d do anything to undo what happened to him. Can’t you see that? I wasn’t even with him when it happened—“

She started sobbing. “My baby boy was all alone when he died. How could you let him die all alone?”

“I’d have been there if I could have. I’d have stopped it.”

“You got him hooked on those drugs! This was your fault!” She grabbed the nearest object, well almost nearest. I couldn’t miss the fact that she didn’t harm her precious bottle of tequila, instead going for the lamp, one of the few intact items in the room.

I dodged it easily, and tried to ignore her.

I ignored her vague curses.

I ignored her specific insults.

She began a diatribe about how I'd been the one to introduce Jared to drugs, and that I could not ignore.

I pointed across the room, at the huge bong that she'd left out in the open on the buffet that connected into the kitchen. "Are you kidding me right now? Are you really too drunk to remember who you're talking to? How old was I when you started handing me your joints? How old was Jared?"

"Fuck you! You're the one that got him drunk when he was thirteen!"

I felt myself shaking with temper, and knew that I needed to leave, but unfortunately, I stayed. "Are we pretending that's the first time he had a drink? Is that what we're doing? You, the mom who thought it was funny to get her little boys drunk at parties, you, are going to blame me for this?"

She was crying even as she started across the room, grabbed a glass vase off the floor, and threw it at my head.

I ducked.

She followed, pummeling my chest with her fists.

That I didn't duck. I let her beat on me. I never had the energy to fight with her for long, because the sad fact was, none of our fighting would bring Jared back. If hating her would have brought him back, I could have done it easily, and forever, but since it didn't, I couldn't hold onto it for longer than it took me to vent my rage aloud.

"You bastard," she bawled between punches, over and over.

I took the abuse, over and over.

She'd always been a volatile drunk, but she didn't hit that hard, so I'd never complained about it much.

This was the scene that Danika walked in on; my mother pounding on my chest and screaming curses at me.

She didn't so much as pause, approaching us, pulling my mother off me.

"Don't you dare," I warned my mom in a low, mean voice. I wasn't sure what I'd do if she put her hands on Danika, but I knew that none of us needed to find out.

Fortunately for her, for all of us, she went with her quietly, turning and sobbing into the other woman's neck.

Danika tugged her gently to sit on the couch, patting her softly on the back. She shot me a sympathetic look, but I could see by the hard set of her mouth that she too was reining in her temper. I knew how she felt about my mom, how angry it made her that she'd placed the blame on me for Jared.

Danika's tone was kind but chiding when my mother finally quieted, and she could speak and be heard. "You need to stop this, Leticia. He is your son, the only person left on this earth that is your child now, and you must stop treating him like this. He is not to blame."

I had to turn away, fists clenched. No one could make me so emotional with just a few words. No one but Danika.

"He blames me, Danika," Leticia sobbed. "Why don't you tell him to stop blaming me, while you're at it?"

“He doesn’t blame you,” Danika told her, a world of patience in her voice. I was glad she could say it. I wasn’t sure just then that I could have gotten those words out. “He’s hurting and you’re hurting, but you are his mother, and you need to stop this. He came here to make peace. Will you turn him away, and open all of these wounds you share even wider? No, no, you won’t. You need each other. You can’t keep going on like this. You’re killing yourself, Leticia.”

I turned back to look just as my mother pulled slightly back from Danika. Leticia was not a large woman, was in fact a few inches shorter, but she dwarfed my tiny Danika. It was amazing how much comfort my girl contained in those toned little arms of hers.

Leticia stroked her cheek, giving her a very affectionate look. “Oh, my pretty girl. I remember the words you spoke at my baby boy’s funeral. You said just the perfect things. You brought me such comfort. I felt like my Jared was standing right next to me, when you spoke about him like that. Where’s my comfort now, though, Danika? I don’t know how to deal with this. I can’t live with what’s happened to my poor, dear Jared. Please, please, find some words to comfort me again.”

Danika pulled her close again, her eyes on me. There was an apology in their pale gray depths that I couldn’t understand. Not until she spoke. “Not long ago, Tristan and I eloped,” she confessed to my mother, shocking me. We hadn’t told a soul, until now.

Leticia sobbed and clutched her, naming her daughter, calling her our beautiful girl, finally sending a few kind words my way, admitting that I had good taste, if nothing else. I’d take it. There was nothing I was more proud of than having Danika love me.

And Danika wasn’t done. “And, Leticia, I’m telling you this because I need you to work on getting better, okay? I need you to be strong for me. I need you to sober up, because I have a very important job for you.”

Leticia straightened, wiping her eyes, looking earnest, and finally, a little sober. “A job?”

“Yes. A very important job. I’m...pregnant, and this baby will need a grandma, Leticia.”

That news did all we could have hoped for, making Leticia gush and cry, happy tears now. She rubbed Danika’s flat belly and gushed.

We hadn’t planned to tell anyone for a few more months, but I saw right away why she’d done it. She’d given my mother something to live for, and my mother held onto that something like a lifeline.

“Will you name the baby Jared, if he’s a boy?” Leticia asked, still rubbing Danika’s taut belly.

Danika didn’t hesitate. “Of course we will.”

“And Leticia, if it’s a girl?” my mother continued, ballsy as ever.

“What else? Yes, Leticia for a girl, and Jared for a boy. But, Leticia, and I’m very serious, I need you to get your act together. This is our first baby, and we’re going to need you to be there for us, to answer our questions, to show us what to do when we’re clueless. Will you do that for us? Will you get healthy again for your grandbaby?”

There were more happy tears, and apologies, some sent my way, to my shock. Effusive reassurances that, of course, yes, she would be better, because she had a grandchild to prepare for.

“Let’s go out and celebrate!” my mother proclaimed later. It was a different woman



speaking then than the one I'd witnessed when I'd first entered the house. Danika had managed to transform her. It was official; she'd gotten every Vega to fall in love with her.

"Yes, let's, but lay off the tequila, please," Danika agreed, managing to sound both warm and wry at the same time, as only she could.

"Yes, yes, no more tequila for me. That stuff is poison."

Leticia seemed to remember the state she was in, patting her hair, her expression horrified. "Give me twenty minutes! I would hate to embarrass you when we're out!" She rushed off.

Danika stood and immediately began to straighten up the house.

"What are you doing?" I asked her, moving to the bottle of tequila. I took a long swig.

"Get rid of that. Dump out any alcohol you see."

I saw her point. I moved to the kitchen. I had to hold my breath, the stench was so bad near the sink. I emptied the remaining contents, tossing the bottle into the trash.

"Find all of her liquor, get rid of it all," she told me as I walked back into the living room.

"Okay, fine, but what are you doing? You don't have to clean her house for her."

"When she comes back here, and she's all alone, what do you think she'll do when she's sitting around in all of her filth? You think she'll clean it or you think she'll go on another bender? Trust me, a cleaner house will help."

I knew she was right, and I began to help her, cleaning and throwing away liquor. At Danika's insistence, I even tossed her bong, grimacing slightly at all of the wasted weed. She was ruthless.

We'd cleaned a good deal of the main floor by the time Leticia made it back downstairs, looking as improved as her cleaned up house.

She made noises about how we shouldn't have, but I could tell she was pleased. She'd needed this visit, needed to know that someone on this earth cared if she lived or died.

Danika could be bossy as hell, but she was usually right.

We went out to eat at a Mexican restaurant just down the street that my mother claimed couldn't match her homemade food. None of us mentioned that she'd had nothing but rotten food in her kitchen.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

When the waiter asked us what we wanted to drink, Danika loudly butted in, ordering for us all. “Just waters tonight.”

I wanted to grumble about it, but I knew she was right. My mother needed to avoid alcohol for a while. I highly doubted she’d been sober in months, and she’d never been a good drunk.

We shared a long, joyful meal, making plans for the baby, my mother happily squeezing my arm every so often in her excitement. This wound had been healed, all thanks to Danika.

We left my mother with a clean house, and a hopeful heart.

All thanks to Danika.

She was the one. If I’d ever had a doubt, I didn’t now. She was the one I’d be thinking about, longing for, until I took my last breath. If I lost her tomorrow, I’d pine for her like a lovesick fool. This was the kind of love that only hit you once in your life.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### DANIKA

I’d called my sister several times after I’d gotten her number. When I had no luck reaching her, Jerry offered to use the number to track her down for me, and I’d let him. He was resourceful like that.

He'd found her living in L.A. She was a waitress and an aspiring actress, and she was willing to drive all the way to Vegas just to meet with me.

I was ecstatic.

Jerry had set up the meeting, but it had taken her a very long time to pin down a date. I'd been more than willing to drive to see her in L.A., but through the filter of Jerry, she'd insisted that she'd prefer to come see me. I was more than willing to take what I could get, even when it took her months to come.

We were supposed to be meeting in the bar and grill on Maryland Parkway, right across from the UNLV campus. I was hurrying to the meeting, running ten minutes behind because of my long-winded Political Science professor, when I saw her.

I stopped in my tracks.

It had been years since I'd seen her, but I recognized her instantly. She'd changed so much, but she was still the beautiful girl I remembered.

My mother said she didn't look like me, but that was wrong. She had light brown hair, which was different, and it fell long and wavy down her back. She'd gotten blonde highlights, which set it off nicely. She was much shorter than me, and even my mother, and built thin, almost waif-like. I looked voluptuous in comparison.

But her face, down to her pale gray eyes, had always been very similar to mine. There was perhaps just a touch less of an exotic tilt to her eyes, but not by much. Even with her light brown hair, she barely passed for Caucasian, on close inspection. For some reason, this had always made my mom think she was plain. But she was wrong. Dahlia was stunning.

She was dressed very preppy, with a pleated gray skirt, white silk top, and a pale pink

cardigan. Black Mary Janes and white knee-high socks completed the look. She looked like an adorable schoolgirl. It was not the look I'd been expecting her to adopt, being an actress/waitress living in L.A., but it looked great on her.

She didn't smile when she saw me, but she waved, big white sunglasses hiding her expressive eyes from me.

I waved back, moving to her. We stopped in the middle of the sidewalk when we reached each other, just staring. I would have hugged her, but I wasn't sure she'd want that, so I kept studying her, taking in this new, grown up version of my sister.

She seemed to do the same. I'd worn a little mod sheath dress that I'd borrowed from Bev. It was light blue, and I had flat ballet slippers that matched almost exactly. I'd been going for conservative but feminine, wanting to make a good impression on my kid sister, and be the polar opposite of how she'd last seen me, in that dark trailer that held so many dark horrors for us both.

"Hey Dahlia," I finally spoke, finding my voice, if barely. Setting eyes on her had me choked up. "You look wonderful. L.A. seems to agree with you."

She nodded shortly, still not smiling. "It's better than here. I can't believe you stayed here. I hate this town."

I couldn't blame her. We'd had a hell of a childhood in Sin City. Somehow, though, I'd made my peace with it. "I'm going to school here. I'm on a decent scholarship, and I work for a great family. I haven't felt any desire to leave. Everything I need is here."

She just gave another short nod. "Can we go sit down somewhere?"

"Yes, of course! I'm so sorry I was late. My professor wouldn't stop talking."

“I wouldn’t know anything about that. I never even finished high school.”

That made me stare unhappily down at my feet. “I’m sorry for that,” I told her quietly.

“Why are you sorry? It wasn’t your fault. We never did have any good odds in our favor. It’s amazing one of us even made it to college.”

There was something in her words that gave me hope, some inkling I could hold onto that she didn’t blame me for everything.

We got a booth, ordered two waters, and then had another long staring match. It was something akin to an awkward silence, although it wasn’t quite that.

I studied her hands. They were so tiny and delicate. How had such a tiny, delicate thing like Dahlia fared against the big bad world all by herself, from such a young age? She’d survived, obviously, but what had she had to go through?

I shuddered to think.

“So how are you?” I asked her quietly and seriously.

That got the tiniest smile out of her. “I’m all right. Waiting tables. Still trying to catch my big break. I can’t complain.”

We shared another long, studying silence.

“So, I um, met your boyfriend,” Dahlia finally began, her lips pursing. I had a hard time reading her, but I thought her expression was displeased.

That had my eyebrows arching in a very curious question. I’d heard nothing about it.

“You’ve met my boyfriend? Tristan?”

She laughed nervously. “Yeah, Tristan. Unless you have more than one?”

I smiled and shook my head. “Not a chance. Just the one. How on earth did you meet him?”

“Your boss, Jerry. He invited me to come see the guys record their album a while ago, and I took him up on the offer. They’re amazing.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Yes they are! Wow I’m jealous. I still haven’t had a chance to come hear them recording.”

She shot me a small, sheepish smile. “I actually went and saw them several times. I couldn’t seem to stay away.”

My mouth twisted wryly. I could see the appeal of five hot guys to a nineteen year old girl. Hell, I doubted any age woman would be immune to them.

“So...you and Tristan. Are you two actually serious?” There was something that I really didn’t like in her tone, as though she weren’t just idly curious.

“Yes,” I said simply. I didn’t feel the need to share any more. I was still feeling her out.

“He’s...a really great guy. I can see why you fell for him.”

“Thanks,” I said slowly, not liking the turn the conversation had taken. I tried to put my finger on it, but there were no definitive red flags. She was hard for me to read, which was sad, because we were sisters, and we’d been inseparable as children.

“So what made you decide to pursue acting?” I asked her, changing the subject, though I was curious. It would have been the last choice I’d have guessed for her. She’d always been such an introvert.

She shrugged, fidgeting in her chair. The question made her uncomfortable, it was clear. “A combination of things. I did one small role, and realized I liked it. Also...it runs in the family.”

I had to think that one over for a while before I gave up. I had no idea what she was talking about. There was just us and our mother, no other family, and none of us were actresses. “What do you mean?”

She cleared her throat, then looked down at her hands. When she spoke, her voice was barely loud enough for me to catch. “Our father is an actor.”

The silence wasn’t awkward this time, but it was long. I sat there, stunned, and tried to understand what she’d just said.

“You know our father?” I finally asked her. It was a mystery that had disturbed me for most of my life. Only in the last few years had I finally made peace with the idea that I would never know who he was. My mother had been stubbornly close-mouthed on the subject.

She ducked her head, flushing. “I do, yes.”

I swallowed. I didn’t know what I was feeling, couldn’t put my finger on it, but it was manifesting itself as a knot in my throat, and a burning in my chest. Why on earth would anything to do with this man, this person who had never been in our lives, had literally abandoned us from the start, bring up some strange emotion inside of me? Emotion that made the smallest news, the tiniest inkling that I might have some answers about him knock the breath out of me. I was angry with myself for feeling



wounded that my sister somehow knew him, and I did not, but there it was.

Finally, “How do you know him? When did this start?”

She never looked up. “When I left that trailer with that sick old man, I found Mom. She was in bad shape, as she usually is, but I asked her if I could move back in with her. I didn’t know where else to go. She said no, but she finally told me who our father was, and she gave me his number. So I went to L.A., and met him.”

Her lip curled into an expression of distaste, but her eyes stayed down. “He was nothing like I’d hoped for. He’s known about us the whole time. He was giving Mom money, but he wanted nothing to do with us. He met with me, and gave me some money, enough to live on for years, but he made it clear he didn’t want to see me again.”

I was overwhelmed.

I just stared at her, trying to figure out where I should start with the questions.

She began to speak again, “He has a family, has four legitimate kids. The oldest is four years older than you, and the youngest is three years younger than me. He’s been a busy guy, but he’s still married. God only knows how many other children he has hidden away. I don’t imagine we’re his only dirty little secret.”

“He’s very famous, and he’s loaded, like mega-loaded.” She looked up, saw my expression, and continued, “He paid my way for a while, when I was underage and had no resources. I guess I’m thankful, in a way, but it does little to soften my resentment. I stopped taking his money as soon as I was able to get on my feet. He won’t even have a phone conversation with me. He has his assistant talk to me. There are no real ties there, and so it didn’t feel right to keep taking his money. Now all I want is to become more famous than him, more famous than his family, so I can

show him what he threw away.” Her voice was passionate by the end, and I felt for her.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, to be grossly neglected by one parent, and completely rejected by the other.

It took me a while, but I finally asked the question that I had to ask. “Who is he?”

“Bronson Giles.”

I’d heard of him. He was a dramatic actor, and critically acclaimed. He was large-boned and handsome, with blond hair and striking pale gray eyes. I recalled that he’d won an Oscar a few years back, and that I’d seen him in several movies, and thought he was good.

“Is that his real name?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “It’s his stage name, but he’s not listed on our birth certificates, and Mom tells me that he never told her his real name.”

I didn’t know what to think, what to feel. Should I be proud that my biological father was famous? I wasn’t. I had no kinship with the man, but finally I had a face, and a basic backstory. Now I wanted to pretend I’d never heard of the man. There was nothing else for me to do.

“I’ll give you his number, if you want it, but I doubt you’ll get any closure on meeting him. Unfortunately, I’m going to have to ask him for more money soon, which I’m not looking forward to. It’s just...I don’t know what else to do.”

“Why?” I asked, troubled by her tone. She sounded so forlorn.

Her face crumpled, and she buried it in her hands. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs.

I wanted to go to her, to walk around the table and embrace her, but I didn’t know that I should. I still didn’t think she’d want me to touch her.

She stopped quickly, straightening. Her face was wet, but her expression was composed again. She took a very deep breath before she spoke. “I’m pregnant, and I don’t know what to do.” She buried her face in her hands again.

I sat frozen, not knowing what to do, or what to say. I didn’t know anything about

her. She seemed too young to have a baby, but she could have been married, for all I knew.

Finally, when she composed herself again, I asked carefully, “Who is the father?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She paused, looking devastated. “I don’t know.”

I didn’t point out that those were two drastically different things.

“Well, if there is anything I can do to help, anything at all, please tell me. I’d love to become a part of your life again. And your baby’s, too. My heart is always open to you,” I had to blink back unexpected tears, “it always has been. I’ve missed you every single day since you left. I’m here for you, however you need me.”

Her face crumpled again, and she looked away.

She reached across the table, not meeting my eyes as she put her hand over mine. “I’m sorry. What happened to us, it was horrible, and I know I made it worse for you. I wish I could take it back. I’m ashamed at how I treated you. I was shocked by what I saw, and I just reacted. I was so broken, so torn apart by all of the things that happened in that fucking trailer, that I ran and just kept running. That’s my only excuse for the way things went down, but I am sorry for it all.”

I was trembling hard, as though a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and my body had to move in some way just to feel its new freedom.

“Thank you,” I whispered. Some things you needed so fundamentally, so desperately, that you couldn’t acknowledge the need until it was met. I acknowledged it now.

I needed my sister. And I needed to know that she didn’t hate me.

“That man was a monster, and I’m sorry I left you alone to his mercy. Forgive me?”

I shook my head, still blinking back tears. “There’s nothing to forgive. I’m so happy you got away. The sooner the better. And I didn’t stay there for much longer after you’d gone.”

“Good. I had so many nightmares about that, about leaving you, and you never making it out of there. But even with the nightmares, I was too terrified to go back. This is the first time I’ve been to Vegas since I left.”

“The old man is dead. A heart attack.” I thought it important to tell her. The news had brought me so much relief.

She took a deep breath, nodding. “That is good. Thank you for telling me. Let’s never talk about him again.”

“Whatever you want. Whatever you need. I’m just happy to have found you again.”

She smiled at me, but it was sad. “Yes. It’s so good to see your face again. I wish it had happened sooner. What are your plans today? We should go shopping, if you’re free.”

I was free. I’d made sure I had the afternoon off for just this purpose, hoping things would work out for the best. They had exceeded my expectations though. I had never dreamed of acceptance from her, or forgiveness.

We shopped for hours at the Fashion Show Mall. Neither of us bought anything. We mostly window-shopped, and chatted about our lives. It was something we used to do as teenagers. We’d hang around the mall every spare second that we could, just to avoid going home.

We talked about our years apart, caught up on as much as we could of what we'd both been doing. I didn't tell her about my own pregnancy, but I had every intention of telling her soon.

It was nearing dinnertime when I finally had to go. "Tristan should be in town by now. He's home for the weekend, and he's supposed to be cooking me dinner at his apartment."

Her face lit up, and so of course, I invited her to join us.

"I have no idea what he's making, but I can guarantee it will be divine," I told her as we walked through the parking garage to our cars.

"Oh, yes, I know," she assured me. "I've had his cooking before."

That made me feel...disgruntled. What had I been missing lately? How was Tristan cooking for my sister, and I somehow hadn't known a thing about it?

It felt wrong.

"How's that? When have you had Tristan's cooking?"

"I visited the band's house for dinner one night, and he was cooking. He made lasagna, and it was to die for."

That was better, but only a little. I still couldn't believe that Tristan had met her and not said a word to me about it. There was no way I wouldn't be grilling him about it later. Not a chance in hell.

I gave her the address in case I lost her, but still had her follow me to the apartment. I sent Tristan one brief text on the way.

Danika: We have an extra guest for dinner.

I didn't check for a response, and put my phone away, as I always did, before I started driving.

It took us forty-five minutes to get from the strip to Tristan's Henderson apartment with the traffic, and I was thinking about Dahlia the entire time.

Something was going on with her, something troubling, beyond even her accidental pregnancy. Even after hours of opening up to each other, she hadn't given away even a hint about how it had happened.

Dahlia was right behind me when I parked. She'd trailed me with diligence for the entire drive.

She followed me closely up the stairs, and to Tristan's front door. When I opened it, unexpectedly, she rushed in first.

Before I could even close the door behind me, she was in the kitchen, throwing her arms around a surprised Tristan, giving him a huge, exuberant hug.

His own arms went slowly and tentatively around her, giving her a ghost of a hug back before he tried to disentangle himself.

"Tristan! It's so wonderful to see you again!" she gushed.

I just stared, feeling a little queasy.

He set his hands on her shoulders, moving her gently away from him. "Nice to see you, too. Excuse me."

He strode to me, wrapping me in his arms, pulling me very close, and kissing me, long and deep. It was nothing that my kid sister needed to see, but that didn't stop him from doing it, and it didn't stop me from reacting. I never had been able to tell the man no.

By the time he pulled back, my brain was near to mush, but that still didn't distract me enough to keep my questions in.

"Why didn't you tell me you'd met my sister?" I asked him, watching his face carefully.

His brow furrowed, and he shot Dahlia one unreadable look before he answered. "I barely met her, so it wasn't such a big deal. Can we talk about it later?"

That answer wasn't what I'd wanted, but I held my tongue, not wanting to have this strange confrontation in front of my sister.

Dahlia and I sat on the couch, chatting it up while Tristan cooked dinner.

He'd come out of the kitchen every so often, sit down beside me, and kiss my on the forehead, the hand, the cheek. He'd always been like this, but my delicate state had seemed to send his natural inclinations into steroid levels. I loved how demonstrative he was, but the fourth time he did it, I noticed the way it made Dahlia look down and, a few times, grimace.

Finally, I had to ask. "Are you okay? Is something the matter?"

She shook her head, but just kept looking down at her hands. "No, no, I'm just fine. You two are really affectionate, huh? I didn't realize how serious you were."

"I told you it was serious," I said carefully. I wondered if I should just tell her how



serious, but then I thought of the Jerry connection. I didn't know how good she was at keeping secrets, and I'd just as soon wait and tell everyone when we were ready to. If Bev didn't hear it directly from me, she'd be so hurt.

"Yeah you did. Did you fall in love with him the second you laid eyes on him?"

I pondered that. "Just about. He and I...we always had chemistry. We tried to fight it at first, but here we are."

She nodded. "Yes. Tristan plus any woman would be mad chemistry."

I didn't appreciate that. And she wasn't done.

"I assumed you'd be head over heels in love with him. Who wouldn't be? But I didn't realize that he was mad for you, as well."

"You didn't? What did you assume? Tell me, what impression has he given you?"

"Well, he's just...I don't know, out of town so much. He's as good as living in L.A., away from you. I just thought that if he was serious, he'd try to be here more."

"You think either of us have a say in the recording schedule? We don't, but it's a temporary problem. I guess he could quit the band, but they should be done in a matter of weeks, I've heard."

She shrugged. "If you say so. It just seems to me that you don't just turn that lifestyle on and off. I don't know, I guess that when I heard he had a girlfriend, and then saw the kind of life he leads over there, I just assumed it was a casual thing. The things that go on in that house would test any serious relationships. I don't know how you can stand it."

“What kinds of things? Do tell.” I felt my cheeks flushing, my temper rising.

She glanced at the kitchen as though she wanted to be sure that Tristan didn’t overhear what she was about to tell me. “Drinking, drugs, constant parties...women,” she said quietly, pointedly.

I felt bile rising in my throat, but I held my composure. “Are you telling me that Tristan’s been unfaithful to me?” The drugs concerned me too, and even the drinking, when he took it to extremes, but that last one caught my attention like nothing else could.

She shook her head quickly, eyes wide, lips pursed. “No, no, that’s not what I’m saying. He’s not like that. But he’s lonely, I can tell. How long will he be lonely before he caves to temptation over there? Every man has needs.”

My jaw clenched. I loved my sister, but I hated that she assumed that she somehow knew Tristan better than I did, that she somehow had an intuition into his needs that I did not.

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“Thanks for your concern,” I told her, trying hard to keep my tone nice, “but it’s my job to see to Tristan’s needs, and if you’ll notice, he’s not complaining. As soon as they get this record done, he’ll be back in town, and everything will be back to normal. We just have a few more weeks left of the long distance relationship.”

My mind avoided the fact that we’d been saying this for months now.

She didn’t look convinced, and I wondered why she needed to be. How did any of this affect her, and why did she feel the need to make it her business? I was getting more agitated by the second.

“And what about when the band goes on tour, to promote the new album? How will things work out then? Would you go with them?”

I blinked. I hadn’t heard anything about a tour from Tristan, though I had heard it mentioned. “Go with them?” I repeated blankly. “Well no, I wouldn’t go with them. I have too much going on here. I couldn’t just quit school, quit working, quit everything to go on tour with them. The idea is ludicrous.”

“I’d do it,” she said passionately.

My hands clenched.

She continued, “I’d do whatever it took to keep a guy like Tristan, even if it meant leaving my whole life behind. Don’t you think he’s worth it?”

It was a much stronger effort this time to keep my tone polite. “I know better than

anyone what he's worth. He means the world to me, but he wouldn't ask me to do something like that. And besides, he hasn't said a word to me about the band going on tour."

She shot a pointed look Tristan's way. His back was to us as he cooked, oblivious to our conversation, in the kitchen.

"Well, you should ask him about it. I don't know why he hasn't told you, but the band is planning a three month tour just as soon as they finish recording."

"Three months?" I burst out, loud enough to turn Tristan's head. He shot me a questioning glance, but I just shook my head. I'd bring it up to him later. It would be ideal if we could have that conversation when we were alone.

I gave Dahlia a rather stiff smile. "He and I can discuss it later. Let's you and I find something else to talk about, huh?"

Tristan made us enchiladas, which he knew were my favorite.

I set the table, getting all three of us tall glasses of ice water.

He brought the bottle of Jack to the table, pouring himself a generous amount. He'd been much better in general since the pregnancy, but his drinking was hitting new levels.

I stared at the bottle. The drinking was becoming more and more troublesome. There was a time when what I thought was his occasional, casual drug use bothered me the most, but the drinking seemed, to me, to be turning into the bigger problem.

"Just to take the edge off," he explained with a charming smile, flashing me his most dangerous dimples.

I thought about how he hadn't used to need to take the edge off around me. It used to be just my company was enough to do that, especially for an evening spent at home.

We ate, and the food was wonderful. I wondered how it was that none of Tristan's cooking ever seemed to set off what seemed to be my constant nausea.

I lasted until dessert before I had to ask, but it was a struggle. "So what's this I hear about a three month tour?"

Tristan froze, a spoonful of chocolate cake halfway to his mouth. He set it down, looking sheepish, then stern as he shot Dahlia a reprimanding look.

Now that I didn't like. If they had spent enough time together to have some sort of silent language, that wasn't good for my peace of mind. What the hell was going on here?

"The record producer is trying to put something together, but I haven't signed on. I haven't committed to anything yet. I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I was going to ask you what you thought about it."

"You know, it's funny how you always say you don't know what you'll do, but you always seem to do whatever the hell they ask you to. I'm thinking you have your decision already, you just don't want to tell me, because you know it's a terrible idea, and I won't approve."

His hand covered my clenched one on the table. "Sweetheart, my decision is made, now. I can see that you don't like the idea, so I won't do it. Simple as that. Like I said, I'd never agreed to it. It was just something that the record producer wanted to do. I have no problem saying no."

He sounded so convincing that I let myself be convinced.

Dahlia wound up crashing on the couch, rather than driving all the way back home late at night, and it wasn't until Tristan and I were alone in the bathroom adjoining his room, brushing our teeth, that I brought it up again. "Why didn't you tell me you had met each other? Why would you keep that from me?"

He spat, setting his toothbrush down, his eyes meeting mine in the mirror. "I didn't want to worry you."

"What does that mean?"

His brow furrowed as he scratched at his jaw. "Don't get upset—"

"That's never a good way to start off."

"Yes, I know. It's not good. Dahlia started coming to the house maybe three months ago. She was hanging around a lot. I tried to warn her off, and I made sure all of the guys knew that she was off-limits, but, I don't know. I thought you'd worry about her, hanging around the guys that much, getting into that scene. She's a very nice girl, but she doesn't listen to me.

"I was hoping," he continued, "when she met up with you again, that you could talk some sense into her, but she just kept putting off the meeting. She stopped coming around the house in L.A. a while ago, so I thought the problem was solved, but I was worried it would hurt your feelings that she'd spent time with the band, and still hadn't so much as called you. I'm relieved you two seemed to hit it off, after all."

"You two seem to have hit it off, as well," I muttered.

He grimaced. "Yeah, I guess. When she came around to the house, I was usually locked up in my room to avoid whatever mess Dean was cooking up, but I did see her a few times. I just assumed she was there to visit one of the other guys, though I

couldn't have said which one.”

“And she told me you still have groupies visiting the house.” I wasn't exactly shocked by this, but even so, I wasn't pleased.

“You know I wouldn't—“

“Yes, I know, but that's not the point. The point is that you promised me you'd make some house rules over there.”

“I did, but that doesn't mean I've been able to enforce them. Every time Dean does it, I refuse to work in the studio the next day, but I've got to tell you, that seems to be just what he wants. He'd love it if we were stranded there inevitably. The first three times he brought random chicks back, I left, went to a hotel, but that didn't change a thing either. I try to kick them out myself, but they're girls. I've kicked Dean's ass, but he doesn't give a shit what I do. I could leave, but at this point, I'd owe the studio more than I can afford to pay back if I back out of this deal. I'm sorry, but it's become a mess that I don't know how to clean up. Right now I just want to finish up and get the hell out of there.”

“How come you didn't tell me about any of this before? It's been going on for months?”

He shrugged, looking unhappy. “You have enough on your plate. What kind of man would I be, if I can't even handle my own problems, especially considering your condition?”

“Just don't go back,” I said suddenly, decisively. “It's bad for you. This thing is taking its toll on you. We'll figure out a way to pay back the studio, and if they try to sue, we've got Bev and Jerry to help you fight them.”

He moved behind me, both hands going to cup my belly very, very gently. “I can do this. I’ll finish it and walk away. We’ll need all of our spare money when this little angel comes along.”

I smiled, my heart in my eyes. I couldn’t help it, every time he talked about the baby, I melted into a puddle at his feet.

“She has a huge crush on you,” I told him after a time my voice very quiet. I did not want to be heard through the walls.

He winced, which told me that he already knew that. “Trust me, I hate that even more than you do. But what am I supposed to do? I have to be nice to her. She’s your sister. I’ve already asked her to back off twice. She stopped hanging around the house, so I think she got the picture.”

That satisfied me, at least on his end, but I had no clue what to do about her. Hopefully she’d just get the picture and move on.

He kissed my neck, one hand going up to palm my breast.

“Tristan,” I told him, trying to sound stern, but falling far short. “We can’t. Not with my sister under the same roof.”

“Oh, hell no. I’ll kick her out right now, if it’s going to be like that.”

I rolled my eyes.

“You’re just going to have to get over this type of shyness. We’ll be living in a house with a baby soon. Are we going to abstain just because our baby is under the same roof?”



I mulled that over. I hadn't thought about the logistics of it yet.

"The answer is no, Danika. There'll be no abstaining. If you need to, you can try to be quiet, but I'm not keeping my hands off you tonight, or any night. And think about how silly you're being, considering all of the times with Bev and the kids under the same roof?"

He had a point, but so did I. "But this is different. The apartment is much smaller, and the sound carries in here."

"I don't fucking care."

This was also a good point. I could see when I'd lost a battle, and this one I conceded gracefully, and unfortunately, loudly.

He stripped me, splayed me out on his bed, and worked on me with his tongue until I was biting my hand not to scream. He was relentless, and finally, when one small shriek burst out of me, he moved up my body and took me hard. There was no mistaking what we'd been up to by the time we were done.

I doubted the neighbors hadn't heard.

"You're an ass. It's like you wanted her to hear."

"Well, let's put it this way. I don't care if she knows, and now you won't be as embarrassed the next time."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DANIKA

In the end, it was the exhaustion that broke me.

I had so much to do, day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute. Between work and school, my life was a marathon, and I didn't know how to slow it down.

There were no pauses for breaks, or naps, or even proper meals.

My fatigue was consuming, but I had always been such a tireless person before the pregnancy that I had no patience for it.

I did not give that fatigue its proper respect.

To this day, I blame myself for that. Hindsight is so very brutal.

It was one misstep, one careless slip that began my unraveling.

I was nearly five months along, a firm bump evident on my belly when I wore something tight, which I'd stopped doing. I wore baggy T-shirts and sweaters, still hiding the pregnancy from Bev, even knowing that it was hardly something I could hide for long. I knew I was being a coward about it, but I hated the idea that this would make her disappointed in me.

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So no one knew. No one but Tristan and I, and Leticia, and Tristan wasn't around much.

It was four a.m. on a Friday, and I was expecting Tristan to be back at his apartment sometime that afternoon. Expecting was a generous word. I was hoping, because he'd told me he'd be there. But, more and more, what he said and what he did were two different things, and I knew that there was a fifty/fifty chance I wouldn't be seeing him until late that night.

He'd been on point for a while, after the initial stunning news of the pregnancy. But then the band had finished up the album, which was everything we'd wanted, and he'd come home to stay.

But my schedule had gotten no better, no less hectic, in fact, it was more so, and our time together still wasn't what it should have been. And so Tristan had too much free time on his hands, which was bad for him. I could see it within days, that this wasn't going to work, and within weeks, desperate to find the right balance, I'd told him to go ahead with the tour.

So to his detriment, we'd gone back to the long distance schedule, and he'd gone on the road. Recording in L.A. had been bad for him. The road was worse. They only had three weeks left of it, and I was counting the days.

I'd been up until one a.m. studying, and I planned to meet up with a study group at the university library for a few hours before my first class.

It'd been a rough week.

I took a five minute shower, rushing in, and unfortunately out, trying to step over the lid of the tub and out with one lurching step that missed its mark, sliding back into the tub.

One foot, and then the other, slipped out from under me, and I jerked forward. I threw my hands out, trying to catch myself, but the lid caught me hard in the stomach before my hands met the ground.

It knocked the breath out of me, the hard metal ridges that formed the tracks of the shower stall cutting sharply into me.

I huddled back into the tub, rubbing my belly, tears stinging my eyes at my clumsy carelessness.

I was thoroughly shaken.

It took me so long to dry off and get dressed, sitting down to slide on every piece of clothing, that I was nearly an hour late to my study group.

But I seemed to be fine after that, and I moved forward with my day, the more time that seemed to pass without any worrisome developments giving me confidence that the fall had done no lasting harm.

It was around five p.m. that I began to cramp. They were not severe cramps, but I called the doctor's office anyway. I had a brief word with the nurse on call. She sounded bored, and impatient, and I explained my problem in a halting tone. I hated to even talk about it aloud, as though acknowledging a possible problem with my baby was allowing that problem to gain more substance. I did not want this fear of mine to become tangible.

I heard gum smack in my ear before the bored female voice quoted an explanation

about braxton hicks contractions, and the things I should look for before I jumped the gun, and hauled off to labor and delivery.

I said a numb goodbye right before the phone went dead at my ear. I'd apparently used up my allotted nurse on-call time.

I called Tristan next, desperate to talk to someone, and he was certainly the only one I could talk to about this. There was no answer.

No answer at five or at six. Or at seven.

At eight, I began to spot. I never called the nurse back, thinking that I'd rather go to labor and delivery than deal with her bored tone again, and none of my symptoms were quite severe enough for that.

I went to his apartment, the cramps getting worse, though not severe.

He wasn't there. Not even Dean was there.

At ten o'clock, I was doubled over by a shooting pain, and the spotting hadn't stopped.

I didn't know who to call. I didn't want to tell anyone how irresponsible I'd been, getting pregnant by a man that didn't show up when he said he would, who wasn't even taking my calls anymore.

I knew I wasn't supposed to be bleeding this much, but then again, didn't you hear all the time about pregnant women spotting?

I didn't know what to do. Should I call an ambulance? The hospital was not that far away, and besides that, after calling Tristan, texting him, over and over for the last

five hours, my phone had died. Dean and Tristan had never bothered to get a home phone. Who did, nowadays, when everyone had a cell? But neither of them were here now, and I didn't have my charger on me.

I didn't panic. I felt too tired, too lethargic to panic. Panic took energy.

The blood was not so very much, I told myself.

I laid down and found a towel, pressing it against me, hoping to stop the flow if I held very, very still. Was it getting worse all of a sudden? Could it even be called spotting anymore? It had become a steady, worrisome flow.

I rubbed my slightly rounded belly, closing my eyes.

I want this baby, I thought. It was the closest I'd ever come to a prayer.

Please, let me keep this baby.

I had never wanted anything more, not even Tristan's love.

TRISTAN

Kenny dropped me off at the curb in front of my apartment building. I was fucked up in the extreme. I knew I'd be catching hell for it later, but at just that moment, I felt no pain, and getting a bit of grief seemed a small price to pay for blessed numbness.

I knew I'd missed some texts from Danika, but she was pissed at me again, our last conversation beginning and ending with her bitching at me for being unreliable, and that was more than I wanted to deal with at the moment.

It took me way too long to fish the keys to my apartment out of my pocket and

fumble the lock open. I stumbled more than walked to my bedroom. I had just begun to unbutton my jeans, my eyes on the bed in the darkened room, when I realized that I wasn't alone.

"Danika," I called softly, not wanting to wake her if she was asleep. I didn't want her to see me like this again, if I could help it.

I lay down beside her, still fully clothed, reaching a tentative hand out to find hers.

Her fingers were limp, her palm cold as I linked our fingers. I moved closer. Even shit-faced, my first instinct was to warm her up.

I slipped under the covers, hugging her to me. She was so deeply asleep that she didn't so much as twitch.

Forgetting entirely that I'd been meaning not to wake her, I slipped my hand up her shirt, then ran it over her body, starting at one cool, rounded breast, over her belly, meeting resistance in the form of bunched up cloth as I tried to delve between her legs.

Impatient, I dug deeper into the swaths of fabric.

I tensed as I my seeking fingers touched something wet and cold.

My heart started pounding.

It was the loudest sound in that still as death room.

I stumbled back, sobering instantly, but becoming no less clumsy as I fumbled along the wall for the light switch, sheer panic setting in.

I'd taken the covers off her with my rough attentions, and so the first thing I saw was the blood.

So much blood.

My breath stuttered in my lungs as I moved back to her, my fingers trembling as I put them to her neck. My eyes closed in relief as I made out her faint pulse.

I swallowed hard as I glanced again at her lower body.

So much blood.

A thick towel bunched between her legs was soaked through with it. Underneath her, the bed was soaked with it.

So much blood. Too much blood.

I fumbled in my pocket, fishing out my phone. I didn't remember dialing 911, or even speaking, and I didn't know how long I held the phone to my ear even after it went dead.

I was terrified to move her, and so I huddled over her, trying to warm her up, pulling her baggy T-shirt down to cover as much of her lower body as I could manage.

I stroked her hair, and murmured reassurances in her ear. They were for my benefit alone, since she didn't stir, didn't so much as twitch under my reverent, soothing hands.

I'd never been so scared, abject terror making my limbs numb. I could hear my teeth chattering with it, tapping out a click-click-click noise that seemed to fill up the room.



Click-click-click.

I pulled the blanket up to her neck. I checked her pulse again.

Click-click-click.

Time slowed down, until it felt like I'd been waiting hours, and still she didn't rouse.

Finally, the sound of the ambulance approaching, a fairly common sound in Vegas, and one I'd never been so relieved to hear before in my life, got me moving.

I made sure the front door was unlocked, reconsidered, and just left it open.

I was hovering over her when the paramedics came in. They were loud but efficient.

My eyes stayed glued to Danika, desperate for any sign of life from her.

She stirred as they moved her from the bed to a stretcher, her hands shifting over her taut belly.

My gut clenched. It could have been the state I'd been in walking in the door, or just plain shock, but it only occurred to me then that the baby was in danger. I'd been too singularly focused on the peril Danika was in to even consider it before.

No. My mind shied away from it, from either possibility. I couldn't take that, not on top of everything else.

I'd been a flake lately, just letting too many things go, but this, this was too much. I couldn't bear the thought.

I wanted our little family, needed it.

Danika roused in the ambulance. She cried and screamed and cursed as that little life bled out of her, but in the end, she was as helpless as I was.

Hours later, utterly defeated, she finally rested, with the help of some much needed painkillers.

I spent the longest night of my life in the St. Rose Dominican hospital, where we lost our baby.

I hadn't thought that life would hand me another thing that could break me like Jared's death had, but this did.

Jared's loss had left a small hole in my heart that had been seeping slowly and steadily since his death, but this, this was a hemorrhage.

My mind focused, with morbid determination, on the things I could have done differently.

I sat in that hospital room, moving as close to a sleeping Danika as I could get, and went through every call I'd missed, every message I'd ignored. For hours, she'd reached out to me, but I hadn't been there, and look what had happened. No woman should have to go through something like that alone. Her phone had died, I'd heard her mumbling to the paramedics earlier. She'd been stranded there, no help in sight.

No matter which way I turned that over in my brain, I was to blame.

I kept vigil over her prone figure through that long night and hated myself. It was a poison, that hate, and once it got in my bloodstream, it stayed there.

The abject horror of finding her the way I had, not knowing if she would live or die, the horror turning into pain at our loss, and finally, that pain turning into a quiet

resolve.

What was I doing? What was I thinking? Did I have a right to keep this woman, this beautiful creature with her bright future, in my twisted disaster of a life? Was I strong enough to let her go?

I had no answers. Or at least none that I was willing to acknowledge just then. I had lost too much already.

When she finally woke, she barely looked at me. When I asked her how she was doing, she only closed her eyes, tears seeping out of her lowered lids.

Did she hate me now, too? I didn't have the courage to ask.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," I told her, clutching her hand and crying with her.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

I was driving her home before she delivered the final blow, her whisper ragged with grief.

“It was a boy.”

I pulled the car over, my shoulders shaking. Her hand touched my arm, and I turned to her, sobbing into her neck.

“Jared Jeremiah Vega,” she said, her voice devastated.

Broken.

“Jeremiah for Jerry?” I finally found the strength to ask.

I felt her nodding against my cheek.

“It was the perfect name, Danika.”

She’d been crying silently, but now she began to sob. It came out of her in a great, heaving flood.

“This is all my fault,” she told me. “I fell down in the shower that morning, then just went on with my day, thinking everything would be fine. I should have gone straight to the hospital. Then none of this would have happened. We’d still be having our baby boy.”

I couldn’t stand it, couldn’t take that she was blaming herself for an accident. “No,

no, no,” I whispered tenderly into her hair. “It’s not your fault. Don’t ever say that. I can’t bear it. It’s my fault. I should have been there.”

She protested, telling me it wasn’t, and I didn’t know if it was her tone or my conscience, but I didn’t believe her.

Tragedy never took its full chunk out of you right away. It always took a while to hit you head on, and sink in and for something substantial, some hint of the real feeling, the real reaction, to come to the surface, and this loss was not done taking its toll on us.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### DANIKA

After that, it was a slow motion free fall for us.

A quiet, helpless unraveling.

Some days I raged against it with every fiber of my being, but others...others I was as far gone as Tristan, and I didn’t even need to be drunk to get there.

So much had been torn apart with the miscarriage, so many little pieces of us that needed to be sewn back together. Only, there was hardly any thread left. Barely enough for one of us, and certainly not enough for both.

He was gone nearly all the time after that, it seemed. I had no one to comfort me, no one to share in the pain.

I never told Bev or Jerry what had happened. As far as they knew, I’d simply spent a few days at Tristan’s apartment. Nothing out of the ordinary.

I couldn't make myself talk about it, and though Bev's keen eyes told me that she knew that something was wrong, I never admitted it out loud.

I visited his apartment for one of his rare visits to town. He was supposed to be expecting me, but it was obvious that he wasn't prepared when I walked into his bedroom.

I found him alone, lying back against his headboard. I could tell that he was wasted at a glance. With what, I couldn't say, and didn't ask.

The what of it didn't matter.

What mattered was the cause. And the fact that he didn't hide it from me, when he'd always put some filter on it before, for my sake.

I could tell that he'd just given up.

I didn't blink. I didn't look away from his bloodshot eyes, or his shaky hands as he lit a smoke, trying and failing to meet my eyes.

I took it all in, the brutal reality of it, my face wet with tears, my jaw trembling nearly as hard as my voice when I spoke. "What can I do? Tell me, and I'll do it. Tell me how to help you."

To save you, I thought.

He didn't flinch. His sensitivity, his feelings for me, had just deteriorated that much, or he was just that high. It could have been either, or both. There was nothing in his voice when he spoke. Nothing at all, not even an echo of the things he should have been feeling in response to my pain. "You can't. I can't."

“Well, someone has to. Can’t you see what you’re doing to yourself? Can’t you see what it’s doing to me? Don’t you care that it’s tearing me apart?”

“What do you want from me?” His voice, at least, was animated now.

“Everything!” I shouted, enraged, heartbroken. “Everything you promised, and everything I need. What I’m willing to give to you is what I want from you. Can’t you do that for me, Tristan? Isn’t there enough of you left?”

He just shook his head, his eyes drifting closed. I’d been as good as arguing with the bed.

He’d remember none of this in the morning.

But I remembered.

I remembered everything. I had no drugs to numb me, to make me forget. I couldn’t take that path.

I wouldn’t make it back.

And neither, perhaps, would Tristan.

I began to notice a gradual change in myself, as well. I was becoming less of myself, or rather, a different version of myself. I became less Danika, the strong young woman who worked hard to build a good future, and became more Dani, the waif of a girl I’d been when I was a kid, who could never get enough love, because she had never gotten any love at all.

I fell back into old patterns from my childhood, the patterns of an enabler.

Tristan was not my mother. Our relationship was, of course, dissimilar in nature, and he was a much more loving charge to me than my mother had ever been. But I was becoming who I'd been when I'd been in my mother's care, or arguably, she mine. The first time this occurred to me, it made me so sick that I had to run to the bathroom and lose my dinner.

No, I thought. Please, no. I love him. He loves me. We can be good for each other. He just needs more time.

This sad little phrase became a mantra in my mind. I lived for what if and if only, and I became who I thought Tristan needed me to be, rather than so much as considering what I might need for myself. That was the debilitating power that he held over me, that I'd given him along with my heart.

I'd heard about depression, had suffered from different forms of it in my abused youth, but a crippling one overtook me after that.

The most despondent low that followed the most soaring high.

For the first time in my life, I began to fantasize about dying. Not ending my own life, necessarily, but about the peace of it, the tranquility.

It was a dark time for me. The blackest phase I'd ever experienced. My thoughts constantly took morbid, twisted turns.

I would look at ceiling fans, and see myself hanging from them. Every intersection while I drove to school was a potential end to all of my pain. A leftover handful of painkillers served a new purpose in my mind, suddenly.

I would fantasize about how life would go on without me, obsessively so. Perhaps my death would be the wake-up call he needed to get his act together. Perhaps he would



miss me so much, he'd follow me to some better place, where the weight of life's sorrows held less of a hold on our every waking thought. Jared would be there, and our barely formed child would have shape and life, and we could hold him and touch him, and call him by name, and things would be better.

Unfortunately, it took another tragedy to bring me out of that dark depression.

As though my own morbid thoughts had substance, the next blow seemed to come from my very own nightmares. What I had fixated on, Leticia had embraced.

To say Leticia hadn't taken news of the miscarriage well was a gross understatement. In fact, she'd asked me not to come see her any more. I wasn't even hurt by that. I was worried, a bit, because I knew she needed comfort, and was refusing it, but I had so little comfort to give anymore.

I left her in peace without a fight.

In hindsight, I should have fought, but I'll never know if that would have changed anything.

We all make our own choices, and Leticia's was impulsive and permanent.

Tristan was making a rare visit to my house, and at first my heart soared, thinking that he was finally ready to start getting better, and he was coming to me to help him.

One glance at his face when I opened the front door told me I was dead wrong.

I led him to my room without a word, sitting on the edge of my bed beside him. He clutched my hand, looking down at his lap, and I threw my other arm over his shoulders, rubbing soothingly.

I let the silence keep us company, never knowing what to say to him anymore. The miscarriage had taken so much of the fight out of him, and he'd already been through too many rounds before that, so there hadn't been much fight left.

Finally, after an eternity, as I stroked his back, and rubbed his shoulders, and he shuddered under my hands, he began to speak.

I could barely make the words out at first. They were given to me in quiet mumbles, in gasping sobs.

"Oh no," I whispered, as I began to piece it together.

I turned to him then, pulling him into my body, laying back and forcing him to lie on top of me. He didn't put up a fight, all the while whispering about his mother, his poor mother, all alone when she'd ended her life at the bottom of a bottle of sleeping pills.

I comforted him. That was my job. But my initial reaction, my first gut-deep response was pure rage. How dare she? How could she be so selfish? How could she do this to my poor, dear Tristan?

It was such a permanent solution to her problems.

It was hard to fathom, hard to process.

Leticia had been a conflicted woman. And that about summed up my feelings for her.

I loved her, and inside of real love, there was always room for forgiveness.

The way she'd treated Tristan had infuriated me, but I'd still felt for her. Always, even now.

In the end, that initial response was the most fleeting of things. More than anything else, I pitied her. We all had a breaking point, and life had landed too many solid blows for her to survive, too many tragedies for her poor mind to handle.

When I spoke at her funeral, it felt like the past repeating itself, though Tristan and I were the only attendees for this one.

Suicides were a touchy thing.

“I know she wasn’t perfect. I know well how flawed she was, but she was a loving woman. She loved with her whole heart, and when that whole heart was broken, she left us.”

I spoke directly to Tristan. “She loved you. I know she did. She was blinded by her grief, but I know that, in her lucid moments, she adored you, and felt pride that you were her son.

“I’m no authority on the universe. I know little about God, or the stars, or the afterlife, but I do know this: somewhere her soul still survives, watching over you. Somewhere they all survive. Jared, our son, your mother.

“My relationship with Leticia was brief but powerful. I felt like she loved me, no, I know she did, and it meant a lot to me. No matter how selfish it was, her death shouldn’t have more meaning than her life, so let’s remember her for the way that she loved, not the way that she died.”

Tristan met my stare and nodded, his eyes shiny, his jaw trembling. He was suffering, but I’d said the right thing. I was gratified, that even in the black cloud his mind had become, I could bring him some little bit of relief.

As terrible as the tragedy of Leticia had been, it served a desperate purpose for me, at

least.

It was as though the fog had been lifted from my brain, and I could think again. I was still hurting, my heart still aching with all of the loss, but I began to attempt to live again.

To wake, to move, to try taking small steps in the right direction. I was alone in that path.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

DANIKA

Tristan's decline was steady and sure after that.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

Every tragedy, every hardship, seemed to suck him just a little bit deeper into the grip of his own personal hell.

It felt like every slip up, every relapse, was pulling us down, until the weight of all of our failures was dragging us under.

At first, we were drowning together, but my will to survive was too strong to let that continue forever.

My hold on him became weaker and weaker, and eventually, every finger broken, my hands opened, and I let him go.

No one could say I didn't fight for him. No one could say I didn't lose.

I strode into his apartment, annoyed and frustrated, and disappointed. They were all feelings I'd become accustomed to where Tristan was concerned.

He'd stood me up again. We were supposed to meet for dinner two hours ago.

He was by himself, sprawled out on his sofa.

I saw that he was playing with a little black wristband, the kind Jared used to wear, and that we'd given out at his funeral. I wasn't surprised.

I was, however, angry. My fear, my desperation, my need to help him, all seemed to be channeling itself into a bitter anger these days. That anger kept me up at night.

I was trying to be there for him, but who was there for me?

His eyes were glazed, and pointing up at the ceiling.

“I get why you’re doing this. Don’t think I don’t. The pain is so harsh that you’ll take anything to numb it. It’s so bad that you’d be willing to lose everything else in your life, if that pain would just go with it.”

He was silent, turning that little band in his hands, over and over.

That silence told me everything.

“Do you not understand how far gone you are? Or do you just not care anymore?”

Silence.

“It should tell you something that I’ve already had to think about what your black wrist band will be, when you follow him.”

He stopped twirling it for a brief moment, then resumed the movement, still silent.

“I’ve decided it will be a deck of cards. Does that seem appropriate to you? You have veto powers, of course, since it’s your funeral I’m talking about.” My voice broke on the word funeral.

He sighed, finally moving his eyes from the ceiling to my face, looking awfully annoyed for someone who was high as a kite.

“You think he would want this? For you to follow him? Jared doesn’t need you to do that, Tristan. Leticia doesn’t need you where she went. Our baby,” I gasped. I had to stop and compose myself before continuing. I still couldn’t talk about our lost little

angel without breaking down. “Our baby doesn’t need you to follow him. Certainly there’s nothing you can do for him now. But I need things from you. I’m right here, and I’m asking you to stop chasing these ghosts, and start living again, with me.”

“You don’t need me. You don’t need anybody, Danika. You’re stronger than all of us, and you’re better off without me.”

“Don’t start on that. I’m just going to tell you one thing, and then I’ll leave you to it. This is it, Tristan. This is the last warning. I find you like this again, I’m done. You wanted an ultimatum. You got one.”

I went home, my shoulders slumped from the weight on them.

I lay down on my bed and did not get back up.

Not for hours.

Not for days.

What was left of a woman when she gave a man everything?

The answer was easy.

Impossible to deny, even for me.

Nothing.

Nothing was left of her.

Had I given too much? Was there enough of me left to even try to move on from this?

Is this what had happened to my mother? I wondered, feeling some bit of sympathy for her for the first time in years. Had some man broken her spirit, so much so, she had become a shell of a woman without him? Would I let myself turn into some apathetic ghost of a woman?

No, I thought furiously. I was stronger than her. I would struggle until the end. Even if I could see now what it would take for me to become like her, it didn't mean I had to. There was one undeniable quality that I had known about myself since I was a very tiny, unloved child.

I was a survivor.

And so, I had to try to move on from this.

TRISTAN

She was at my apartment, slamming around in my kitchen. She was pissed at me again.

She'd brought me a cup of coffee, and I sipped on it while I listened to her venting her frustration at my kitchen. I winced as I heard something break.

The thought suddenly occurred to me that our separations weren't doing this to her.

She seemed harried, yes, stressed out and busy, of course, but the pain in her eyes, the rage, came not from my absence, but from my presence.

That killed me.

A light suddenly went on.



It wasn't a spotlight, but a floodlight, illuminating everything I didn't want to see, every dark, sinister corner of my pitiful existence. The facts were the light, and I'd been ignoring the facts for way too long.

My life was cursed. People I loved, people close to me, who depended on me, had died, and I was responsible. As far as I was concerned, every single one of those deaths had been preventable, and I had failed to prevent them.

I had no future. This had been clear to me for a while now.

But what suddenly became clear, what made my skin crawl with its pristine simplicity, was that Danika did not have to share this future with me. She didn't have to be dragged down into the abyss with me. I'd been selfishly keeping her on this sinking ship, and she deserved so much better.

What had I ever been thinking, dragging her into my mess of a life? How had I ever thought that I could be good enough for her?

She came back into my room carrying a plate of food. She set it on the nightstand, then came to stand in front of me, hands on her hips.

I set my cup on the floor, my hands going to her hips. She was wearing tight, low-slung jeans, and I buried my face against the bared skin between the top of her pants and the bottom of her shirt.

Could I really do this? I wondered.

One thing was for certain, I couldn't do it without touching her at least one last time.

Her hands went to my hair, gripping. I could tell that, with just the small touch I'd given her, she was softening in her anger. She never stayed mad at me for long, no

matter how much I deserved it.

I kissed her belly, that perfect belly. “Danika,” I breathed against her skin. My arms snaked around her body, clutching her. “We can’t do this anymore.”

She stiffened, then relaxed, stroking my hair. “Drink some more coffee, Tristan. Get sobered up before you start spouting nonsense at me again.”

I kissed her belly again, closing my eyes, digging deep for strength that I didn’t think I possessed.

“This isn’t working, Danika. You know it as well as I do.”

“Stop it!” she said sharply, tugging my head back, making me look at her.

I flinched away.

She was ruthless, following me, kissing me, lying down beside me.

I groaned and covered her body with mine, needing to feel her against me more than I needed to breathe, even if this was the last time.

“I’m sorry,” I breathed against her face. “I’m done.”

I couldn’t take her eyes for even a second, couldn’t take the wounded, condemning stare, the pursed, angry mouth. “Stop it,” she said, but this time her voice was weaker, less certain.

Still, she wasn’t done torturing us both, and lifted her head to press her lips to mine. I took her mouth with a rough moan.

She was going to be taking another important piece of me with her when I made her leave. There was no helping it. No changing it.

“We’re over, sweetheart,” I told her, when we pulled away to catch our breaths.

“No,” she protested, her voice a faint thread.

She kissed me again, and I kissed her back. She peeled her shirt off, and I helped her, my hands roaming freely over her bared skin. She reached down to free my thick length into her hand, and I pushed hard against her palm.

I was only human, and a flawed one at that.

She stripped us both bare, and pulled me on top of her. I didn’t enter her, just lay on top of her, our bodies molded perfectly together, our heartbeats pumping restlessly against each other, my erection throbbing along her entrance.

It was the most exquisite torture.

When all else failed, I thought, become the kind of asshole that I knew she would hate. I squeezed my eyes shut as though bracing for a blow, face buried in her neck. “I think I’d be better off on my own. Being tied down just isn’t doing it for me.”

She was sobbing, and I held her. She kissed me, still sobbing, and I kissed her back, eyes still closed tight. “Why, Tristan, why? Why are you doing this?”

“We need to do what’s best for us, and at this point in our lives, we aren’t best for each other.” I used the we, because if I made it only about her, she’d never accept it. The we was a lie, but it was also my only hope. “This marriage was a mistake.”

She writhed against me, shifting her hips to push me inside of her. Her sobs came in

sweet, soft pants against my cheek. With a rough gasp, I shoved in to the hilt.

I was dying, and in my death throes, I let myself have her one last time.

Every stroke was sweet agony. Every cry I drew from her held as much pain as it did pleasure.

I rutted out my pleasure inside of her sweet, perfect body, and a torrent of self-loathing tainted every rough stroke.

My skin should have been crawling in shame when I was done. I should have never been able to rest again, for the guilt.

But should have meant nothing. I came, buried deep inside of her, and still buried deep, I fell asleep.

When I woke again, fourteen hours later, she was gone.

DANIKA

He lay on top of me, buried deep, and fell asleep.

He slept all night like that, and I did not move him, did not want to. I gasped breath in and out and closed my eyes and thought that I would never forget this feeling, of him on me and in me, of him consuming my soul and letting me go.

He was too callous, too far gone to realize that I'd never be free of him, and all he'd really done was set me adrift.

I never left that bed.

That feeling of helpless abandonment and unendurable longing stayed inside of me, for hours, for months, for minutes, for weeks.

For years.

I went through my life, through tragedy and pain, through hardship and life, and my heart, my very soul, stayed in that bed.

I felt broken after that last encounter.

Was broken.

Pieces of me had been shattered on that bed, important, essential pieces, and they would not, could not, ever find their way back together.

But I kept going. Life is cruel like that.

The facts revealed themselves all too clearly, when I could look at it through the numb filter of fresh, untested grief. That brief moment between the denial and the agony.

I had two distinct paths to choose from in front of me.

One was painfully bright, and paved with brutal certainties. I could move on. It would hurt, it would kill some parts of me, but I could still have a future. It was not the path I desired, but life was not about getting what you wanted, it was about living with what you needed.

Tristan started me calling me exactly one week later, apologizing, trying to take it back, but I didn't take his calls. Couldn't.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

He had too many weapons that he used against me with no effort at all. I was defenseless against those weapons. The only way to survive was to avoid them completely.

I sent Jerry to Tristan with the divorce papers and a very long letter explaining everything that was in my heart, explaining every action. And I'd given him a choice.

Rehab or divorce. He had to decide.

I could not take seeing him again. I could not physically hold myself together and see again the evidence of how he was tearing himself apart. I had some little bit of myself left to save, and in a last ditch effort, I needed to at least attempt to save that little, damaged bit.

I could not spare even one more tiny, wounded, piece of myself, or I would lose any shot of making it out alive.

The papers came back promptly. They were signed.

He didn't call me again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### DANIKA

It was over a month later when I began to feel a familiar nausea that I associated with only one thing, as I'd only experienced it when I was in a condition I'd only been in

one other time.

I couldn't quite believe it when I first had the thought.

But why not? That last brutal, heartbreaking, soul-crushing time we'd had together had held such weight, contained such substance, that it should have been no wonder that it'd had such life-changing results.

I was pregnant. Again.

I was terrified, but excited, no, exalted, and it changed everything between one instant and the next. Having that life growing inside of me made what had seemed so insurmountable before seem like a possibility again. The divorce was suddenly unnecessary, this unbearable, permanent separation from Tristan had an abrupt, merciful end.

With one little plus sign, I went from believing that our breakup was the only way for me to survive intact, to realizing, with gasping, desperate relief, that I didn't have to torture myself anymore.

I'd cut off all contact with Tristan with determined resolve, and I had managed to maintain that resolve, thus far. It hadn't been easy. As though our hearts had been severed from each other, I felt an aching, twitchy pain, and I'd gotten through each day without caving through sheer force of will. But now I didn't have to suffer anymore.

I felt like I'd been let out on parole.

My heart felt free again.

I'd tell him about the baby, and we'd find a way to work things out.

I told myself that the news would help to get him clean. It hadn't before, but this was different. We had even more to lose this time. There was no more room for mistakes. I had to make him see that.

I didn't call him, but I did call Kenny to find out where he was. I lucked out; Tristan was in town for the weekend.

I went through my day, floating on a cloud.

Everything would be okay now. I was just sure of it.

It was a Friday.

I remember everything from that day, down to the weather. It was a beautiful day in early spring, with the sun shining, and the lightest breeze played through my hair as I walked to my classes, an unassailable smile on my face.

I got ready with special care that evening. I only realized as I was putting on mascara and crimson lipstick that this was the first time I'd worn makeup in well over a month, the first time I'd even looked directly into a mirror. I'd been a zombie before I'd known about the baby.

It felt amazing to suddenly be alive again. Wonderful.

I could recall everything I wore that night, every detail, from my tight little button up black shirt dress that bared a lot of cleavage, since it was one of Tristan's favorites (he always said it had spectacular access), down to my favorite red heels, that I knew he loved even more than I did.

I curled my hair, wearing it loose down my back. I painted my nails candy apple red to match my shoes, and my lipstick. I was going for the wow factor. I knew it



couldn't hurt to knock the breath out of him at first glance. I'd take any little advantage I could get.

I put on my wedding band and my engagement ring. He'd refused to take them back, and I'd never gotten rid of them. I never would.

As I drove to go see him, my hands trembled on the steering wheel. In excitement, in trepidation. I wasn't naive enough to think this would be a smooth meeting. Still, I felt confident that somehow, eventually, we could sort this out. We had so much at stake now.

I didn't linger on the morbid, like how happy Leticia would have been, if she had just held on a little longer. I could only focus on this child, and on getting our family back together, to give him or her a good life.

I planned to give this baby's parents a chance at happiness again, to give its mother a chance at a joyful existence.

I knew it wouldn't be easy. Tristan needed rehab, it was clear. Rehab and grief counseling. He was an addict, and he'd suffered too much loss in too short a time to recover without help. I knew it. If he could have stopped on his own, he wouldn't have fallen this far.

I told myself that the baby would be enough to convince him. He wanted to be a father. A good one. A present one. There was no doubt about that in my mind. This baby was going to change things.

With the discovery of my pregnancy, all of the dark, scary corners of my life had been lit up again. Where before there was despair, now there was hope, and this news would give Tristan the hope he needed, too. For the first time in a month, I felt my heart bursting with optimism.

Everything was going to be okay now.

I approached that apartment with a light heart.

I knocked on the door. I'd given my key back when I'd sent the divorce papers.

Dean answered. I wasn't happy to see him, but he sure seemed happy to see me, which had never been a good thing in my experience.

"Danika! What amazing timing! We were just having a little get together. Please, come in. You can find Tristan in the kitchen. He lost his shirt and his vodka, so he's very, very grumpy."

I rolled my eyes. Well, that explained his good mood. He thought I was going to blow up when I saw Tristan, and I was sure that would have made his day.

The house was crowded with people, men and women that I'd never seen before. Not one of them. I saw by the things being passed around that anything went in this apartment now. All of the house rules had been thrown out the window. It didn't matter, I told myself. What mattered was the future and salvaging what we could.

I had to put on a neutral face when I saw him. Things were even worse than I'd imagined, and I'd imagined a lot.

He was shirtless and barefoot in the kitchen, jeans slung low on his hips, holding an empty bottle of vodka and bellowing something about finding out who'd drunk it all and not replaced it. He looked like he'd lost thirty pounds since I'd seen him last. The bones in his face had become alarmingly prominent. He'd had the healthy look of someone that bulked up at the gym before, but it was when he was thin like this that you saw that he was a big man, no matter what. It wasn't just his height, though he was very tall, but his very bones were what made up the large frame that set him

apart.

His eyes were scary, and they widened as he recognized me. He slammed the empty vodka bottle on the counter, the clanking sound it made loud enough to make me jump.

I wanted to cry, he looked so bad. Could he come back from this? Could either of us? I told myself firmly that it wasn't a question anymore. We had to.

He pointed at me, his jaw clenching. His expression only made his ghastly weight loss more starkly apparent. "You," he mouthed, like he didn't believe I was really there, as though I was haunting him.

"Me," I said softly, my heart aching for him.

He'd hit rock bottom.

He moved towards me, his fists clenched, his expression thunderous.

"I need to talk to you," I began quietly.

He shook his head over and over as he crowded me against the edge of the counter, gripping my shoulders roughly.

Whereas before his size had always been fascinating, and a turn-on for me, suddenly he was menacing. I'd never experienced this side of him before.

His hands were more brutal than they'd ever been on me, his eyes cold and glazed over. His voice, when he spoke, was mean and rough, "Who are you all dressed up for? You moved on from me already?"

His big fingers were wiping at my lips, bruising them as he rubbed hard at my lipstick, wiping it off. “Who was this for, huh? I know it wasn’t for me. Tell me his name, so I can fucking kill him.”

“Tristan, stop. What are you doing? We need to talk.”

“Talk? You fucking divorced me, and now you want to talk?” His hands moved up into my hair, gripping hard enough to make my eyes water.

“Yes. Please calm down. I have something important to tell you. We need to go somewhere private. I don’t want to do this here.”

His hands went to my hips, and he heaved me onto the edge of the counter. I could tell that he was impaired at that moment, but he still showed no actual strain when he handled my weight. It was nothing for him.

He pried apart my legs, moving his hips between, his eyes on his hands as he inched my skirt up, pushing it high.

I used both hands to try to keep myself as covered as I could, but he just batted them away, exposing my panties to anyone that cared to look. He didn’t seem to realize that we weren’t alone, his apartment full of strangers.

“Stop,” I pled softly. “Please, stop.”

“What, you’re not ready?” As he spoke, his hands moved to the top button of my dress, situated right at my cleavage. He pulled at it roughly, popping off two buttons with a few swift tugs. “Who was all of this for? Tell me.”

“You’re out of control, and you need to stop.” I tried to make my voice firm, but it came out trembling and scared.

Tristan didn't seem to notice, his eyes heavy-lidded as he gazed down at my body. "It's been so long, and you come to me like this. Such easy access, so ready to take. You obviously wanted someone tonight. Don't I do it for you anymore?"

He fondled me, grasping hard at my soft flesh. I'd be bruised in the morning, but he wasn't done.

He kissed me savagely, thrusting his tongue down my throat. I nearly gagged, the taste of alcohol was so strong on his breath. He pawed at me and plundered my mouth, none of his normal finesse present. It was as though he'd totally forgotten his own strength.

Tristan was gone tonight. Before me was a stranger.

I wasn't sure what to do, but I knew I couldn't continue to let him touch me, not like this.

He popped another button off my dress, and then another. I'd felt daring when I'd put it on, and hadn't worn a bra. What a mistake that had been. I'd be topless before long.

He bent down, sucking from my neck down to my chest, biting a sensitive nipple hard enough to make me whimper.

"Like that, do you?" he mumbled against my skin.

I tried to push him off, but of course it was no use. He could handle grown men like rag dolls, and I was certainly no match. I'd taken for granted how much he kept that brutal strength in check for me with every touch, but he wasn't keeping it in check now. I moaned in pain as he again grabbed me too hard.

One of his stranger hands snaked down my body, and I scrabbled to keep it away

from his goal, but it was in vain.

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:03 am*

He pushed one huge finger inside of me, and I cried out in dismay.

I was noticeably dry, and so it hurt, but the dryness had one small saving grace; it seemed to take him out of his strange spell.

He reared back, staring at me. “What, you don’t want this?”

I shook my head emphatically. “No, no, no,” I whispered in a chant.

“Then what the fuck did you come here for?” he roared, backing away from me.

“To talk.”

“So you’re telling me no?”

“At the moment I am. I can’t handle you like this.”

“Oh, you can’t? You think you’re the only piece of ass around here?” He lurched away.

I quickly stood and tried to right my clothes. Tristan had disappeared around the corner, and I wasn’t at all sad about it. I needed to get away from him and fast, and stay away until he was himself again.

He came back while I was still standing propped against the counter, holding the front of my dress together and wondering what on earth I was going to do. I couldn’t stand the thought of just leaving with nothing settled, and I felt too shaken to walk

across the room, let alone drive home.

He was holding the picture of the two of us on our wedding day, the one that hung above his bed

He thrust it at me.

I took it, using it to cover my top half.

“Take it. I don’t want to look at it anymore. It obviously didn’t mean a damn thing to you, anyway.” He stumbled away.

Dean startled a yelp out of me when he spoke to me closely from behind. “Come here, Danika, come have a seat on the couch. I cleared a spot for you.” His tone was uncharacteristically gentle, which I didn’t trust, but I followed him into the living room. I did need to sit down.

I sat down on the vacated couch, clutching our wedding photo in front of me, and staring off into space. I was shaking, head to toe.

Dean crouched down in front of me, his brow furrowed, as though he was concerned. Who was this man? Another stranger. “Let me get you some juice. I think it will help. You look like you’re in shock. You could use a little sugar, I think.”

I nodded, feeling too numb to even try to figure out why he was acting this way. His words were noticeably slurred, so I knew he was drunk, but I’d seen him drunk plenty of times, and he’d never been this nice.

He left just as Tristan came into the room, two groupies in tow. I knew that they were groupies by the trashy way they were dressed, and the vacant look in both of their eyes.



I shook my head slowly, just wanting the night to end.

“Look how easy I replaced you!” he shouted. He was so drunk that he was swaying in place. He threw an arm around each woman. “Twice!”

I blinked back tears. “What is wrong with you?” I asked him, my voice trembling.

“What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with me?! Did you forget? You divorced me.”

Dean came back into the room, not saying a word, just setting a glass of orange juice down in front of me on the coffee table. He shot me one swift, drunkenly sympathetic smile before he disappeared away again.

I would remember the round shape of the glass, the exact shade of orange that juice was. I’d remember that that glass was full nearly to the brim.

“Oh, is that who you want?” Tristan shouted, his malevolent gaze swinging to Dean’s retreating back. “Wouldn’t that be fucking precious, you and douchebag Dean.”

I took a long drink from that memorable glass of orange juice, feeling almost too weak to lift it to my mouth. It tasted bad, a touch bitter, but I attributed that to the bad taste already in my mouth.

He lifted his arms, and shooed the groupies towards the hallway. “Go wait in my room, replacements. I’ll be right there.”

They went, and I took another long drink. It was hard to even look at him just then, but I did it.

Our drama, or Dean, had cleared this room completely. It was the closest I thought

we'd get to being alone.

I looked up at him and whispered quietly, "I'm pregnant."

He blinked, just blinked, and didn't say a word, just staring at me. I had no idea if he heard me.

"How could you do that, Danika? How could you just send Jerry here with those divorce papers without even giving me a chance to talk to you?"

"I sent Jerry with those papers and a letter. I told you I'd meet with you, if you wanted to try to work things out. Didn't you read the letter? All you had to do was go to rehab, Tristan, but instead you just signed those papers. We both made this mess. You can't put it all on me."

He threw his arms in the air, the muscles in his chest and stomach working with the motion. That had set him off. "A letter? Bullshit! There was no fucking letter!"

I shook my head, again and again. Was he just so out of it that he didn't remember?

"There was," I whispered, feeling woozy suddenly. I shook my head, but that just made the feeling worse.

Carefully, I set the orange juice down.

I would remember that it was half-full exactly as I studied it. I didn't touch it again.

Something was wrong with me.

"Tristan, I don't feel well. I don't think I'm okay to drive. I need to lie down."

“Dean, will you fucking take her home?” he shouted. He pointed at me, his mouth shaped into a snarl. “You divorced me. Did you forget?” he said, yet again. “You got yourself stranded? Not my problem.”

I just kept shaking my head.

Tristan turned to the wall, punched it three times, leaving a gaping hole, then stumbled from the room.

Tears seeped slowly from my eyes as I lay back against couch and let my lids drift slowly closed. I just couldn’t keep them open for another second.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### DANIKA

I started slightly as I felt a hand on my arm.

“Come on, Danika. I’ll take you home.”

It was Dean’s voice, and I opened my eyes, but I didn’t quite process what he said.

He helped me sit up, and then stand, and then I was leaning on him as he led me out of the apartment. I blinked, trying to clear the strange cloud that had come over my mind.

“What’s going on?” I mumbled, struggling not to let my eyes close again.

“I’m just giving you a ride. Shh, now, you’ll be home in no time, and you can talk to Tristan in the morning, or whenever he sobers up. He’s a maniac tonight.”

He supported most of my weight as we made our way very slowly, very carefully, down the steps.

“Why are you being so nice tonight?” I asked him, letting my eyes fall closed after he’d helped me, very gently, into the passenger seat of his car.

He didn’t answer, in fact he barely looked at me again as he set my large wedding picture into my lap and shut the door. I hadn’t even realized that he was carrying it.

I hugged it to my chest and closed my eyes.

The car began to drive, and I struggled to stay awake, as I felt a cold touch on my leg. I couldn’t tell what it was at first, but I knew that it was wrong.

With effort, I opened my eyes.

Dean’s cold hand was on my thigh.

“What are you doing?” I whispered hoarsely, trying to shift away.

His hand lifted, going back to the steering wheel. “Shh, go back to sleep. You’re fine. I’ll have you home in no time.” His tone was still soothing.

It was only then that I realized this nice version of Dean was far scarier than the unfiltered prick I was used to, but I was just so drowsy, and my eyes drifted closed again.

I had a thought that made me fight to stay awake, and I opened my eyes again. “You shouldn’t be driving,” I pointed out. “You’re drunk.”

He laughed. “And high as a kite. We’ve been chasing speedballs with shots of vodka,

in honor of our dearly departed Jared. But don't you worry about it. I drive better drunk, so you're in good hands. Now go back to sleep."

I wanted to argue with him, because of course everything he said was asinine, but the effort it took to open my mouth and speak was just too much for me, and I couldn't get the words out.

His icy fingers moved to grip my leg again, this time higher, and I protested as loudly as I could. He shoved his hand higher, briefly fingering the edge of my panties, before he pulled away again.

"I know well what's under there. You don't even want to imagine how many times I've seen you and Tristan together. I love your tight little body. You're just my favorite kind of girl. I like them tiny and curvy, with snug little pussies. I won't be the fit you're used to. Tristan is a beast. So don't worry, you'll probably barely notice a thing in the morning. And I heard you say you're pregnant, so you don't have to worry about that either.

"You're sick," I told him. "I wouldn't let you touch me if you were the last man on the planet." I was happy that I'd gotten such a long sentence out. I was so lethargic, that little spark had felt like an accomplishment.

He gripped my thigh again. I glared at his sideways smile.

"I really wish you'd finished the glass. I like you better when you're not talking."

"What are you thinking? Tristan is going to kill you, literally kill you, for this."

"Maybe if he knew. Are you gonna tell him? You realize he'll be disgusted if he finds out. He may kill me, but he'll also never touch you again."

“I don’t care. I don’t care. I’ll tell him so he’ll kill you. I’ll tell everyone. You won’t get away with this.”

“That’s if you remember. I have a feeling that your memory is going to be a bit fuzzy tomorrow, but feel free to speak up tomorrow, if I’m wrong.” As he spoke, he inched his hand higher, and higher, rubbing and kneading at the skin of my inner thigh.

I kept telling him to stop, but he didn’t listen, shoving his fingers inside my panties, touching where he had no right.

I hadn’t remembered the frame of my photo being so heavy, but it was now, so heavy that I could only manage to pitch it forward, so that it covered my lap, the top edge digging into my abdomen, but at least it blocked my thighs from his roving hand.

He didn’t seem to mind, his hand then going to the open neckline of my dress, and roaming freely over my chest.

“Stop touching me,” I told him, sounding more drowsy than angry, even though inside I was so angry that I was surprised that my rage alone wasn’t enough to give me some strength.

“Hmm, I don’t think I will. How about you go back to sleep? As I said, I like you so much better quiet.”

“I hate you,” I whispered, raising one hand up to try in vain to cover my chest. There was too much skin exposed, and his hand was so much stronger than my own.

“What are you planning to do?” I said in as loud of a voice as I could manage. “And why? Why would you do this?”

He laughed, and it was the usual Dean again. The nice act was long gone.

“You really want me to tell you? Okay, if you insist. It’s not like you’ll remember any of it. I’ll talk dirty to you, if that’s what does it for you.”

*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:04 am*

“Fuck you.”

“No, Danika, fuck you. Here’s what I have planned for you. We’re going to take a nice long drive out into the desert, about an hour out from the city. No matter how hard you fight it, you’ll be out by then, dead to the world.”

He twisted my left nipple hard, and just kept twisting, no matter how I batted at his hand. “You’ll be so out of it that I can do whatever I want to you, however I want it, and you won’t have any recollection of it come morning. And make no mistake, I have plans for you.”

I could hear the sick smile in his voice as he continued. “First, I’ll strip you naked. You won’t even get to keep your shoes on. All of that will stay in here. Then, I’ll drag you out of the car, push you facedown, ass up onto the hood. I’ll spread you wide and fuck your pussy first, because you know I’m dying to know how that feels. I’ll pull out before I come, because I want to feel your ass too. I’ll fuck that next. I won’t use lube. I don’t mind tearing you up. You won’t feel a thing, but I like that your body will remember me tomorrow.”

“Fucking sicko,” I bit out, my body starting to shake. I thought that might be a good sign. Perhaps the effects of the drug were starting to wear off.

“Whatever. I’ll come in your ass, or maybe on your lower back. I don’t like to plan it out, so that’ll be a surprise. I’ll be sure to leave the mess on you, wherever it is, so you’ll have to clean it up yourself later. You’ll be so confused. Maybe you’ll think it’s from Tristan. Who knows, but one way or another, you’ll have to handle the mess. After I’m done with that, I’ll lay you out on the ground in front of the car, so



the headlights shine on you nice and bright.”

He took his hand off me, finally, as he stopped at a red light. I had no idea where we were, but at least we weren’t in the desert yet.

“I’ll look at you, every inch of you. I’ll open your legs and look my fill. I’ll study your body hard, so that, anytime I want, I can close my eyes and remember. That will take some time, but when that’s done, I’ll shove my dick down your throat. I’ll shove it as deep as I can, but I won’t get off like that. You’ll be too out of it to suck me proper, but I want to shove my dirty dick in there either way. After that, who knows? Maybe I’ll titty fuck you, maybe I’ll fuck your pussy again. I’ll see what gets me most excited. One thing is for sure, I’ll have you at my mercy for hours, and you can’t undo the things I’ll put your body through. I’ll shove my dirty dick in every orifice, and you won’t say no.”

“When I’m done, I’ll put you back in your clothes and drop you off somewhere. Maybe the apartment, or maybe I’ll sneak you back into your very own bed. Does it matter? You’re going to wake up tomorrow feeling dirtier than you ever have before, and you won’t remember why, but you’ll be too disgusting for Tristan to ever lay a finger on again, because he was in love with you, and you let his best friend use you like a dog.”

“You aren’t his best friend,” I found the voice to say. “He can’t even stand you anymore.”

That set him off, and he was practically foaming at the mouth as he whirled on me. “Fuck you! That’s your fault!”

I was watching his face when it happened. One second I was at his mercy, and the next, I was at the mercy of fate, as another vehicle crashed into his side of the car.

I remembered spinning and spinning, and when the spinning was over, the pain.

Later I would learn that we'd spun out until my side of the car made solid contact with a telephone pole, caving in my side, though Dean's half of the car got it far worse.

I was still staring at him, at his crushed, bloody body, his blank, empty eyes, when my side hit.

No one ever had to tell me. I saw Dean die.

I never so much as asked about him after that.

I remember that my head smashed onto the dashboard. I remember the windshield breaking, bits of glass embedding itself into the skin of my face, chest, and arms, but that was but a taste as it was followed almost instantly by a burning pain in my stomach that I'd never forget, as the frame in my hands broke into pieces and stabbed into several vital parts of my belly.

I don't know to this day if I screamed out loud, but deep down in my soul, in the place inside of me that was bursting to be a mother, that pined for it, that lived and breathed for the day that I could give birth to my own child, my own flesh and blood, that part of me screamed, "Nooooo!"

It was quite possible that, somewhere deep down, I never stopped screaming it.

That pain was profound and unforgettable, but the agony of my leg being crushed was what finally, blessedly, made me black out.

When I woke again in the hospital, recovering from multiple surgeries, I didn't have to ask.

I knew.

I'd lost everything in that car.

Only, even I didn't know what all that loss entailed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### TRISTAN

I woke with a start. My head was killing me, bile rising in my throat before I'd even opened my eyes.

I kept those eyes closed for a moment longer, my hands reaching out to feel the naked body beside mine, and then, with something akin to horror, another one, on my other side.

I recoiled when my hand skimmed over one plump breast.

I stumbled out of bed, barely making it to the bathroom before I began to wretch.

I emptied the contents of my stomach in huge, racking heaves.

I had no idea who it was in my bed, but I knew who it wasn't, and that was enough to scare me sober.

She can't find out, she can't find out, she can't find out, ran like a mantra in my head. We'd broken up, and she'd stopped taking my calls over a month ago, had in fact divorced me without so much as a phone call, but still, I'd been faithful before this.

I knew that this was unforgivable. It felt unforgivable.

I was in the shower, washing away the night's sins, when pieces of the evening started coming back to me.

I remembered the fucking speedballs, the shots, and a whole lot of fuzzy details in between. The fucking morbid tribute to my brother, remembered not caring what happened to me, maybe even hoping that something bad would. Maybe I'd wind up in the hospital, and she'd feel so bad for me she'd take me back, I remembered thinking.

She'd been at the apartment, I recalled, in horror. Said she'd needed to tell me something, but I couldn't remember what it had been. Had she told me and I'd forgotten, or had she not told me at all?

Of all of the nights for her to come and see me...things couldn't have turned out worse.

Had she come back to reconcile? I felt so sick with guilt that I couldn't bring myself to call her with two sluts still in my bed, but I had to find out why she'd come.

When I was clean again, my body, if not my soul, I walked with dread back into my bedroom. The two naked women were awake now, one calling out my name as she sat up to lean on her elbows.

I barely saw her, barely saw either of them, my eyes fixed on the spot above my bed where a picture should have been.

My gut twisted with dread.

Had she just come to get it? If so, was that a good sign, or a bad one? Had I given it to her, or had she taken it? I needed answers, but first, I needed to empty my bed, and burn all of my sheets.

I told the girls to get dressed, visibly cringing every time they made mention of the night before. I didn't recognize either of them, and doubted I could have picked them out of a lineup. One had dark hair, one had light brown, both had fake tits. That was about as much as I noticed.

The dark haired one approached me, trying to get close. My arm flew out, warding her off.

She smiled, unfazed. "You were amazing last night. Even with two of us, we couldn't keep up with you. You were a fucking stud. Fucked us silly."

I ran my hand over my face, wondering if I was going to throw up again. "Go, please. I was trashed last night, and I don't particularly want any reminders about all of the fucked up shit I did."

They didn't move, just staring at me.

"Get the fuck out!" I roared at them. "Just get the fuck out of my room!"

Finally, thankfully, that got results.

I cleaned my room, top to bottom, disinfecting every surface. I gave my bathroom the same treatment, since I was fuzzy on all of the sordid details from the night before.

I wasn't sure if I was relieved or further horrified when I saw that my wastebasket contained several used rubbers, but least I'd used some form of protection.

I threw up again.

I threw out my sheets. I only had one other set, but I didn't care. I took them out to the dumpster like the trash they were.

I showered again, brushed my teeth, then went to work some more with the disinfectant wipes.

It was three in the afternoon when I called her.

It went directly to voicemail.

I took another shower.

Lather, rinse, repeat.

Would she ever forgive me? Was there any way I could keep it from her? I hadn't been unfaithful. Not technically, since we'd been very clearly broken up, but a technicality did not alter the way I felt, and the way I felt was wretched. In my heart, I was still married to her.

Would I be able to forgive myself if she'd come here to reconcile, to give me another chance, and I'd trampled over it in my hell-bent path of self-destruction?

That answer was easy to find. No.

I called her, got her voicemail, and cleaned my room again.

This went on for days.

Five days later, I got a phone call from Dean's mother with news that would change my life.

She threw the details at me too fast for me to understand, her tone almost blank.

"Dead?" I repeated back to her. I hadn't seen him in days, but that was hardly

unusual. I was shocked beyond all comprehension.

Even so, I was not prepared for what came next.

“He had a passenger in the car, too,” she continued, and I thought she must truly be in shock to be acting so calm when her son had just died. “Some girl that worked for your manager, Jerry.”

I was in my room, back to the wall, and I fell against it, sliding to the floor, nearly dropping the phone. “Wh-what did you say?” I asked her, my voice a terrified croak.

“There was a girl in the car with him. The car is totaled, by the way. He’d have had a serious drunk driving charge on his hands, if he’d survived.”

“What happened to the girl? Is she okay?”

“The girl? Oh...did you know her? I’m not sure what happened to her. I didn’t ask.”

I hung up, calling Jerry.

Thankfully, he answered on the third ring.

He answered with, “She’s okay, Tristan.”

Following panic came fury. “Why didn’t you tell me? This was days ago! How could you keep this from me?”

There was a long pause on the other end. “Listen...Tristan...she doesn’t want to see you.”

My free hand reached over to my arm and began to scratch mindlessly at the skin of

my other forearm.

Gut roiling, heart twisting, I asked, “She said that?”



*Source Creation Date: June 27, 2025, 6:04 am*

“I’m sorry, man. Have to respect her wishes. She seems very resolute.”

“What hospital, Jerry?”

He sighed audibly. “You don’t want to come here, Tristan. It’ll be better if you don’t.”

“Tell me!”

“St. Rose.”

“You said she’s okay, but, was she hurt?”

“She got banged up pretty bad.”

“Tell me.”

“She hit her head pretty hard, got a concussion. She’s still in the hospital, but she should be fine.”

I swallowed hard, still scratching away at my arm. “Anything else?”

“She got cut up on impact some by the debris, but she’ll heal.”

Scratch.

Gouge.

Claw.

“Anything else?”

“Her knee was crushed. She should be able to walk again, eventually, but she’ll have a substantial limp. She won’t be dancing anymore, Tristan.”

My hand moved to my chest, right over my heart.

Scratch.

Gouge.

Claw.

The phone dropped from my hand, but not before the sound of my own sobs bled through to Jerry’s end.

I didn’t last three hours.

I was in my car before I realized that my hand was bloody. I glanced down at my arm and chest, genuinely surprised that I’d scratched myself that badly. I hadn’t felt a thing.

I went back up to my apartment, showered, changed, and headed out again.

It was only on my second run that I saw Danika’s car parked at the curb. I hadn’t left the apartment in days, but it must have been there from the time of the accident.

DANIKA

The news came at me in twisted waves. They gave it to me all wrong, making it hard for me process or understand. It was only as I heard Bev chewing out the doctor that I put some of the pieces together in order.

“That is not how you tell that to someone. If a woman just lost her baby, you do not start by telling her she can’t have any more. I’m a lawyer, you ass, so watch what you say to her, or I’ll sue you for emotional distress.”

That got the doctor the hell out of the room, and Bev was at my ear, stroking my hair, a comfort in a moment where that should have been impossible.

“I can’t really sue him for that, sweetheart. I just lost my temper, and that’s my go-to scare tactic. I would in a heartbeat though, if I thought we could win. That bastard deserves worse.”

I tried to pay attention, but my mind was just circling back to what I’d learned. “I lost my baby,” I whispered.

“I’m so, so sorry, Danika. I didn’t know you were pregnant, but I know you, and I know that, since you were, you wanted that baby. I’m so sorry.”

“And I can’t have any more.”

“No, my dear. I’m so sorry, and I know this is hard to think of now, but someday, when you’ve met the right man, and you’re at the right point in your life, you can adopt. You can still be a mother, Danika, just not in the way that you’d hoped for.”

I barely heard her, only focused on my pain, only focused on my loss.

I laid there, and felt as though my very soul seeped out of me with that loss.

I'd thought I was numb. Head to toe, heart and soul, numb. But alas, no, there was something left, something awful that fired up in my chest as Tristan walked into my hospital room, his face ashen.

I'd seen him heartbroken. I'd seen him reeling from loss. I'd seen him strung out, high, drunk, devastated, and out of his mind enraged.

But never had I seen him like this. He looked like a man who had lost his whole world.

It took every ounce of willpower I had not to cave at the sight of him.

Outwardly, I was calm, but my insides had become a tempest, a great storm that I wouldn't let Tristan close to. He couldn't be allowed even a glimpse of it. I had to at least appear composed and resolved if I had any hope, any prayer, of making it through this.

"I just now heard about the accident," he croaked out. "How are-er-are you doing okay?"

I shrugged, having the hardest time meeting his bright, shiny eyes set in his haggard face. I couldn't meet them for more than milliseconds at a time, or I knew I'd be exposed. There was just no escaping his eyes for long. "I'll live."

"Are you in pain?"

I shrugged again. "I'll live. I don't really want to talk about it." My tone brooked no refusal.

"That's fine, that's fine. I'm just glad you're okay."

I thought that okay was a pretty generous term, but I held my tongue.

“Jerry told me that you didn’t want to see me. Is that true?”

It was difficult to get the word out. “Yes.”

He staggered back, visibly upset. His hand shot to his arm and began to scratch at a spot under his T-shirt. It took him a very long time to find his voice again.

Finally, the waiting was too much, and I closed my eyes, turning my face away.

“Did something happen that night? You were coming to see me. Did we have a fight? I saw that our picture was missing from my wall, but I don’t remember what happened. What did you come there to say to me?”

My mouth hardened. “Nothing important.”

“Danika, please—“

“Please, Tristan, please just go. We aren’t good for each other. Can’t you see that? After all that’s happened, isn’t that finally clear? I need to move on from you, and the only way that’s going to happen is if we stay clear of each other.”

“You’re wrong, Danika.”

“Listen to me, Tristan. You are bad for me. I am done.”

Horrible noises were leaving his throat.

I finally looked up to see him staring at me, the most devastated look on his face. He was scratching at his chest now, those low, harsh groans still coming out of him, as

though escaping from deep in his chest. “Done, Tristan. Please go.”

I had to look away again, closing my eyes. I’d break for sure, if he didn’t leave soon.

I felt him watching me for a while before he spoke, his voice hardly more than a whisper. “Can I please have the picture back?”

“It didn’t survive the crash.” Like so many things.

Finally, mercifully, he left.

TRISTAN

Bev came at me like a Tasmanian devil. I’d never seen anything like it. A skinny white woman in her forties trying to take on a huge motherfucker like me.

I just let her abuse me, holding still as she pounded on my chest and slapped my face. She was panting and crying by the time she finally got it out of her system, glaring at me, the wrath in her eyes daunting. This was a formidable woman, not in size, but in will. I had no doubt that if she wanted a thing done, it would happen just how she wanted it to. I wouldn’t have been all that surprised if she put a hit out on me.

She poked a finger in my chest, her voice very quiet, but shaking with fury. “You need to leave. She’s asked you to go, and so that’s what needs to happen. Before you go, though, I have a few things to say. Did you know that guy Dean was giving her a ride home? Did that happen with your knowledge?”

I grimaced. So much of the night was a blur to me, but I did recall screaming something along those lines to her. I was almost positive that had been my idea. “I did. I’m sure you know that Dean was my roommate.”

“Danika was dosed with Rohypnol. Do you know what that is?”

My entire body stilled.

He wouldn't have, I thought, my mind racing.

He'd never dare, I told myself.

“She was dosed at your place. The only thing she drank was half a glass of orange juice that your buddy Dean served to her. You brought that into her life.” She was screaming by the end, her voice cracking.

Her mouth hardened as she regained her composure, and her hand shot up, slapping me again.

I took the abuse. I knew I deserved it. I didn't think there was any way even Bev could have hated me more than I hated myself right then.

“You put her into a car with a rapist motherfucker who was high as a kite. You did this to her. You. Now get out of my sight. If I see your face again, I will make you pay.”

I left, my mind still reeling with the information she'd given me. I believed her that she'd find some way to make me pay if she saw me again, but that wasn't why I left. If Danika had wanted me there, I would have stayed with her, no matter what. No one could have kept me away this side of death. But that was the problem. She didn't want me there. She'd been very clear about that. I wasn't good for her. She could do better, and she finally saw it that way.

I went to Dean's funeral. I seethed through the entire thing. I'd lost people, close people, but never had I lost someone and realized that I loathed them. I should have

felt bad, but I wasn't even sorry he was dead. In fact, the only use I would have for an alive Dean after what I knew he'd done was to kill him with my own hands.

Even when he'd pissed me off, I'd still trusted him not to do something like that. It was a hard pill to swallow; how misplaced my trust had been.

If he was capable of drugging Danika and doing God knows whatever he'd been planning, what else had he done? It was downright devious, outright evil, what he'd done. If it had been anyone but an incensed Bev who had told me about it, I wouldn't have believed them. She had no reason to make a thing like that up, and she was not a woman that dealt in misinformation.

I spent a week in pure hell, torturing myself with regrets, dosing myself liberally with any drug at hand.

Seven days after I saw Danika in the hospital, I checked myself into rehab.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

### DANIKA

They gave me details. So many pointless details about loss of cartilage and muscle tissue. Painful details about irreparable damage to my uterus. Endless details about surgery and physical therapy. The gist of it was: I was now a cripple, and I could never have children. My response to that reality; I will not let this define me. So help me God, I won't even let it slow me down. I wasn't a dancer anymore, and I would never get to grow a child inside of me. Those were facts. I refused to cry about it, or if I did, to even so much as acknowledge those fucking useless tears. I would find something else to define me. I just had to figure out what.

Bev took time off work to take care of me. I was shocked, as I'd never known her to



take more than a week of vacation from work before. But she took nearly a full month off for me.

She helped me around the house, kept me company, kept me sane.

“Why are you so good to me?” I asked her at one point. “Why have you always been so good to me? I’m such a burden to you, and you’ve done so much to help me. We both know I can never repay all of your kindness.”

Bev gave me the saddest smile, and one of her soft hands moved, as though in slow motion, to stroke over my hair. “Oh, you poor girl. Don’t you know?”

I blinked at her and shook my head, completely lost. “Know what?” I asked her.

“You were never a burden, Danika, and this isn’t kindness.”

I shook my head at her again, my brow furrowing in confusion. “If it’s not kindness, then what is it?”

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Her eyes filled with tears, and the look on her face made my heart turn slowly in my chest. “My dear, this is what’s called family.”

I was completely undone by that. I began to sob, the sounds loud and harsh and broken. She just embraced me, murmuring soothing words into my ear, her soft voice filled with tears.

Family, I thought, absolutely floored by the thought. Family, I realized, my mind flashing back through the years of Bev and Jerry’s unfaltering generosity, their unfailing kindness. Family.

The thing I had yearned for had been mine without me ever having to ask. It was just there, through better or worse.

Family.

## EPILOGUE

### DANIKA

A few months after the accident, I got a call from my sister.

She was in labor.

I drove for five hours and made it to her just in time for the delivery.

We’d been talking on the phone and corresponding via email. I’d even gone out to

see her a few times, before my first miscarriage.

But that birth is what made us sisters again.

It was a bittersweet joy to share that special moment with her.

I was the only family present, the only one there for her.

She named him Jack Markova, and I was one of the first to ever hold him. I cut his umbilical cord and fell in love with that darling boy.

I drove her home from the hospital, and helped her settle in with the new baby. I stayed with her for two weeks, staying up with the baby, letting her get some much needed rest while she recovered from her ordeal. I limped around her house and tried to help make it a home for that fatherless little boy.

I was tucking her in one night, the baby asleep in a bassinet beside her bed, when she looked at me and said, "I do know who the father is."

I sat down at her hip, and she found my hand with her own. I stared at her face and waited.

I knew it was going to be something truly awful. Just knew it. The nature of that awful, however, eluded me. My head was in a dark place, and so the possibilities were endless.

The thing I feared the most, though, was not the worst thing that could have happened to her. I knew this because, the worst thing had happened.

She squeezed my hand tight and closed her eyes tighter. "I had no boyfriend. No lover. I didn't know what had happened to me, until I realized I was pregnant. But I did remember a few nights that were...out of my recollection. And after those nights,

I did know that something was off, things were askew. I woke up in ways and places that didn't add up."

"Oh no, Dahlia," I whispered, stroking her cheek.

"It took me a while to piece it together, but...I had a few nights that made no sense, and as I began to uncover the facts, I realized that Dean had drugged me. A few times. I confronted him, and he wouldn't admit it aloud, but I saw his guilt. And then, when I told him I was pregnant, it didn't even faze him, and he straight up told me that he was the father.

"I hated him. Before any of that even happened, I couldn't stand him. I didn't have the stomach to get rid of the baby, or even to give it away, but I got the hell away from him. No way was I going to let him be in this baby's life. He was a rapist and a lowlife. I wanted to press charges, but I didn't see what good it would do. I was so stupid. By the time I realized what had happened to me, all of the evidence was gone."

"You poor dear," I told her, kissing her forehead, aching for her. "I'm so sorry you got mixed up in that."

Her hand moved from her side to rest on Jack's little head in the bassinet beside the bed. "I've made peace with it. I love this baby, Danika, with my whole heart I love him. The rest is in the past."

I had so much bitter poison inside of me, so many regrets, and it didn't slip my notice that Dean's ugly proclivities had produced a beautiful baby boy, while my and Tristan's love had only ever ended in tragedy.

Life was so very cruel, but there could be no doubt that I loved that baby.

We doted on him, my perfect little nephew.

## SIX MONTHS LATER

I didn't look at his face, but listened to his words, hearing more what he didn't say, than what he did.

We were sitting in the small café where I'd agreed to meet him. He was here with two other people, a young man and woman. I'd told him I hadn't wanted to meet him alone, and that had been his solution. I hadn't wanted to do this, but when he'd explained the purpose of it, as part of his rehab program, I hadn't been able to refuse.

We wouldn't be a part of each other's lives again, but that didn't mean that I was willing to cripple his recovery.

I'd wanted to show up first, so he wouldn't see how I was still struggling to get around. That instinct was part pity, part pride on my part. I wasn't sure which was stronger.

I'd dressed painstakingly, my hair loose and straight and shiny, my makeup heavy but flattering, my skirt long, to hide my knee brace and my orthopedic shoes, my shirt tight to show off my figure.

I couldn't delude myself for long. Pride was stronger.

Unfortunately, I hadn't shown up early enough. Tristan and his two shiny new friends had already been at a table, drinking coffee and laughing at something when I walked in the door.

I was ridiculously grateful to the man that held the door open for me so I could hobble through. It was amazing how the little things could help, and struggling with the door while Tristan watched was a humiliation that I did not care to contemplate just yet.

My chest burned as I made my way, one small crutch assisted step at a time, to an empty table near the entrance. I wanted to sit before he saw me, but I wasn't so lucky.

One look at his face and I knew I wouldn't be meeting his gaze for this little meeting. The raw regret, the crippling pity in his eyes was nothing that I cared to see. I'd prefer anything from him before I'd take his pity.

I couldn't look at his face, so instead stared at his collarbone. I couldn't face his eyes, the promises we'd made and broken, the things we'd lost. They were all there, accusing me, yet filled with guilt, filled with pity, all at once.

"Can I get you anything? Coffee or tea?"

A shudder ran through me. His first words to me were to offer to wait on me, because I was a cripple now? I couldn't bear it. I almost bolted right then.

"Some tea, thank you," I said through stiff lips, finally, after I'd debated in my head which would be more humiliating.

I didn't so much as twitch while he went to the counter and got us both a cup of tea.

I stared down at mine, added one sugar, then stared some more.

"Milk?" he offered.

I shook my head, then added another packet of sugar.

I never took even one sip before he said his piece. I never touched that tea.

"I have many regrets, many bad things I must take credit for, but believe me when I say that the negative impact that all of my actions have had on your life is my biggest one."

He stayed firmly on his side of the table, his eyes on his hands, and in their downcast depths, I saw his sincerity, but I hadn't really been questioning it.

I quickly looked away.

Of course he was sorry.

So was I.

Neither of us had wanted things to turn out this way. But as I looked at him, whole and healthy, and when I'd seen him laughing, before he'd spotted me, happy. Perhaps things really had turned out for the best for him, in spite of this all. He'd been a mess of a man when he was with me, and look at him now, thriving.

It planted one tiny seed of bitterness inside of me, and over time, that bitter seed would grow. It would flourish.

"I do not deserve your forgiveness, after all that's happened, but I am asking for it." His words were stilted, as though he'd rehearsed them. "Know that I would take it all back if I could, and know that I hold myself responsible for all of the bad things that happened. I am so sorry that my hitting rock bottom the way I did impacted you. Any recompense you can imagine, anything you would ask of me, I would be happy to provide. I'm at your service. Always, Danika. And it is my most sincere wish that someday, perhaps over time, you might consider being my friend again."

Friend? I recoiled from the notion. Of course I couldn't be that. What a drawn out torture that would be. Friends? It felt like a slap in the face. Didn't he know that if we tried that, if we stayed close in that platonic way, I'd never be able to move on?

"Tristan." Just saying his name was a struggle. How on earth would I get through the rest? I took a few long, necessary moments to steady my voice. My words were very formal when I was able to continue. "Consider yourself forgiven. But please don't

think that I hold you responsible for everything that happened. Things didn't turn out how I could have hoped." What a joke of an understatement. "But no one person is to blame for any of it. So yes, I forgive you for any and all of it. That being said, I must decline your offer of friendship. Some things...What I mean is, some people, need to stay away from each other, and we are such a pair." I wanted to say so much more, but chose to keep my composure instead.

His ragged breaths were his only response for the longest time. "If that is how you feel, I must respect your decision." He seemed to me to nearly choke on the words.

"It is. But thank you for the apology, and I wish you all the best." I swallowed hard, looking down. "I'm glad you got yourself help."

After an eternal agony of waiting, he stood up and walked away.

We didn't look directly at each other.

I refused to stand up before he and his friends left, and so I stared at my tea for a long time while I waited.

I never took one sip of that tea.

It had been torture. But every coffin needed its last nail, and that meeting was ours.

Heart in tatters, but will intact, I went on with my life.