

Desire always
trumps logic.

Craving
MR. KINKY

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Chapter 1

Dante

The buzzer announcing that the bags were on their way sent the hoard of people moving closer to the conveyor belt, like cattle. One by one they impatiently yanked and pulled their suitcases off, failing to realize that trying to do so in a bottleneck was counterproductive. After assisting a nice elderly couple with their luggage, I located mine coming around the turn. Thankfully, three bags had gone on the plane, and three came off.

I spotted a man holding a sign with my name. At my approach, he asked, “Dante Benedetto?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

I followed him to the parking lot as horns, sirens, and the clamor of people welcomed me to one of my favorite cities. Even though it was dusk outside, the heat clung to the humid air, causing beads of sweat to dot my forehead.

Minutes later, my luggage was in his trunk, I gave him the address, and we were on our way. I sat back into the leather seat and watched the city pass outside my window.

I’d been blessed with traveling the world, along with living in exciting cities. Milan, Los Angeles, Chicago were once home... and now I could add New York City to the list. I couldn’t wait to see my brother, Luca. We hadn’t lived in the same place in over a decade, and I looked forward to spending time with him again.

When he had called to tell me about Sabrina, and her son, Mikey, it didn’t surprise me he’d fallen head over heels for her. Between the two of us, Luca was the romantic one. I, on the other hand, preferred a bit more adventure.

His friends were much like me in that regard. Years ago, when I met his buddies, Kyle and Jude, I hadn’t pegged either of them as the type to

settle down with one woman. Now Jude was married, and I was on the way to a birthday party for Kyle's girlfriend, Vanessa, as the only single male left in the bunch. My, my, how things had changed, and I looked forward to ribbing them about it.

Traffic was horrible, just like all the other times I'd come to the city. My driver felt the need to lay on his horn every few seconds as if it would magically change the red light to green. Rather than get annoyed by it, I pulled out my phone and went through email and confirmations for upcoming shoots.

Being a photographer was what I lived for. Every image possessed a unique quality, and if shot correctly, could tell a story all on its own. It's what I loved to do, and I was one of the best in the field. For that reason, agencies had no issue paying an exorbitant fee to book me to photograph their top models.

The driver, who I now knew as Andre, lowered the radio and glanced at me over his right shoulder. "We're pulling into the lot if you want to gather any personal belongings."

I nodded, leaned down to grab the small bag that held my favorite camera, and *bang!* My body was jolted, the seat belt tightened on my collarbone, and Andre began to swear.

"Son of a bitch!" Andre slammed the car into park and flew out his door. I unfastened my belt and dipped my head to look out the side window. A blonde flew out of her car, throwing her hands in the air and began to yell at him.

Not wanting to miss one second of what promised to be one hell of a show, I emerged from my place in the backseat. Sure, she was stunning, but I was used to that in my field. It was her feistiness, however, that immediately caught my attention.

"I can't believe you cut me off!" She swept a stray lock of hair off her forehead. "Ever hear of a turn signal? It's the lever on the left side of the steering column. You push it down to indicate you're turning left, and up for right. They make them for a reason, you know." Exasperated, she

examined where her car bumper had a crack across the front. “Dammit! We need to call the police to file a report.”

“Relax,” Andre said, immediately holding both hands up. “We can settle this. You hit me, your insurance pays. End of story.”

The affronted woman glared at him and then at me. *What did I do?* “Hey, how about a little backup? You were in the car, so you’re a witness. It was his fault, right?”

“Look, lady, I just arrived in New York and have someplace to be. Fill out whatever paperwork you need and let’s move on. I’m late as it is.”

“Well, God forbid *you’re* late. I’m supposed to be somewhere too, you know. This was the last thing I needed. So don’t get all righteous on me, mister!”

Righteous? Who the hell was this woman? She then mumbled something incoherently, and I did my best not to laugh, knowing that would set her off even more. Part of me wanted to test the theory, though, because damn, the more pissed off she got, the more turned on I became. Granted, it’d been a while since I met a woman who intrigued me at all.

“Are you hurt?” I took the opportunity to slowly scan her body from head to toe. Even standing as rigid as a virgin in a porn shop, she was perfect. Perky breasts sat high in the bustline of her dress, with the thin straps revealing the smooth skin of her neck, shoulders, and arms. The dress hugged every inch of her from chest to waist, and then flared until it hit right above her knee.

In comparison to the supermodels I photographed, she was petite, her heels still only bringing her to my shoulder. The dress itself was both sweet and sexy, leaving nothing to the imagination about what lay beneath the flirty fabric. Except for that print, which was busy as hell—*were those vibrators?* It was tough to see under the darkening sky.

Sensing my distraction, she snapped her fingers in the air, a habit I remembered Jude having. “Hey!” My line of sight slowly lifted to meet hers. “My eyes are up here.” Two brilliant cornflower-blue eyes blazed right through me, and fuck if that didn’t make my cock twitch... blue-eyed blondes were kind of my thing... angry ones, even more so.

“Are you cold?” I asked, what I thought was the obvious question based on the way her nipples were pushing through the vibrator fabric.

“What? No, it’s like eighty degrees out.” I could see the innuendo of my question hitting her through the widening of her eyes. “You’re a pig.”

“I’ve been called worse.”

Thank Christ, the cops arrived and quickly began filling out the dreaded paperwork. Apparently, this wasn’t Andre’s first accident, but I still had no clue who was at fault.

While waiting to give my own statement, I sent a quick text to my brother.

Running late. Wacko hit my ride. Just filling out paperwork. Will be there soon.

Twenty minutes later, the parking lot attendant walked up to us, and although he hadn’t seen it happen, he was the one who had called the police. The dude stared at my nemesis, appreciating her beauty, and offered to park her car for her.

A sweet smile lifted the corners of her plump lips. *Why did he get her sweet side?* “That would be lovely, thank you.” She bent into the car, and I ogled like the pig she accused me of being as the flirty dress rose up to expose the backs of her thighs. When she’d straightened back up, she was gripping her purse and a wrapped present with one hand and giving the attendant the keys with the other. He beamed like a horny teenager, as if she’d given him her phone number rather than what was needed to start her car.

Without a goodbye, she scurried away and disappeared into the same building where I was headed. And I had a deep suspicion we’d be crossing paths in a few minutes.

Exhausted over this ordeal, especially after traveling all day, I headed into Cleary Laboratories. Kyle had decided to have the party at the building

that housed his cosmetics company, and thankfully there would be an open bar waiting for me inside. Shit, I could use a drink.

As Kyle had instructed, I hauled my luggage into the foyer and waited for his hostess to direct me to the empty office where I could store my belongings. From the lobby, I heard the festivities going on above. After I dropped off my things, I headed to the party, following the sounds of chatter and music. I yanked the door open, and sure enough, the first thing I saw was the irate blonde yapping a mile a minute as my brother and his friends looked on.

Fucking awesome.

I hadn't even realized I'd released the heavy door until it clanged shut and all eyes landed on me. It was one of those moments when you wanted to turn around and check to see what was behind you.

"Are you following me now?" The closer I got, the redder her face became, and then in true Tasmanian devil fashion, she lost her mind. "This is a private party! My friends will kick your ass if you hurt me."

"Maybe you're following me?" Who was this chick and why was she here? *I know... to torture me.* This woman had a chip as big as the car she'd just hit resting on her shoulder. Was she kidding right now? Blood coursed through my veins, turning it from a simmer to a full-on rolling boil. And hell if I knew why that turned me the fuck on.

Actually, it may have been because she clearly couldn't give a shit about my opinion. As strange as that sounds, most of the women in my life were eager to impress.

Yet, this one couldn't give a crap about impressing me. The disgusted look on her face came complete with an unflattering choking noise... and again I wanted to laugh. Even while trying to appear all badass, her pretty face and ridiculous dress made her attempts counterproductive.

"In your dreams. You're such a jerk."

"Sweetheart, I'm not the one who caused an accident—you were. Where did you learn to drive? On a racetrack?" A quick glance at our audience revealed them twisting their heads back and forth in a ping-pong fashion.

“If your dumb driver didn’t cut me off to get into the lot, this wouldn’t have happened. God, you’re so rude.”

“You need to relax.” All the females gasped at once, while the men visibly cringed.

“Cass,” Luca said in his calming voice.

If fire could dart out of eyeballs, I’d be scorched. Ignoring my brother, she gritted her teeth and growled, “*Relax?* Did you just have the gall to tell me to relax?”

“Did I stutter?”

“Ugh!”

“Cass.” Luca tried grabbing her attention furtively.

Miss Pain-in-my-ass glanced at my brother before turning toward Kyle and plowing on. “Kyle, can you please escort this... this... jackass out?” I assumed the puff of air she aimed upward was meant to blow away a strand of hair that had fallen across her face, but it only ended up releasing in an unattractive sound. *Did she spit?*

Luca, always the diffuser of situations, stepped closer and placed a calming hand on her shoulder. “Cass!”

She bit back, “What?” At last, Blondie gave my brother the attention he’d been seeking, and as if a light bulb illuminated inside my brain, the name registered.

“Cass? As in Cassie?” She glared at me before darting her narrowed gaze to Luca.

Luca raised his hands in surrender. “I see you’ve met my brother.”

Suddenly, you could hear crickets. *No fucking way!* This was my brother’s best friend, Cassie? The friend who had a heart of gold and the patience of a saint? The one who was as sweet as sugar?

Luca met my shocked expression with a glint of mischievousness in his eyes and a shrug. “Welcome to New York, Dante.”

Cassie’s brows furrowed when the comedy of our situation hit her. “Wait... this... this... *man...* is your brother?”

Luca laughed as he nodded. “Cassie, this is Dante. Dante, Cassie.”

Had I just entered an alternate universe? “*This* is the woman you told me about? The sweet school teacher? Christ, I’d hate to be one of her students.”

Cassie plopped her hands onto her nicely shaped hips and smirked. “I’ll have you know, I’m a very good teacher. Take that back.” She then whispered something that sounded very close to *asshole*, but one couldn’t be too sure with her.

“Take that back? What are you, twelve?” And once again, everyone’s eyes bounced between us.

“You’re incorrigible. You’re nothing like your brother.”

Her comment forced a grin. She had me there. The more she stewed, the more I appreciated the way her dress enhanced her boobs. “Ahh... they’re pencils, and here I thought they were vibrators,” I voiced my revelation out loud.

“What?”

“Your dress. Outside I thought you had dancing vibrators all over it. Makes sense now. I get it—teacher.”

After an unflattering gawk, she blinked once and let out with a snit, “I need a drink,” before storming off toward the bar by herself.

Once she was out of earshot, Luca pulled me to the side. “Ease up. She’s one of my best friends.”

I couldn’t help feeling a tiny bit of remorse over busting her chops as I looked over to where Cassie stood with the other ladies. “I had nothing to do with that damn accident. She’s *pazzo*.”

“She’s not crazy, *and* I’ve never seen her so upset. Can you take it down a notch?”

“For you, fine. But I’m telling you, there’s a side to that woman you haven’t seen yet.”

Luca laughed but didn’t disagree with my assessment. Then he led me back to the circle and placed a possessive hand on the small of a brunette

beauty's back who I recognized from our video chat as Sabrina. "Sabrina, officially meet Dante. Dante, Sabrina."

The warning look he gave me as I pulled her into a hug made me laugh out loud. She clearly belonged to him, since he went caveman, though I decided to have a bit of brotherly fun. I held her face and leaned in slowly, knowing he was about to deck me. As my lips hovered over hers, I turned to kiss first one cheek and then the other. "Even more beautiful in person."

Sabrina, who seemed unaffected, confidently said, "Thank you."

I couldn't help but smile at my brother, who simply shook his head. "You sure know how to make an entrance."

"What can I say? It's a gift," I retorted with a hearty chuckle. "Trust me, this wasn't how I predicted this night going."

Jude and Kyle were next, each of them giving me a handshake followed with a bro-hug. They then introduced me to the two gorgeous women standing beside them. Brae, Jude's wife, shyly shook my hand. In comparison, Kyle's girlfriend, Vanessa, met my gaze full on and didn't hold back—I liked that in a woman.

"So you're the big brother?" she asked with a smirk.

"That's me, and you could be a model. Happy birthday."

She rolled her shoulders back with a truckload of self-assurance. "Thank you." At our exchange, Kyle gave me the same warning glare I'd gotten from Luca before he snatched her hand with his.

"You're welcome. My apologies for the commotion."

Vanessa nodded once, leaned in, and with emphasis said, "But..." She pointed a manicured nail at me. "If you ever talk to my friend like that again, I don't care who you're related to, I will take you out back and kick your ass. You got it?" My eyebrows joined my hairline. "That's what I thought. Now, let's go have a drink. It is my birthday after all."

We congregated at the bar to place our drink orders. Cassie still looked furious, turning her back to me while holding a glass of wine. The band struck up a song, pulling people into the center of the room to dance. Jude

and Kyle followed suit, taking their ladies by the hand and joining the other couples on the makeshift dance floor.

Luca's gaze bounced between Cassie and me. "Is it safe to leave you two alone?"

Naturally, Cassie answered before I could, with a saccharin smile plastered across her pretty face. "Yes, of course. *I* know how to act civilized."

Sure she did.

With a tilt of my hand, the three fingers of whiskey I'd ordered shot down my throat. I noticed Cassie's body begin to sway. Under normal circumstances, I would have asked her to dance, but this night was anything but normal.

Chapter 2

Cassie

It took everything in my power to keep my eyes from devouring Dante. But I'd rather eat chocolate-covered insects than let him know he affected me. For some unfathomable reason, my mind and body were at war with one another. And if I had to be honest, it could be because this cocky, arrogant man sent an unfamiliar zing zipping through me.

Jesus, he was my best friend's brother. Which meant there shouldn't have been anything zipping or zinging anywhere... and that should've been weird all around—yet, it wasn't. Yes, they both had the same tall, dark, and handsome thing going on, the same faint accent, but their dispositions couldn't have been more different. Where Luca was modest, Dante was cocky. Where Luca was reserved, Dante appeared uninhibited. For whatever reason, that last difference had my lady parts screaming.

I thought back to when I'd met Luca, and between his striking good looks and sweet personality, I might have developed a tiny crush. But the more we got to know each other, the more that crush turned into genuine affection, like a sister had for her brother. Definitely no zing.

A man like Dante Benedetto screamed of danger. Usually, I preferred safe, sweet, quiet men, much like my coworker Thomas. We'd gone on a few casual dates, and he had hinted at wanting more. Something held me back, and it only now occurred to me what that something was. With Thomas, there was no zing.

After receiving Vanessa's invitation, I'd had a fleeting thought to invite Thomas, and now I wondered how different my evening would have been if I had. For one thing, I wouldn't have been driving. For another, if I'd had a date, Mr. Benedetto might not have even given me the time of day.

Why my eyes kept seeking him out was beyond me, and why did my heart flip when I caught his gaze fixed on me? More important, why in the world did this ass need to be Luca's gorgeous brother?

To calm my pounding pulse, I took a moment to look around. Unsurprisingly, Kyle had outdone himself and transformed the clinical space into the perfect place for a party. Purple and white balloons and streamers adorned the lab, along with a “Happy Birthday” sign draped along the far wall. All the tables were decorated with candles and flowers. Waiters and waitresses milled about passing out hors d’oeuvres, causing my stomach to unleash a low rumble. I helped myself to a few, needing food to counterbalance the alcohol.

Even with the party’s distractions, I still couldn’t get past the events of the evening. Beneath the weight of Dante’s stare, I continued to ignore him, keeping my eyes fixed on the couples dancing to the ballad played by the band. I turned toward the bar for a refill on my wine when a warm breath caressed my ear and a deep voice stopped me. “Are you sure you should be drinking with the way you drive?”

Practically knocking noses when I whipped my head toward him, I glared with contempt oozing from every cell in my body. “Not that it’s any of your business, but I’m already taking a cab home tonight because my car is damaged. I barely drive it, but of course the one night I take it out, you come along...”

“Damaged?” He cut me off before his full lips rolled over his teeth, forcing my gaze down to his mouth. “You mean the tiny little crack in your bumper?”

“Oh my God!” There would be a murder committed tonight, no doubt, if I spent one more minute with this... *person*. “You know what...” He halted my words when he slid his jacket off to reveal a formfitting T-shirt that skimmed over him like paint. *Holy crap*. Every muscular nuance was proudly displayed beneath the smooth light-blue cotton, including the outline of a bar piercing his left nipple.

“You were saying?” His eyes held mine as he casually laid his jacket on the back of a nearby chair. His T-shirt and jeans left nothing to the imagination. Long legs, trim waist, and an impressive bulge caused the back of my neck to overheat. Of its own volition, my hand lifted my empty glass to my lips. When words still hadn’t found their way out of my mouth, he folded his arms, making my hot-flash predicament even worse.

“I was saying...” I paused to swallow air. “Please go away.” My own words sounded distorted due to the lack of moisture on my tongue.

“Is that what you really want?” He stepped even closer... too close. “For me to go away?” Eyes the color of rich coffee with a touch of cream bore through me. I wasn’t sure if it was a rhetorical question or not; regardless, I chose not to dignify it with an answer. Undeterred, Dante closed the distance, bringing his bare left elbow to press against mine. He was so close, there wasn’t a doubt he could see the effect he had on me through my dilated pupils and the hair on my arms standing on end. It wouldn’t surprise me if he could hear my heart pounding.

It took five full seconds for him to continue, and by then my heartbeat roaring in my own ears almost made it difficult to hear him. “Because that may pose a problem, since you’re my brother’s best friend. Let’s not forget, we’ll be seeing so much of each other now that I’m a New Yorker.”

Dammit. I forgot this wasn’t a short visit. Luca had mentioned Dante was about to relocate to the city. How in the world was I going to deal with seeing him on a regular basis? Granted, I could avoid him, but that would mean avoiding my friends as well. He was right, we would run in the same circle.

When I chanced another glance at him, his gaze remained trained on me. His deep-brown eyes studied my face as he dragged his thumb across his bottom lip—one of the sexiest moves I’d ever witnessed.

“Is there a problem?” I asked, my raspy voice betraying my attempt to disguise how much that one move turned me on.

Dante shook his head. “No, not at all. You have wonderful bone structure.”

My eyelashes fluttered a few times. “Excuse me?”

He tilted his head, studying me. “I photograph a lot of beautiful women, and even though you’re too short, your face has nice angles.”

“Too short? My face has nice angles?” *The nerve of this man. Who the hell says that to someone?*

“It’s a compliment.” He stood back and gave me a panty-melting smile. “Take it.”

“Being compared to a short elf is a compliment? Thanks.”

“I never said *elf*, did I?”

Heat rose from my ankles to my neck, and if I could spit fire, I would have. If I stayed at this party much longer, I was sure any makeup I had left on my angular face would melt off. Rather than shoot the breeze about bone structure with a man who clearly got under my skin, I decided to go to the ladies’ room to make sure I didn’t look like a raccoon who’d just left a sauna. “Please excuse me.”

“Something I said?” The left side of his mouth quirked up at the corner, but then morphed into a full-blown grin as I shook my head and walked away.

Brae and Vanessa noticed my hasty retreat, and before I knew it, the three of us were huddled in the ladies’ room like teenage girls.

“Are you okay?” Catching Brae’s worried expression in the mirror made me feel guilty for bringing this party down. My friends shouldn’t be concerned about me; they should be enjoying themselves.

“A bit rattled, but I’m fine.” I pulled a tissue from my purse and began to blot the tiny beads of sweat I could feel on my neck.

Vanessa slicked her lips with a red gloss before turning to me. “It’s Dante, isn’t it? I will say, the man is stunning.” When Brae and I looked at her with disbelief, she shrugged. “What? You can’t tell me he isn’t gorgeous.”

“Oh, he’s gorgeous all right... and he’s as cocky as they come.”

Brae laughed. “Jude was super cocky too, remember?”

“What do you mean, *was*?” I shook my head and continued. “But at least he wasn’t an ass, even when you thought he was Mr. Wrong. And then you found out he was your Mr. Right.”

Vanessa agreed with my assessment. “That’s what’s so great about Kyle—what you see is what you get.”

“Yeah, a sex fiend.” Brae laughed at my description, but it was the truth. Kyle, also known as Mr. Flirt, was definitely the perfect match for Vanessa.

“Well, if you got it...” She let her words trail off. “You know, Dante could be loads of fun. He’s nothing like his brother, Mr. Romeo.” I had to smile as Vanessa reminded me of Luca’s nickname. It fit him perfectly. “According to Kyle, Dante’s a kinky fucker.” An immediate blush reddened my cheeks. Hearing this bit of news made it even more necessary to stay away from that dangerous man. When Brae and I stared at her with wide eyes, she amended her statement. “Those were Kyle’s words, not mine. Apparently, the man is experienced.”

“Well, I’m not looking for Mr. Kinky. I’m not looking for Mr. Anybody. Just because all of you are paired off doesn’t mean I need to be,” I lied. Deep down I longed for the love my friends had found, but kink was out of my comfort zone.

Vanessa scoffed, “You’re so full of it. Come on, Cass, why else would you be dating Mr. Yuppie?” Brae giggled again, and once again I glared at my friends.

“We’re not dating. We went out a few times, that’s all. And Thomas is not Mr. Yuppie. That’s how he dresses for work.”

“He wore a shirt and tie to Dispatch last week for happy hour.” Vanessa’s voice raised a few octaves. “Who wears that to a bar?”

“I’m not going to stand here and defend a nice guy when the biggest jackass is beyond that door. Did you know his nipple is pierced?”

Vanessa licked her lips. “Oh, *really*? Wait, how do you know that? Did you...”

I snapped at Vanessa. “No! What is wrong with you?” She shrugged in response. “I saw it through his T-shirt.”

“Yum. I wonder if he’s pierced anyplace else.” Vanessa said as Brae sucked in a breath. “You know, that can bring a woman to orgasm quicker.”

“How do you know?” Before my friend could respond I snatched a towel to dry my hands and added, “Never mind. I don’t want to know.”

When are we having cake? I'm getting a headache."

Brae placed her hand on my shoulder. "Sweetie, are you sure you didn't bang your head in the accident? Maybe you should go see a doctor."

"I didn't bang my head." Although, based on how this evening had played out I wanted to bang my head against a wall. "Let's get back out there before Jude busts through the door."

We filed out of the ladies' room to witness most of the guests dancing or drinking happily enjoying Kyle's open bar. In the short time we'd been in there it seemed the party had gotten even livelier.

As predicted, Jude was waiting a mere two feet away for Brae. The man loved her like she was the reason he existed. I'd never witnessed such devotion before. Yes, Kyle loved Vanessa, and Luca loved Sabrina, but Jude had an intense possessiveness toward Brae. It was sexy as well as endearing. What would love like that be like?

I shook my head, bringing myself back to reality, which wasn't difficult because when I looked up, Dante was laughing with Luca and Sabrina. He had a camera out and was taking pictures of the happy couple. When he pointed the camera at us, I shielded my face. God only knew where those pictures would end up. With my luck, Dante would create a meme of me with a sarcastic tagline and plaster it on social media.

Vanessa struck a pose when Dante aimed the lens at her. Then in true V fashion, she pointed to his chest. "Nice piercing."

Everyone looked to where Vanessa pointed. Jude grabbed a beer from the bartender before tipping the bottle toward Dante. "I still can't believe you got that thing on a dare."

A dare? I wondered what that story was. *No, Cassie*, I reprimanded myself. *Don't go there; you don't want to know.*

Luca laughed at his brother. "You're such an idiot."

Kyle was about to say something, but Vanessa stroked his chest. "You know, that would be super sexy on you, babe."

"Not a chance. That had to hurt like a son of a bitch." Kyle kissed Vanessa on her cheek, and added, "But if you want to get yours pierced, be

my guest. Speaking of boobs, let's have cake."

Everyone looked confused until Vanessa giggled and said, "He likes frosting."

TMI. We gathered around the white-and-pink confection shaped like a perfume bottle. Once the candles were lit, and the song was sung, I was ready to leave. A flash caught my attention, and when I looked to my right, Dante was pressing the shutter button on his camera, taking pictures of everyone.

He walked to where he'd left his jacket and returned with an envelope in his hand. "This is for you." He gave it to Vanessa. "I'm sorry I didn't have time to stop at a store before I came, and airport gift shops aren't really my thing. I'd be happy to take your portrait, my treat."

"Thank you so much, I'd love that." Luca's eyes cut to mine before Dante strolled toward the bar. With him gone, I decided now was as good a time as any to announce my exit. Walking up to Vanessa, I said, "Hey, I'm going to head home."

"Why?" was her immediate response. She leaned closer and added, "Once all these other yahoos get lost, the real party will start."

"You'll fill me in tomorrow." Guilt squeezed inside my chest from the look on her face. "I love you. Happy birthday."

"Me too, Cass." After hugging Vanessa, Kyle handed me a party favor as I said my goodbye to the others and made a hasty beeline for the front doors. I had such high hopes for this evening—dancing, enjoying my friends. I could blame the fender bender for the headache pounding in my temples, but that would be a lie.

I owed it all to the kinky newbie named Dante. Never in my wildest imagination did I think a cocky jackass would make my insides clench, but he did. Maybe it was the circumstances, but I had a feeling it was much more than that. Dante was different than any man I'd known, and yet in a matter of minutes, he'd been able to ignite a fire inside me that hadn't been stoked in years... or ever.

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Chapter 3

Dante

Unpacking was the worst part of moving. Thankfully, Luca had taken the day off to help me. I had lived in several places, and with each move, I disliked it more and more. Getting too old for this shit, I decided maybe this time sticking around longer than a year or two wouldn't be a bad idea. Besides Milan, New York was the perfect place for my business to thrive. The move to Manhattan had been instigated by a major modeling agency contacting me to do multiple prominent shoots. I couldn't turn them down. Couple that with the other gigs I could easily line up, plus the fact that Luca lived here, and it made it a no-brainer.

Finding an available unit in Luca's building was another bonus. Thanks to my success as a photographer, buying the two-bedroom apartment was doable. Plus, using the second bedroom as a studio would save me the hassle of renting space elsewhere.

While Luca focused on my kitchen, I worked in the living room. After an hour or so, the clanging of pots and pans ceased. Luca walked out of the kitchen and asked, "Hey, do you want to grab lunch?" My brother's eyes fixated on the large photograph I had hung. "Wait, isn't that Charlene?"

Luca was the only one I had confided in, and it hadn't been by choice. He'd happened to meet her once or twice, and then to his displeasure, he'd been in California when Charlene and I had decided to call it quits. "It is." I quickly explained that although displaying it was weird, it had nothing to do with the person in the photo.

"It's a beautiful shot, but isn't it difficult for you to have it front and center in your home?" He shook his head, still focusing on the woman and not the art.

"It's not about *her*." It wasn't. Yes, Charlene was a gorgeous woman, but as I concentrated on the portrait, I could see past all the makeup and

perfect blond highlights. What first caught my attention were her hazel eyes. They glittered as if she always had the sun shining in them.

She and I had dated for almost two years. She was the closest I'd ever come to wanting to spend the rest of my life with someone. Our jobs took us to various places around the globe, from Hawaii to South Africa. But when she was offered a contract in France, she moved. In not so many words, she'd insinuated she couldn't pass up the opportunity. Charlene had felt it was the perfect time for us to explore new and *different* experiences. It took no time at all for her to begin a new relationship with a businessman she met in Paris. I suppose everything happened for a reason. "Like I said, what we had ended, and we've both moved on."

My brother cocked an eyebrow. "Okay, if you say so."

"I do." I raked my hand through my hair, no longer wanting to talk about Charlene. "Did you say something about lunch?"



Forty-five minutes later, Luca and I sat in a booth, enjoying the daily special at a nearby diner decorated in a 1950s motif. Elvis crooned softly in the background while the waitstaff scurried around in bubblegum-pink uniforms.

"Ma called last night worried about you."

The burger I had in my hands stopped its path toward my mouth. "If she texted, like the rest of society, she'd know I was fine."

"You're lucky she's even using a cell phone at all. Can you please call her, so she stops bothering me?" Luca shoved a fry into his mouth, acting as the older, more responsible brother. Somewhere between our preteens and adulthood, we had switched roles. "I'm not your personal assistant."

"She likes you better anyway. Besides, every call is no less than forty-five minutes long, and most of the time she's yelling at me for some reason. You having found your Ms. Perfect doesn't help my case. So thank you for falling in love." Luca beamed, and I forced my hand to stay still and not

slap that dopey lovey-dovey look off his face. “Seriously, you’re making my life very difficult. Not only is she happy her middle child found the love of his life, but she has an instant grandson. Way to go, little brother.”

Luca shrugged. “Sucks to be you, right? Don’t forget, I was in your shoes not so long ago.”

“Not even close. Ma hated Charlene. If you recall, the one and only time they met, Ma made lasagna and she may as well have set a plate of fat in front of my girlfriend.” Luca’s laugh caused me to grimace. “Yeah, very funny. I swear, the day I told her we broke up, I heard a champagne cork fly into the air. Followed by a lecture on how she knows best.”

“Well, in her defense, Charlene, although beautiful, was all wrong for you. Sabrina, on the other hand, is all right for me. I can’t wait for Ma to meet her and Mikey in person. The next trip I take with them will be to Milan.”

“Be careful, she might have Father Pietro in the living room waiting to officiate your nuptials.”

“That might not be a bad plan.”

“Wow, you’re pussy-whipped worse than I thought.” Luca scowled. “Fine, I’m sorry. Maybe that was the wrong phrasing. What I meant was, that sounds wonderful. Anyway, once I’m settled, I’ll call Mom.”

No sooner had I taken the first bite of my lunch when my phone dinged with a text from an insurance adjuster. Was this ever going to go away? I plopped my burger onto the plate so I could open my cell and read the rest of the text.

Tossing the phone on the Formica table, I growled. “Jesus Christ.”

“Problems?” Luca asked before he took another healthy bite of his meal.

“Now some adjuster needs my statement. You’d think I drove the damn car involved in that stupid accident. I need to fill out more paperwork as a witness, even though I didn’t see anything.”

The way my brother methodically wiped his hands on a napkin meant a lecture was coming. “You know, Cassie is really upset about that.”

“Really?” I scoffed. “I never would have guessed. The chick jumped down my throat as if I was at fault.”

“Cassie hardly ever drives that car. She was shaken up, so cut her some slack.” He shook his head with a sigh. “Look, you’re my brother, and I love you... but Cassie is very special to me. All I’m asking is for you to be nice. I’ve known her for over a year, and I’ve never seen her so agitated before.”

“I find that hard to believe.” At his glare, I put my hands up in defense. “Look, I get it, but I’m an innocent party in all of this.” When Luca wordlessly crossed his arms in front of his chest, I conceded. “Fine. I’ll play nice.”

“That’s all I’m asking.”

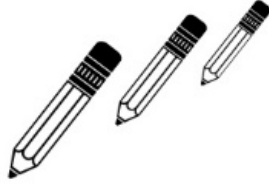
I was finally able to eat the rest of my food in peace. As Luca filled me in on how busy he was at work, my mind went elsewhere. It had little to do with the financial-world jargon he seemed obsessed with. Even though I couldn’t fathom loving that line of work, my lack of interest in finances wasn’t what caused me to zone out. It was the mention of his blond friend that forced a strange curiosity to fester in my mind. With all her friends now paired off, how did she spend her time? Was there a boyfriend, or did she sit at home grading papers while watching bad reality TV? An image of Cassie hovering over a stack of papers while wearing nerdy glasses should have invoked pity, yet strangely enough, it elicited intrigue.

“Okay, you can at least pretend you’re listening,” Luca said as he pushed his empty plate away.

“I was listening. You and Jude are rock stars in the financial market... the end,” I responded, sarcasm dripping. “So, um... maybe I’ll call her. You know, to apologize.” Lifting my phone, I asked, “What’s her number?” My brother staring at me for a few seconds had me adding, “Seriously?”

“I’m not so sure that’s a good idea. She doesn’t like you.”

“Ouch.” Feigning shock, I covered my heart with my hand. *As if I didn’t know that already?* “Okay, then I’ll be forced to stalk her online and maybe show up at her school.” And just like that, Luca began reciting Cassie’s number, knowing that my calling her was most definitely the lesser of three evils.



Cassie

Normally, at this time of year excitement coursed through me. Yes, summer ending always caused a touch of sadness, but once I got into my classroom and began decorating for my new class, everything I loved about teaching took over. Fresh faces eager to learn and eager to please served as the best motivator. Especially for someone like me who tended to live for her work. Yet this year, for the first time ever, I felt antsy.

While tacking paper apples with each student's name on them onto the bulletin board, I became lost in thought for the millionth time that day. Maybe I needed a vacation? And not one like I'd just had, lying on the beach lost in a book. I needed a real adventure, in Australia, or Bali, or South Africa.

Hell, I'd love to spin the globe that sat on my windowsill, close my eyes, and go wherever my finger landed. With my luck lately, I'd end up smack-dab in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

There was a time my friend Vanessa had the same aspirations, to travel and see the world. She had since added many stamps in her passport, thanks to Kyle. Unfortunately, I didn't have someone waiting in the wings, ready to whisk me away. I had money saved up, more than enough to take time off. But as quickly as that thought came to me, knowing I'd miss my students brought me back to reality. Could a midlife crisis arrive in someone's late twenties?

Maybe I needed to do something crazy like get my boob pierced? As quickly as that thought popped into my head, I let it fly out. Who was I kidding? It took me years to get my ears pierced.

"Knock, knock." Turning, I saw Thomas standing in my doorway, dressed as usual, professional tie and perfect oxford in place. "Need help?" he asked, a warm smile spreading over his handsome face.

Glancing at my wall of apples, I said, “I’m okay. I wanted to finish my ‘Good Deed’ chart, but I’ll do that tomorrow.”

“I’m depending on you to instill those morals this year, so next year they’ll come to me as first graders with good hearts.”

“I’ll try, but we both know a lot can happen over a summer.”

Thomas walked deeper into my classroom before leaning against one of the desks facing mine. He had cuffed his crisp white dress shirt slightly below his elbows, revealing the golden tan that had developed over the summer. The stiff cotton fabric did little to hide his muscular shoulders, upper arms, or even his chest.

I remembered the first day he had walked into our school, and like every other female in the building, my heart had skipped a beat. Thomas Carson looked like he’d stepped out of the orientation brochure for an Ivy League school.

Besides his classic good looks, he was a genuinely nice man. I knew the type well. Having grown up in Connecticut, I’d been surrounded by men like Thomas my whole life. My Sundays had consisted of dressing up to attend church with my parents and brother. School uniforms were the norm, everyone looked the same, and originality was nowhere to be found. All my life I’d felt like a square peg in a round hole.

Rarely did I break the rules or disappoint my parents. Everything I did back then was to please them. I held no regrets, as I loved what I did for a living. But I often wondered, if certain choices hadn’t been left to me—like the college I attended or the career I had chosen—would I be in an entirely different place right now? If my parents had control over my life, no doubt I’d be married, spending my time as a stay-at-home mom, and living within a mile of the house I grew up in.

I knew college was my ticket out of Uptight, USA. My goal to break free of the mediocre came to fruition when I was accepted into Fordham University. Naturally, Dad was not happy with the out-of-state colleges I applied to. He insisted I should attend one in Connecticut or even Massachusetts. Refusing to budge, Fordham had been an olive branch of

sorts. It gave him the confidence I'd receive a top-notch education at a private Catholic university, while giving me distance.

What my parents hadn't planned on was my decision to stay in Manhattan and not return home. They eventually got over it, sort of. With each visit came the typical inquisition regarding my love life or lack thereof. In fact, as I glanced at Thomas, I knew my mother would bust an ovary over how perfect he was for me.

The problem with Thomas was that damn zing wasn't there, and I now knew for sure it existed thanks to Dante. I was fully aware that needing a spark sounded delusional. I was a practical woman, and although I loved a fairy tale as much as the next hopeless romantic, it had never been something I'd required in my life.

Seeing the love affair between Brae and Jude, or Sabrina and Luca, or even the unconventional relationship Vanessa and Kyle had, caused an unfamiliar envy to develop within me. I could only surmise that having my friends all head over heels in love was what had shifted my focus on what I wanted from comfortable and safe to exciting and dangerous.

And now that I'd seen fireworks could exist between a man and a woman in the real world, I wanted that for myself.

Shit, the Cassie from a year ago would probably have slapped this version across the face to knock some sense into her.

With one final tack, all the apples were now in place. "There... done."

Thomas straightened and admired my handiwork. "Nice job. I was about to drive up to Central Park to enjoy this weather before we are sequestered within these walls. Care to join me?"

That icky feeling that came right before refusing someone swelled within me. "I wish I could, but I'm waiting for the insurance adjuster to call."

"Oh, right. Your accident. Is your car still in the shop? Do you need a ride anywhere?"

"No, not yet. I still have it. But I was going to head home in case he called and approved the repairs." No sooner had I said that when my old-

fashioned ringtone sounded from my bag.

“Maybe that’s him now.”

The screen displayed an unknown number, and as I slid the bar to accept the call, Thomas whispered, “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I nodded with a smile before saying, “Hello?”

“Cassie Brooks?”

“Yes, that’s me. I was expecting your call.”

“Were you now?” I smiled at the unexpected chuckle that followed his question. But when he then said, “I’m glad to hear that,” with a hint of an accent, I practically fell off the edge of my desk.

“Who is this?” I asked, despite my suspicions.

“Who do you want it to be?”

“Do you always play games? Can’t you just answer the question?”

“It sounds like you already know the answer to all of the above,” he said, another chuckle following his statement.

“Ugh!” That agitated feeling that had consumed me last Saturday night began to simmer once again. “You are so... so... so...”

“Charming?” he quipped, and I could practically picture the arrogant smirk on his face.

“What do you want, Dante?”

“To apologize.”

A wicked laugh erupted on my end of the call. “Apologize? I think you’re incapable.”

“Not true. Hey, I know we started off on the wrong foot, but I’m sorry your car was hit. I’m also sorry I gave you a hard time.”

At his words, the ire I held inside started to dissipate and suspicion replaced it. “You can stop blowing smoke up my ass.” Guessing it was my pride that fueled the sarcasm, the moment the words were out I regretted them. I glanced at the classroom rules tacked to my wall, especially the last one that said, *Be kind to others*, and felt like a hypocrite.

The slight pause on his end worsened my regret, but before I could apologize, he quietly said, “I’m not blowing smoke up your ass, Cassie. I am sorry your night was ruined. Look, just as I bent down to grab my bag, the driver looked back at me. Maybe that move caused him to miss your turn... I don’t know. I had forgotten until now. And if it helps, I can change my statement to include that.”

“You don’t need do that, Dante.”

“Okay, then can you let me take you to dinner... as a do-over?” That wasn’t what I’d expected him to say, and my fumble to answer proved as much. “I’ll take that as a yes? Is tomorrow night good?”

A string of refusals played in my mind on an endless loop, yet my brain somehow malfunctioned when the one word that made its way out of my mouth was, “Yes.”

Chapter 4

Dante

Honestly, I was a bit surprised she agreed to my request. Hearing her calm and agreeable voice was a pleasant change from her irritated, annoyed one. Maybe Luca was right, and she wasn't the she-devil I thought she was. Generally speaking, the first impressions I had of people were spot on, but that being said, we hadn't met under normal circumstances.

The rest of my day was spent getting my apartment in living order and scheduling shoots with local models and ad agencies. My fee wasn't nominal, and I didn't need to fill my calendar with anyone who wasn't serious about their profession.

I stood staring at the city's skyline as it began to illuminate against the darkened sky. Up here in my glass fortress, New York seemed so peaceful at night. Yet below on the streets, it always boasted an energy I craved. I turned to look at my apartment, proud of all I'd achieved, before I slipped into bed. Even though I was tired, I found myself staring at my cell phone. I wanted to text Cassie, an urge that not only baffled but surprised me. Chasing women wasn't in my repertoire, nor did I plan on adding it. Plus, if I opened the door to communication, it could give her the opportunity to change her mind. Since that was an unpleasant thought, I closed my eyes and tried to let sleep take me, but my brain refused to settle.

The sound of sirens and horns honking outside enabled my insomnia. In the shadows cast by the moonlight, I could vividly see Cassie's sweet smile while staring at the ceiling. The contradiction between that innocent persona and flashes of seductive vitality drove me insane with curiosity. Knowing I'd be seeing her tomorrow night caused my heart to beat a bit faster. The woman was unaware of how she could affect a man—namely me.

Sometime during my tossing and turning, I finally passed out. Thankful to get any sleep at all, I woke, my eyes blinking open. I

lengthened all my muscles, pushing my arms against my headboard. The morning sun filtered in the sides of the curtains, creating streaks of light on my pale oak floor, mimicking the highlights of Cassie's hair.

Cassie. What the fuck... I went to bed thinking about her, and I woke up thinking about her.

I wanted... no *needed*... to make tonight special enough to erase our first encounter. The mere thought of her made my blood rush through my veins. I was unsure if it had been because she was my brother's friend or someone I wanted to get to know better, but I planned to use the time to find out.

Normally, I'd be picking up my date, but since I decided not to have a car in the city, that wasn't an option here.

Rather than dwell on the negative, I got out of bed, shrugged on some clothes, and headed into the kitchen. I made myself a cup of espresso and sat at the table with my laptop.

As an additional gift to Vanessa, I wanted to download and edit pictures from her party. When I clicked on the files, rather than focus on the other partygoers, the fiery blonde who turned my first night in the city into a memorable one distracted me. Knowing there were more shots of her, I clicked through to get to the one picture I took of Cassie when she wasn't paying attention.

Finally finding it, I gave myself a moment to truly study her. Telling Cassie the angles of her face were gorgeous was the truth. After a while, models all looked the same. Yes, they were pretty, but they knew it, or they wouldn't be in that line of work. But the unassuming school teacher's beauty was as rare as was her attitude about it.

Cassie's effortless smile lit up the computer screen. Guilt hit me for putting a scowl on that beautiful face a few nights ago. But in my defense, she'd been infuriating as well... and the fact she was sent a swell of desire straight to my libido.

Even now, the combination of her anger and sweetness had the nylon of my basketball shorts tenting with my growing erection. I clicked to the next picture, and Cassie was watching the other couples around her.

Focusing solely on her eyes, I noticed a longing in them. Letting my own drift lower on the picture, her body filled out that ridiculously patterned dress as if it was made for her. Maybe it was, but I was suddenly envious of the cotton that got to touch every inch of her body.

Having a mind of its own, my hand slid beneath the elastic waistband of my shorts, finding my stiff shaft. The moment I made contact with my throbbing crown, an electrical charge rushed through me. My head lolled back, my eyes closed, and a carnal groan crept its way up my chest and out my mouth.

With each stroke, different sides of Cassie flashed in my head—from pissed off to smiling at her friends. But a few minutes in, the daydream became a poor substitute for the reality.

Dammit. I pulled my hand from my shorts and closed my laptop. I needed to calm down. Rubbing one out in my living room to a picture of a woman I barely knew screwed with my head. My days were spent staring at half-naked women, and sometimes they were completely bare of clothes. Yet a fully dressed school teacher managed to rile me up more than I'd been in years.

Caught between confusion and excitement, I gingerly rose from my chair with a slight limp and decided to work off whatever the hell this was by going on a run... a long one.



Earl's Grill was the perfect place to take Cassie to dinner. It was closer to her apartment than mine, a tip Luca gave me. It wasn't so loud one needed to shout to converse with their dinner companion, and the tables weren't on top of one another.

Positioning myself on the side of the table facing the door, I watched as people came and went while waiting for Cassie. When I texted her the time we would be meeting, she didn't hesitate to say, "Ok." Yet, glancing at my phone, she was already fifteen minutes late.

The waitress stopped by, asking me if I wanted to wait for the other person in my party before ordering a drink, but I didn't. After telling her what I wanted, she scurried away. My nerves spiked thinking something, God forbid, could have happened to Cassie... or she stood me up. Either of those scenarios didn't calm my nerves.

My beer was placed in front of me. I glanced once more at the door before calling Cassie, and then she walked in. Her pretty eyes scanned the room, and when she spotted me, she smiled.

I stood for two reasons... one, it was the polite thing to do, and two, it gave me a better sightline to admire her. Rather than a dress, Cassie had on a pair of light denim jeans, a white sleeveless button-up blouse that hugged the curve of her breasts, and a pair of nude-colored stilettos that were meant to be worn while her legs were wrapped around my neck.

Fuck me.

"Hi," she said as she slung her purse on the back of the chair. "I'm so sorry I'm late. My neighbor, who's reaching eighty years old, couldn't find her cat. So I spent an hour scouring the building and lost track of time." Cassie sat with a thud in the chair across from me.

"Did you find it?"

The waitress walked up to us and greeted Cassie. "Can I get you anything?"

Cassie tucked her silky hair behind her ear. "Yes, please. I'll have a cosmo." When we were alone again, she resumed, "We did find the cat... in her apartment... sleeping under a throw pillow on the couch."

I couldn't help but laugh. It dawned on me that Cassie seemed to be a magnet for mishaps. "Well, I'm glad you found it." She rambled on about her elderly neighbor for a few minutes. And the more she shared about her neighborly ways, the more I wanted to get to know her.

"Anyway," she said, a bit out of breath. "Usually, I'm quite punctual." My eyebrows arched. "You know... when I'm not in an accident or searching for a feline."

“That’s what I thought.” I winked, and a light pink hue tinged her porcelain complexion. “Thank you for meeting me tonight.”

She nodded, picking up her cocktail, which had been set down in front of her. Beating me to the punch, she lifted her glass. “To do-overs.”

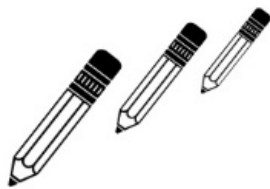
Hearing her toast to the reason I wanted to meet her tonight relaxed me. “To do-overs,” I repeated before gently tapping my bottle against her glass. “How was the rest of your day?”

Cassie sipped her drink, set it down, and grinned. “Good, thank you. The insurance adjuster called, and apparently the passenger in the other driver’s car made a statement. And in addition to Andre’s other accidents, it tipped the tables in my favor.”

“Sounds like that passenger is a great guy.”

She quickly shrugged one shoulder. “It would appear so.” Cassie leaned forward, causing the opening in her blouse to give my eyes a direct line to her cleavage... which I averted. Her soft warm eyes met mine, and along with a radiant smile, made my body go hard like it had earlier in my apartment. “Thank you for giving your statement. I would never want you to lie for me, but you saved me a lot of aggravation by doing so.”

The cool bottle against my lips did little to extinguish the heat running through my body. “It wasn’t a lie.” What she didn’t know, and what I didn’t understand, was I *would* lie for her if it meant she would be happy.



Cassie

Conversation was surprisingly easy with Dante. Truth be told, when Oscar the kitty was loose, part of me wondered if it was a sign that I shouldn’t meet him tonight. But now that we were there, sharing a meal together, I almost felt guilty for feeling that way.

“I’ve been by this restaurant so often yet have never walked inside.”

Dante grinned. “A couple of years ago when I was in New York, a client introduced me to this place.” He glanced around the room. “I like it here.”

“Me too. This is much different than José Ponchos. When the girls and I go there, we can hardly hear ourselves think over the music and crowd noise.”

“Then why go?”

Such a simple question deserved an equally simple answer. “Because they have the best margaritas.”

“So you don’t like loud music?”

“Not really. I’m not a fan of my ears ringing when I wake up in the morning.”

“That’s a shame.” His deep-brown eyes darkened, sending my pulse into overdrive. When I remained silent, he added, “There’s somewhere I thought we could go after dinner.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.” A shot of excitement coursed through me at the thought that our night wouldn’t end after dinner.

Throughout the meal, it took every ounce of self-control not to stare at his corded muscles that flexed each time he cut his steak. My mind drifted often, wondering what it would be like watching those arms support his body as he hovered over mine, how his slender hips would fit between my legs, and those lips... soft, full, and kissable.

“Cassie? Did you hear me?”

Shit. Was he talking? “Sorry, what? Did you say something?”

“Alessandro’s. It’s a hidden gem.” He put a few bills in the vinyl wallet containing our restaurant tab and stood. “Come on, I’ll take you there.”

I repeated the name, Alessandro’s, in my head over and over to try to spark a recollection, but none came. How was it that I’ve lived here my entire adult life and never heard of it, yet this guy visits a few times a year

at best and knows the hot spots? Rationally, I should decline, but I didn't want my night with Dante to end no matter how much my brain told me this was a bad idea. He made me feel things I never had, so why not go with him?

“Okay.”

Dante grinned, pulled out my chair, and with a firm hand on the center of my back led me toward the door. The thin fabric of my shirt did nothing to lessen the heat of his skin branding into mine. Even in a crowded restaurant, even though I barely knew this man, his possessive hold had me feeling like I did indeed belong to him. I felt every fingertip, the flat surface of his large palm, and the strong yet gentle pressure as his hand pressed into my back.

The part that shocked me speechless—the zing that traveled through me from his touch.

It could have been because of the unexpected contact. At least I tried to convince myself of that. Or my recent state of restlessness decided to mess with me a bit, not unlike the man who continued to hold me as we walked out of the restaurant. Whatever it was that caused the reaction from my body had my mind reeling with confusion.

Distracted, I wordlessly folded my body into the cab that he called to the curb with a raised arm. Before I knew it, we were sitting side by side heading toward Midtown. When our driver turned down a street that didn't look like there was a bar in sight, my nerves spiked to new heights. Then the car stopped, and Dante swiped his card in the reader and got out.

When he stepped to my side and opened my door, I hesitated. He dipped his head down, held out his hand, and waited for me to take it. “Come on, it's right down those steps.”

I accepted his help getting out of the car, glancing around and only seeing dumpsters, a stray dog, and litter scattered about. He again placed his hand on the center of my back, guiding me to steps that led to a black metal unmarked door... and once again my body reacted to his touch.

Forcing myself to snap out of it, I asked, “What is this place?”

“A club.”

My feet stopped moving. “You’re taking me to a sex club?” It may not have been an obvious question, but based on the location and its appearance it looked like something out of a BDSM book I had read.

Dante, a step ahead of me, craned his head back. “No, a dance club. Why, would you prefer me to take you to the other?”

“No!” I shouted louder and quicker than I intended. Dante started laughing, took my hand in his, and pulled me toward the door. Fear. That was the emotion that should have been coursing through my veins, but instead, that delicious zing again took hold... as well as anticipation and intrigue.

“That’s too bad,” he said with an exaggerated frown. Dante knocked on the door three times—reminiscent of a gangster movie. Instead of a burly man in a three-piece suit and a fedora answering the door, imagine my surprise when a tall, redheaded woman dressed to the nines did. Heavy beats from the music sounded from inside. Multicolored lights flashed, and the woman sized Dante up with a glint in her eyes.

“Dante Benedetto, aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.”

Dante leaned down and kissed her on both cheeks. “Marisa, it’s good to see you.” He pulled me closer to him. “This is my friend, Cassie. Cassie this is Alessandro’s wife, Marisa.”

Why I was relieved she was married was unbeknownst to me, but I was. “Hi, it’s nice to meet you.”

“Any friend of this guy’s is a friend of mine,” Marisa said as she patted Dante’s chest. “Come, Alessandro had to step out, but you know your way around. Go have fun.”

In a sexy move, Dante laced his fingers with mine. Marisa wasn’t kidding when she said he knew his way around. He weaved us through the small crowd until we reached the dance floor.

A disc jockey sat in an elevated booth on the right side, cradling one headphone between his ear and shoulder, while he pressed buttons on a keyboard. The music changed to a slower melody, and like robots, the couples dancing all slowed down. They didn’t stop, but rather than their feet doing most of the work, their hips were.

“Dance with me.” Dante’s warm breath tickled the sensitive spot beneath my ear.

Panic shot through me. I pointed to a woman who was bent backward, her partner’s thigh supporting her body as if they were connected. “I... I can’t do that.”

“Sure you can.” Without haste, Dante pulled me into the center of the floor. Couldn’t he have picked a less conspicuous spot? All the saliva in my mouth evaporated, and I was sure this was going to end badly.

“Dante...”

He placed his finger over my lips and brushed his scruff-covered jaw over my cheek. “Follow my lead. I’ve got you, Cassie.”

Chapter 5

Cassie

Dante took my right hand in his left, his right went to my lower back, and he pulled me toward him until our hips touched and our chests grazed against each other. I watched in awe as a couple gyrated next to us. It felt like we were in the middle of a *Dirty Dancing* remake, and the more I watched, the more I knew I couldn't dance like that.

Suddenly, his hand lifted to cup my cheek, guiding my attention back to him. I worried my bottom lip until his thumb tugged and then stroked over where my teeth had been. Dante lowered his head, bringing his lips a breath away from mine. If I leaned forward one millimeter, our mouths would touch.

Maybe it was the music or the erotic vibe in the club, but my body screamed to be caressed—my lips begged to be kissed. He rested his forehead on mine, and when the music paused a beat, he said in a husky voice, “Dance as though you're making love.”

The DJ raised the volume of the next song, and we were back in dancing position, except now I had sex on my brain. Dante slid his leg between mine, bringing the top of his thigh to brush against the part of my body that hadn't seen any action in a long time. Instantly, every nerve ending pulsed to life from my head down to my toes. I felt it everywhere, and if I concentrated enough, I knew I could make myself come.

When Dante mentioned making love, he wasn't kidding. The way he moved his muscular abdomen to create a wave as his hips followed the rhythm simulated sex so accurately, my panties dampened as a result.

There was no denying the man could dance. Hell, he was so good that he had me believing I could as well. I closed my eyes and let my body go, figuring I'd never see these people again, so why not? Dante's hand went from my waist to the curve of my ass, where he let it linger a bit. At the

same time, my free hand rounded his shoulder, traveled down his back, and because what was good for the goose... landed on his tight ass.

Despite him raising a suggestive brow, or how much I wanted to leave my hand there, I thought better of it. So instead, I dropped it until it rested on the side of his leg. Our eyes remained connected, and although I knew we were still moving, I no longer cared if I was doing it right. I had taken ballroom lessons, as most uptight families back home forced their daughters to do. But the rumba, or whatever we were doing, wasn't part of the curriculum at Miss Carrington's School of Dance.

Dante pulled me closer, not bothering to hide his excitement, which I could feel pressing up against my hip. He speared my hair above the nape of my neck, gently guiding me backward. My foot rose, and my leg curled around his. Balancing on one foot, he dipped me farther back into the position I never imagined pulling off.

When the song ended, and the DJ started announcing events that were going to happen in the upcoming days, we didn't move right away. Instead, we stood in the center of the dance floor, staring at each other. Something passed between us—for me it was indescribable. It wasn't long ago this man infuriated me. Tonight, I had never been so turned on in my life. I wasn't sure if my body could withstand another dance like that without stripping him naked. *Get it together, Cassie.*

I rose on the balls of my feet. "Can we get a drink?"

Dante nodded, and hand in hand we walked through another black door. The dimly lit eclectic room was small, yet housed a bar, a few tables, and a couple booths. He led me to the one in the back, where it was quiet enough to have a conversation.

"I'll be back." He pointed to the bar. "Cosmo?"

"Yes, thank you."

I watched him, as did many other females in the room. Dante's dark hair, olive complexion, and sinewy body were difficult to ignore. The black button-down and black jeans not only fit his perfect physique like a glove, they gave him a dangerous edge. Soon enough, with his beer and my drink in hand, he began to make his way toward me.

A dark-haired woman stopped him, flipped her hair over her shoulder, and whispered in his ear. Dante's eyes landed on me before pointing in my direction with his pinky finger. The woman glanced my way, and then shrugged and walked off.

Acting as if that was a common occurrence in his life, he merely continued to the table, set my drink in front of me, and sat down. "So what do you think? Cool place, right?"

I let the cold fruity liquid sit on my tongue before letting it slide down my throat. "Yes, and you seem to be quite popular here."

His eyes flitted to the brunette before coming back to me. "She was only asking for directions."

A laugh erupted from me. "Directions? To where... your bed?"

The corners of his full lips quirked up. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you sounded a bit jealous."

"No, not jealous. The same thing would happen when I went out with Luca. Women acted as though I wasn't in the room. It was annoying."

An immediate frown furrowed his brow. "You dated Luca? I thought you were just friends?"

"We didn't date. But the women who flaunted themselves in front of him didn't know we weren't a couple. I may as well have been invisible. Was I not pretty enough? Sexy enough?"

"Sweetheart, you're the sexiest woman here."

"Thank you, but I wasn't fishing for a compliment."

"And I wasn't trying to score any points. You're gorgeous. You might not have noticed, Cassie, but when we were dancing, I was the envy of most men in the room. You move like your body was made for sex. Plus..." He waggled his finger toward my blouse. When I looked down, I saw a few buttons must have come undone when we were dancing, revealing the lace of my demi cup bra as well as my cleavage. "*That* is hot as fuck."



Dante

The blush that colored her creamy cheeks at my declaration was even hotter than her blouse being unbuttoned. I smiled at how she adorably fumbled to close the buttons with clumsy fingers.

This woman was such a contradiction to the woman I had conjured in my mind. There was the Cassie that my brother had told me about, who seemed so sweet, innocent, and one stop away from joining a convent. Based on his description, I had an entirely different image of what she looked like, a different assumption of how she acted. In all honesty, the Cassie I had heard about seemed boring.

This Cassie, this firecracker with a short fuse and an undeniable hunger in her brilliant baby-blue eyes, might have had everyone she knew fooled... but not me. The way she pressed her body against my thigh, followed my lead so perfectly in the sway of her hips, and looked into my eyes like she wanted to devour me most definitely revealed an inner vixen.

The combination of kindergarten teacher by day and—if given the opportunity I wouldn't doubt—siren by night caused my cock to harden against her hip. And when it did, she subtly pushed against me. Now *that* was fucking hot. Show me a man who didn't have the naughty teacher wet dream and I'd show you a gay man.

“Do you always do that?” she asked, her eyes meeting mine over the rim of her cocktail.

“Do what?”

“Stare?”

“It's kind of my profession, to admire beautiful women.” I leaned closer, resting on my bent elbows. “You can tell a lot about a woman by staring into her eyes, by watching her reaction to studying her.”

She placed her drink down and mimicked my stance. “Okay, what can you tell about me?”

“Well, I can tell you’re naturally curious. For instance, you’re dying to know about my piercing, because you keep staring at my shirt. Right?”

My question shocked her, as evidenced by the instant reddening of her cheeks. “I... well, I’m a teacher, and of course I’m naturally curious. I...” With another awkward pause, she stopped short of asking me what she wanted to know.

“It’s okay,” I said, letting her off the hook. “Ask me.”

She hesitated slightly before succumbing to that curiosity I pegged her to have. “Jude said it was on a dare. Who dared you?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it a dare. That’s just what I told the guys.”

Cassie opened and closed her mouth a couple of times. I was sure she wondered, if not a dare, then what? I half expected her to ask, but instead she changed course. “How badly did it hurt?”

“Bad.” Was she curious because she wanted her nipple pierced? That thought shot blood directly to my dick. I couldn’t resist fueling her curiosity. “But not as bad as my other one.” Lifting my beer bottle to my lips, I took a slow pull, watching her the entire time. The way she tilted her head to look at my ear almost had me laughing out loud. Instead, I glanced down and added, “It’s a bit more south than that. If you’re that intrigued, I’d be happy to show it to you.”

In a playful manner, I moved my hands to the waistband of my pants, only for her to blurt out, “No!” When she realized I was joking, she smirked and shook her head. “Jerk.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.” She fought hard to hold back a smile and failed. “Why do you look disappointed?”

“What? No, I don’t,” she was quick to respond. “I just think that’s crazy. Who would be so stupid to get one...” Her eyes fell down to where the edge of the table met my abs. “Down there.”

“Many men, and women for that matter. I looked into it. Once I read up on the downsides, it didn’t seem worth it. I don’t need help stimulating a woman. I can do that fine on my own without complaints.”

Those two cornflower-blue eyes lifted toward the ceiling in an exasperated way. “I’ll take your word for it.”

I chuckled at her obvious discomfort. “Anyway, back to you. Want to know what else I can tell about you?”

“I don’t think so.”

Ignoring her, I said my thought anyway. “Your eyes say otherwise.” Starting at the top of her head, I scrolled my gaze over her inch by inch. First, I focused on her baby blues, her lips, the kissable curve of her neck. A pinkish hue tinged the span of pale flesh when my line of sight kept raking over her body. Taking my time, wanting to cause her to squirm, it felt like minutes before I finally met her eyes again. Purposely prolonging my response by drilling into her soul, the *squirm* I craved finally came. She shifted in her seat and looked away. Then, and only then, did I say, “There are two Cassies.”

Her gaze cut back to mine. “Two? Like I have a split personality... I’m nuts?” she asked with a silly grin. “I guess I deserve that label based on how I acted the night we met.”

“No... not a split personality as in being nuts, although that night I did think you were wacko. I meant two Cassies with split interests.” Seeing her teeth clamping down on her bottom lip meant I must have touched on something—a vulnerability... an insecurity?

She played my assessment off with a wave of her hand. “Pfft, I don’t have interests besides reading and teaching.” Slender fingers gripped the stem of the glass, and it trembled ever so slightly as it made its way to her mouth.

“I call bullshit.” My claim had her halting her drink midair. The anticipation for my explanation revealed itself in her wide-eyed stare and parted lips. But I didn’t give her any more than that. I didn’t share how I suspected Miss Brooks would be into trying all sorts of lewd interests. I didn’t hint that I suspected she wasn’t as innocent as she acted. So, instead of giving her more, or playing my hand, I simply said, “Ready to go?”



The more time I spent with Cassie, the more it became obvious she wasn't a fan of being analyzed. That inner snark I had gotten a taste of tried to take over her otherwise calm, cool, and collected demeanor. And the more I teased her, the feistier she became. However, the joke was on me, because the feistier she got, the stiffer I did.

There I was fresh in a new city, hanging out with one of my brother's best friends, and already envisioning all sorts of ways to not only give her pleasure... but to take all her pleasure as well. And I did want all of it, which fucking freaked me out.

By the time the cab pulled up to her building, my grand plan to get a rise out of her had backfired. Because in doing so, I had worked myself up in the process. If it were someone I had randomly picked up, things would have already become physical. Visions of crashing through her apartment door and tearing her clothes off like an animal weren't helping my predicament. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been so turned on, the last time I wanted to do filthy things to a woman. To be honest, I had no idea how to proceed, or whether to proceed at all.

"You didn't have to ride all the way with me." Ignoring her, I slid my card through the scanner, but my silence didn't stop her rambling. "So, um... thank you... and good night, Dante." She opened her door to get out, never expecting me to hop out of my side and trot around to hers. Once out on the sidewalk, a light breeze caught her hair and lifted it off her shoulders, except for one piece that stuck to her lip and caught my attention. "Dante, I'm fine. You don't have to see me in."

"Yes, I do."

"Nothing is going to happen tonight," she spit out, but then quickly blushed at the abrupt assumption.

"I don't expect anything to happen, Cassie." A defiant expression crossed over her face, and instead of arguing, she sighed impatiently before turning toward her building. Nothing was said between us as I followed like

a dog in heat right to her door. *Who was I kidding?* If she suddenly had a change of heart, I'd oblige in a split second.

"See, I'm home now safe and sound," she said with sass while sporting a teasing smile. "I had a really nice time, Dante. Thank you again."

"You're welcome. I hope our do-over was a success and you no longer think I'm an ass."

"I never thought you were an ass," she quickly replied. Her cornflower eyes appeared backlit in the dim light of her hallway.

"Sure about that?"

When I leaned closer, she swallowed audibly and whispered, "Just a jerk."

"Actually, I think you called me a pig." I put my hand on the door beside her head and smiled at her discomfort. "But I'm sorry I was an all-around jerk." It sounded like she dragged in a breath and held it as I moved closer to place a soft kiss on her cheek. Keeping my lips on her silky-soft skin, I let the kiss linger. Her warm breath hit my face. I could hear each additional breath she took. I could smell the spicy perfume she dabbed beneath her ear. And through it all, my cock stiffened in my jeans.

I could easily twist my face and take her mouth. Better yet, bust through her door, as I had imagined, to take her body. But this was Cassie. And as much as I wanted to, or as much as she'd want me to, I couldn't do that to her. I couldn't go there. Not only would my brother kick my ass, the rest of her friends would as well. That wasn't to say I wouldn't another day. I wanted her too badly, my curiosity was too strong. Regardless, I needed to navigate this carefully.

A few seconds later, I finally straightened. Really, it was out of necessity. Based on the dazed expression on her face, the raw hunger in her eyes, I no longer trusted her to force me away. While staring, crushing my lips to hers became one of the hardest things I had to walk away from.

Somewhere during the kiss on her cheek, she pressed her hands into the wood door behind her. Combined with the raw lust in her eyes, this confirmed my theory that if pushed, she would have succumbed to wanting more than an innocent kiss.

“Good night, Cassie.” Without looking back, I headed down the hall toward the stairwell.

When I hit the street, I felt like I had finished a marathon... an unproductive one. Every part of my body wanted back into her building to pick up where I left off. Never have I had to consciously talk myself out of being with a woman. *What the hell was that?*

Minutes later, I was back in a cab heading to my place. My body felt like it'd been plugged in, the desire I felt taking on a life of its own. Part of me wanted to storm right back in there and pound on her door. *Shit.* I hadn't gotten laid in way too long. That could only account for my lapse of judgment.

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Chapter 6

Cassie

Thank God it was Sunday. Brunch with my girls was exactly what I needed to clear my head. For years, Brae, Vanessa, and I would meet once a week to catch up on things. Recently, our weekly ritual had been reduced to three times a month. Ever since Jude and Kyle came into the picture, their gripes caused Brae and Vanessa to appease them by giving up one of the weeks. I guess it could have been worse with the kind of man Jude was.

Our brunch dates were special, and it was a shame our other friend, Desiree, was working in London. We missed having her around, but one of us would usually fill her in the next time we spoke.

Sabrina had started to join us when she could, but this week Luca had planned a vacation with her and Mikey to Southern California. Not having her there meant I didn't need to hold anything back... once I swore Brae to secrecy. It wasn't because I didn't trust Sabrina, but she was attached to the brother of the man who wrecked my head.

I sat at our usual table, staring into the worn wood as if answers would appear. Laughter caught my attention, and I let out a sigh of relief when my friends walked in. Brae, of course, had her yoga clothes on. But Vanessa, who despised yoga, was dressed casually in jeans and a T-shirt.

“Good morning!” Brae's bright demeanor rivaled that of the late August sunlight filtering into the restaurant. “Have you been waiting long?” She kissed my cheek before sitting down next to me. Vanessa gave me a hug and sat opposite myself and Brae.

“No, not really. I haven't been sleeping very well, so...” I let my voice trail off because what would I say? *A sexy, annoying man with a pierced nipple keeps infiltrating my thoughts?* Instantly, I remembered what I did to said nipple last night in my dreams.

The waitress came and Vanessa ordered our customary mimosas.

“I’m so sorry I had to cancel on you last week,” Vanessa said with a slight frown. “There was no way I was going to make it after that wonderful party.”

Brae laughed. “I don’t think any of us could have made it. I spent the morning in bed. Your man sure knows how to do it right.”

Vanessa grinned salaciously, “Mmm... he sure does.” Vanessa and I stared at our unassuming friend waiting for *it* to click.

The way Vanessa’s mind processed things had become predictable, especially when Kyle was involved. Those two were the definition of sex. Then again, Brae wasn’t the type to kiss and tell.

“I didn’t mean... ugh, you know what I meant.” Brae welcomed the mimosa the waitress had set down by taking a large taste of it.

Mimicking Brae, I picked up my glass and drained the tangy cocktail. “I went out with Dante.” The sentence flew from my mouth before I could stop it. Vanessa, who had just raised her glass, paused midair, as Brae shooed away the waitress who came to take our orders.

“When?” Brae asked with more shock than confusion.

“Friday.”

“Friday?” Vanessa screeched. “That was two days ago, and you’re only telling us now?”

There was no way this topic of conversation could leave the table. Reaching over, I placed a hand on Brae’s forearm. “You can’t tell Jude any of this, okay? I’d rather be the one to talk to Luca.” Brae shifted in her seat. “If this makes you uncomfortable, I won’t discuss it now.”

She bit her bottom lip for a half second before nodding. “My lips are sealed, I promise. But, if it ever gets to be too much, don’t take offense if I walk away. I don’t like keeping things from him.”

“Deal. I completely understand.” I let out a breath before continuing. “So, the other day, Dante called to apologize for being an ass after we got into the accident... and for most of Vanessa’s party. If it wasn’t for him being Luca’s brother, I probably would have told him to go to hell. He

wanted a do-over, and he took me out to dinner. He also remembered something from the accident that could help my case.”

The waitress came back yet again, and this time Vanessa did the shooing. When the waitress huffed at us, I said, “We can order.” Once we each recited our choices, she scurried away, giving us privacy.

“Now go on,” Vanessa said, leaning forward on her elbows, her chin perched in her hands.

“Anyway, dinner was good. He wasn’t as asshole as I thought he’d be. To make a long story short, when he brought me home, he kissed me on the cheek.”

“That’s it? A kiss on the cheek?” Vanessa relaxed back into her chair. “How scandalous.”

Brae laughed. “V, she isn’t you. I’m surprised you went out with him at all.”

Thoughts of how Dante held me when we danced, the way his hips moved with mine, and the way his eyes looked at me with wanton lust had me squirming in my seat. Although it was a simple kiss on the cheek, his full lips against my skin, his hard body pressing into mine, and even the scent of his masculine cologne sent a shockwave through my system. Never before had a simple gesture wreaked so much havoc.

There was so much I wanted to say, but knowing Brae thought I did the right thing, I held back. Vanessa, on the other hand, arched a brow, knowing there was more to the story. She also knew I wasn’t going to talk about it right then.

“Well, I’m glad you two are getting along,” Brae said before taking a sip of her mimosa. “I’m sure Luca was worried about it.”

I nodded, knowing that was probably the case. Even though Luca was away, there were times I wanted to pick up the phone to get his take on the situation. And if my confusion was about anyone other than his brother, I would have.

After we finally ate our meals, we stood and made plans for the holiday weekend. Jude and Brae were having us all at their place in the

Hamptons for Labor Day, except for Dante, who had to work. Without the distraction of Dante, I looked forward to doing nothing but reading a good book.

Vanessa hung back once Brae said goodbye. I knew she wasn't satisfied with the little information I divulged.

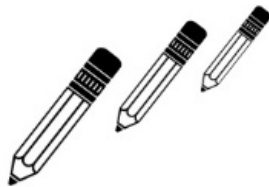
“Come on, let's go to your place and *really* talk about your date.”

“What makes you think there's more?” I asked, acting dumb yet relieved I could let out all the salacious thoughts plaguing me. If anyone was the perfect candidate to listen without judgment, it was V.

She hooked her arm around mine and leaned in as we began walking to my place. “Let's see, the way you licked your lips at the moment you said he kissed your cheek. Then there was the constant blush that made you look like the air-conditioning in the diner had stopped working. I saw at least three squirms and a dreamy faraway look in your eyes.”

“Jesus, V, you should be in the CIA.”

An easy laugh busted out of her ruby-tinted lips. “I'd be a kick-ass CIA agent.”



Only once we were comfortably lounging on my couch did I start revealing details. With her poker face on, Vanessa listened to everything I said leading up to the dance club.

“Okay, sounds like a nice dinner, but my girly parts aren't tingling yet, so what are you holding back?” she asked, with a touch of attitude. Vanessa was a no-bullshit kind of girl, so beating around the bush wouldn't fly with her.

“Well, after dinner he suggested taking me to a club.”

“You went to a sex club?” She couldn't contain the excitement in her voice.

“No!”

Before I could say anything else, she pointed a pink manicured finger at me. Lines of curiosity appeared on her forehead. “You’re hiding something.”

“Oh my God. Can we stick to one embarrassing detail at a time?” I literally felt like I popped off the top of a can of worms, and one by one they slithered out. I hadn’t told a soul of my curiosity with kink... how I loved reading about it in books... how I wished for it in my own sex life.

“Why is this embarrassing? He’s a hot-as-fuck man who obviously knows how to use what God gave him.”

“Okay, let me get through my date with Dante, and then I’ll fill you in on some other stuff you don’t know.”

“I knew you’ve been hiding something,” she quipped.

“No, you didn’t. Anyway... he took me to an underground dance club.”

With a firm nod, Vanessa said, “Alessandro’s.”

“You know it?”

“Sure. Kyle and I have been a few times. We use it as foreplay.”

“Oh, Lord. Okay, well, I can’t dance like that. But Dante took control, and the way he moved his body against mine unleashed some sort of... of...”

“Inner slut?”

“Yes! I was so damn horny. It didn’t help that his hard-on joined our little party and stayed for the duration of the night.”

“Poor guy probably had a bad case of blue balls. Was it huge?”

As if it were still pressed against me, I could feel every delectable inch of him. I didn’t know if it was huge by Vanessa’s standards, but for my own, it felt like something that would be a delightful challenge. It didn’t surprise me in the least, considering it matched the size of his ego.

With an annoyed sigh, I said, “Can we focus?” A firm nod allowed me to proceed. “Well, I can’t stop thinking of the way he rolled his hips and the

look on his face as he did. It left nothing to the imagination of what having sex with him would be like... of course, minus the actual... you know.”

“Fucking?” She rolled her eyes and leaned forward. “Get rid of this little innocent act you have going. From here on in, just say what you’re thinking. So then what?”

“He took me home and kissed my cheek.” She opened her mouth to speak, and I raised a hand. “Let me finish. By the time we got to my door, I was on fire. I thanked him, he leaned in close, and even though it was an innocent kiss, every part of him was pushing up against every part of me.”

“His cock was still hard,” she interjected with a nod.

“Yeah. V, I was seconds away from inviting him in. And if I had, I would have most definitely slept with him.”

“I don’t see the issue here.” Her head continued to shake back and forth even as her words ended. “You’re both adults. What is it with adults denying themselves because they think it’s wrong?”

“It *is* wrong. He’s Luca’s brother.”

“So? And Kyle was Jude’s best friend. When we started our thing, that wasn’t a reason I would have used to not fuck him.”

I blushed at her statement. God, she could be so blunt. But she was right... sort of. “That’s not the only reason.” I then voiced the other issue that held me back. “He’s out of my league. Damn, I don’t even own decent lingerie for a man like Dante. He’s surrounded by models... not ordinary ones either... supermodels. The man is sex personified. He could probably suck the life right out of me.”

“Sounds hot,” she retorted. “He’s not out of your league. I’ll coach you. You need this, Cass. He’s obviously into you. If any one of us needs a hot, writhing, raw, hip-pounding affair...” She lifted one perfectly sculpted brow with a smirk and pointed at me. “It’s you.”

My friend was right. I did need all that. I needed a distraction, an obsession, an adventure. Maybe the restlessness I felt was because of Dante. After meeting him last week, an antsy feeling consumed me. Maybe it had nothing to do with my routine or not feeling a zing with Thomas.

Maybe... getting one little taste of a man who could both infuriate me and make my blood simmer with desire, while wanting to tell him off with my next breath, was what caused the restlessness.

“Anyway, back to what I was going to tell you.” On instinct, or maybe it was habitual, I straightened my spine and crossed my legs at the ankles. “What you don’t know about me is how I was raised.”

“Amish?” Vanessa quipped.

“Seriously?” I let out a long breath. “No, I’m not Amish. Do you want to hear this or not?”

Vanessa casually tucked her feet under her legs. “Yes, I’m sorry. Please continue.”

“Thank you. You could say my family is very rigid. My father is the chief of cardiology and on the hospital’s board. My mother doesn’t work, per se, but she’s very involved with the historical society and co-chairs several philanthropic events. Growing up, it was all about acting the right way, knowing when to speak and when not to. Like many girls, I was enrolled in a finishing school.” I couldn’t keep from rolling my eyes at my statement. It sounded so pretentious... because it was.

Vanessa’s head tipped to the side. “Did you have one of those coming-out parties?” She laughed, but I nodded. “No way. Really? How is it that we don’t know this about you? We’ve known each other for years, Cass.”

How? Because I hated everything about it. “It wasn’t something that came up in idle conversation... or ever. What should I have said? My parents are stuffy and hate the fact that I’m a teacher? Or worse yet, that I wasn’t married to a doctor, living in a home surrounded by a white picket fence? No, some things are better left unsaid.”

“So you can successfully walk across a room with a book balanced on your head. What does this have to do with sex?” Her eyes widened. “You have had sex before, right?”

“God, yes!” I rubbed my temples, warding off my impending headache. “Focus, V. You’ve seen Dante. What if we do get together? He’s the opposite of everything I know.”

Vanessa blinked long and slow, as though she were trying to garner patience. “Sweetie, you’re a grown woman. You can’t be worried about your family’s opinion on who you want to fuck.” A victorious smile meant that she misinterpreted my silence as conceding to her words.

Yes, she was right... regardless, yes, I could worry about that. “This is difficult to explain. I’m their only daughter... their princess. Picture this... it’s the Fourth of July. We’re at my parents’ estate.”

“Estate?”

“Again, focus, V.”

“Sorry, continue.”

“Anyway, we’re at my parents’ home, in the backyard for their annual barbeque. The elite of the elite are there. My mother is donning one of her designer sundresses, my father looks like he should be on the golf course, and their friends are sipping expensive wine on the flagstone patio around their large pool. Enter Dante. His board shorts are resting low on his hips, revealing his vee. His sunglasses make him look uber mysterious. His hair isn’t neat as a pin. Instead, it looks like he just had sex.” I crossed my legs in the other direction at the thought of that. “Then he peels off his shirt and the sun gleams, catching his nipple piercing...”

“Damn, that’s hot.” Exasperated, I let out a sigh. Not because she was wrong, but for the opposite. “I’m sorry, but again, you’re an adult. I think there’s something else besides your uptight childhood. Spill it.”

I needed to come clean with what was really bothering me, even if it made me sound insecure, because, quite frankly, I was. “What if Dante is used to a woman who is a bit more experienced? One who’s uninhibited? One who’s a bit reckless. I’m not that woman, V. Yes, I know how to have fun, and I do my best to let loose, but you’ve seen my past boyfriends.” Sadness filled my eyes. “If we got together, and I fell for him... I mean *really* fell for him, and he got bored, then what? Going to Alessandro’s was a taste of what he liked. What if I can’t keep up?” Defeated, I shook my head. “I guess I’m scared.”

Vanessa pulled me into a hug. “You’re not a stuffy, uptight stiff from Connecticut. You’re a fun-loving, sweet, sexy woman who can recite Emily

Post. Deep down, there's an inner vixen in there. You just need the right man to pull it out of you... or put it in."

She pulled back and winked at me. We both started laughing, but I couldn't help but wonder if she was right.

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Chapter 7

Dante

The beige lace cups of her bra left nothing to the imagination, and neither did her matching thong. “Lie back,” I instructed, waiting as she seductively positioned herself. She bent one long leg at the knee and the other lay flat on the mattress. A small strip of the lace revealed itself between her thighs. A sheath of silky ebony hair hung behind her, creating a backdrop to her *come fuck me* look. “On your elbows.” She did as I asked before pinning me with a heated gaze, one that said she wanted me.

Click. Click. Click.

I couldn’t help the smile that spread over my lips. That right there was the money shot, that look you couldn’t fake. Over the years, I’d learned through experience that those who wanted in my pants were better subjects to photograph... and that included some of the men.

After snapping a dozen or so shots while she stripped me bare with her eyes, I slid to the right and said, “Smile, Camilla.” An electric smile lit her face, prompting me to capture it on film for all of eternity.

This wasn’t the first time I’d photographed her. It seemed apropos for her to be my first client in New York City. The woman had been relentless in pursuing me. When her call came, my first instinct was to suggest outdoor shots. Subconsciously, Camilla was probably the main reason I second-guessed using my spare bedroom as a studio.

The purpose of today’s session was to supplement her portfolio with full body shots to help her break into the commercial lingerie/swimsuit industries. Easy money for me. When I wasn’t traveling, private sessions with models were the bread and butter of my income. Taking baby shots or engagement portraits weren’t my thing.

As hot as Camilla was on the outside, her vindictiveness had been a major turn-off. I’d seen the way she’d backstabbed her colleagues on several occasions. But as much as I couldn’t stand her personality, she’d

never know that. I prided myself on professionalism, never crossing any lines that could be misconstrued.

“Good job. Let’s get into that bikini now, and then we’ll be done.”

She slid off the bed and sauntered over to where I adjusted the lighting. With no shame, she ignored the modesty screen in the corner and unhooked her bra, letting it drop to the floor. “Do you think we should take any nudes?” she asked, and I had to suppress the eye roll that wanted to come naturally. Even before I could respond, off came the thong, leaving her as naked as the day she was born.

Desperation never seemed to be something they shied away from, especially if it helped get them what they wanted... me... which had never happened during my professional career. I used the term *they* to represent a small group of young, up-and-coming models who had no clue what it meant to have integrity.

It was a demanding class of beauties whose careers came easily, without a need to sell themselves. They were spoiled brats, a small, elite group of women who had been noticed as they sipped designer coffee at the park or sauntered through a fashion mall while giggling with friends. Camilla was probably the worst of them all. If given the choice, I always preferred to photograph the more mature set of models, in their late twenties to early thirties—models who knew how to be humble, appreciative, and, most of all, professional.

“That’s up to you, but to be honest, I don’t think you need them for next week’s appointment.”

I could see the wheels turning as she said, “You’re right. If something arises, I’ll schedule another shoot.” She moved even closer to stand directly in front of me. I still hadn’t looked at her as she continued to stand there naked, and no doubt it was pissing her off. Naked women affected me as much as they did a gynecologist. When you’ve seen as many breasts and waxed pussies as I have over the years, it was normal to become a bit desensitized toward them.

A visual of a fully dressed Cassie came to mind, and if she were standing right beside naked Camilla at that moment, strangely enough my

body would have responded to Cassie more. I knew that because there'd been a few times since meeting her when the thought of what she'd look like naked in my bed caused my cock to swell.

I wasn't dead. Sure, over the years there'd been plenty of women who caught my attention with their hot little bodies and cunning smiles. But once I got to know them, the desire would dim. One woman managed to keep me wanting to come back for more, until the day she broke up with me.

"I'll check my calendar when I get home," Camilla went on to say when I still hadn't acknowledged her pathetic attempt to rile me up.

"Sounds good," I lied. "Would you like anything to drink before we finish up?"

"A chilled Pellegrino with a slice of lemon would be great, thank you." God forbid they subjected themselves to tap water.

"Coming right up." As I reached the door, I said over my shoulder, "Go ahead and get that bikini on. I have another client in a few hours, and I don't want to rush these shots."

Her silence meant she got the hint to move things along and stop trying to seduce me. The truth was, I didn't have another client that afternoon, so the sooner Camilla's session ended, the sooner I could get her out of my apartment.



Robotically, I edited the photos of Camilla on my laptop. That had been typical of the private sessions I conducted. These models were perfection, and except for a shadow or the occasional red-eye, not much touching-up was needed.

By three p.m., I became antsy. Something had been nagging at me over the past few days, or, to be more specific, someone. Since our date, I thought of Cassie more times than I should have. I tried to rationalize my atypical behavior, concluding she was the shiny new toy in a new city. But

as quickly as that conclusion came to mind, I'd dismiss it. It was more than an infatuation toward a beautiful woman who intrigued me. But why it was more remained the question.

I wasn't the type of man who needed to talk to someone when something bothered me. In my profession, between all the traveling and the people I met, it was hard to have good friends. There were a few buddies I remained in touch with from college and my early days as a photographer. Really, the only person I ever opened up to was Luca.

With Luca on a business trip / vacation this week, I was left to my own devices for solving my dilemma. That could be dangerous. I tended to be impulsive and impatient, which was what caused me to pick up my cell and text her.

Whatcha doin'?

I had no idea where she'd be in the middle of a Friday. I believed schools in the city didn't start until next week. At least that was why Luca took Sabrina and her son, Mikey, with him to California. Did teachers have to report sooner? Not expecting a response, I resumed staring at photos of Camilla on my screen with a bored sigh.

Deciding to take a break, I popped open a beer in my kitchen and heard my phone ding with a new text. My feet may have carried me back to my desk a bit too quickly for my liking. *Fucking feet.*

I was just leaving my classroom. What are you doin'?

That impulse I couldn't control had me typing back, *thinking of you.* My dignity had me erasing it. And then my fingers ignored my dignity by retyping those three damning words and hitting send.

The dancing dots appeared as I waited. When her reply came back, I chuckled at her humor.

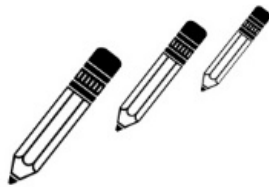
Why is that? Did your driver hit another unsuspecting blonde's car?

For the record, you did the hitting. I was going to get some fresh air.
Want to meet me at the park in the East Village?

I asked, purposely choosing a busy park near where she lived.

It took a full five minutes for her to reply... and her response was a simple

Sure.



Cassie

This time, the excuse I gave Thomas wasn't a lie... well, maybe the meeting-a-friend part was. Could I consider Dante a friend? Since I didn't look at my other male friends like I wanted to eat them for lunch, probably not.

After Dante's text, I stopped home for a quick freshen-up. Keeping on the jeans I wore to school, a quick switch from a T-shirt and flip-flops to a frilly summer blouse and sandals helped emphasize my curves. I left my hair up in a ponytail and added a swipe of lipstick to help me look a bit more put together.

Fifteen minutes later, I made my way toward the park, where I spent a lot of time either reading under a shady tree or watching my students play extracurricular sports.

My heart pounded over meeting Dante. I hadn't handled the kiss at my door very well and didn't trust my traitorous body not to betray me. The way Dante blatantly studied me made it impossible to hide that I'd been

affected by him. No matter how much I pretended to act cool, pebbling nipples, dilating eyes, a sheen of sweat, and failing to control my breathing all said otherwise.

A few times during the short walk, I'd needed to talk myself off the ledge. We were meeting in a public place, during daylight, among hordes of people. There was nothing to be nervous about, right?

Yeah, right, I thought as I spotted Dante, sitting on a bench at the park entrance. The sexiest scruff covered his jaw and framed his mouth. With his dark-brown hair flopping over to the side, he dragged his thumb over his bottom lip while his chocolate-brown eyes bore straight through me as I approached. The closer I got, the easier it was to see a pale-blue T-shirt molding over his body in the same way as the one he'd worn to Vanessa's party.

Once he stood, I saw the professional camera he held in one hand, and my stomach flipped. I hated being photographed. As if he heard my thought, he lifted the camera and began snapping over and over with each step I took.

"Stop," I complained, one hand covering my face. "People are staring."

"Let them stare," he said with a chuckle from behind the camera.

"It's not funny, Dante." I went to swat him, but he jumped out of my reach. His smile was as radiant as the afternoon sun. Of course, I heard the shutter click one more time before he lowered his camera. *Smart-ass*.

Like a cobra striking its prey, he chastely kissed my cheek, catching me off guard. "I didn't mean to annoy you right off the bat. I planned on giving myself at least ten minutes before that happened."

"Ha ha, you're a funny guy."

Sporting a devious smirk, he glanced at the small screen on the back of the camera. "I have no idea why you don't like being photographed. The lens loves you... look." Dante flipped the camera around to show me, but I turned my head—mostly so he wouldn't see me blush at his compliment. "Really? Wow, you're not even going to look at it? I must admit, you didn't strike me as the shy type."

Cautiously turning back to face him, I quipped, “Being shy around people and being camera shy are two completely different things.”

Dante rolled his eyes. “Whatever. Maybe it’s because you can’t argue with the camera. All the evidence is in vivid color.” I let out a deep sigh, but before I could argue, he placed his hand on my arm. “Fine, no more pictures. How about a walk?”

“Sure.” Aside from the general park noise, sounds of the city, and my sandals smacking against the paved path, it felt too quiet. Should I start the conversation? He was the one who asked me here. My arms swung at my sides, while one of his held the camera and the other brushed against mine with every other step. Linking our fingers would be so easy, yet it didn’t happen.

Every so often, he’d lift his camera and take a picture. It wasn’t people he focused on, but instead ordinary things that I would never give a passing glance. The last one he took was of a pigeon pecking at a food wrapper someone left behind. Where he saw the beauty in that was beyond me.

A shrill whistle from a soccer game caught our attention. Dante veered off path and toward the small field, where orange cones created goals on each end and kids were scattered between them.

When a little boy bent down and picked up the ball before dropping it at his feet to kick it, Dante groaned. “They can’t do that.”

Déjà vu hit as I remembered the day Luca accompanied me to my students’ soccer game. “You sound like your brother.” I scanned the kids playing, wondering if any were current or past students of mine since they looked the right age. Granted, this was the park where my class generally played, so it wouldn’t have surprised me if they were.

Dante kept his eyes on the game and every so often he’d flinch or cringe. “Who taught these kids how to play? They need new coaches. It’s a disgrace.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Let’s go before you have an anxiety attack. I swear, if Mikey never hit Luca in the head with a ball the day we watched a game together, we would have been kicked out of the park because of his ranting.”

Dante looked at me. “You can’t get kicked out of a public park for wanting kids to know how to properly play the best sport on Earth.”

Yes, there was no doubt he was related to one of my best friends. *Friends*. As much as I loved the relationship I had with Luca, for some reason the same type of relationship with Dante didn’t give me the warm and fuzzies.

Memories of how Dante held me when we danced were still vivid in my head. That was definitely not the way one would dance with their friend. We walked again until we came to an empty bench. Dante placed his free hand on my back, sending that familiar zing through my body.

When we sat down, our thighs brushed and both of us turned to look at each other. He ran his thumb along his bottom lip, and all I wanted to do was suck it into my mouth. It was then I realized being *just friends* with Dante Benedetto wasn’t going to be enough for me.

“Thanks for meeting me today.”

“Thanks for asking.” It seemed as though he wanted to say something else, but when he didn’t I looked away to stare at the cloudless blue sky while inhaling deeply. “In a few short months, when winter arrives, we’ll be wishing for these days again.” The sun beating down on us wasn’t to blame for me feeling so overheated. It was the way he looked at me, sitting right beside me, like his one and only mission was to get into my space both mentally and physically. I couldn’t read this man. I had no idea what ran through his mind as he shamelessly continued to stare at me.

But when he said, “Hey, have dinner with me?” it was the last thing I expected.

Chapter 8

Dante

When the cab pulled up to my building, Cassie dipped her head and looked out the window. “You’re staying with Luca?” she said to the glass before twisting her gaze to me.

“Nope. I live here too.” Once I paid the fare, I leaned past her to open the door. Hearing her tiny gasp as my arm skimmed the side of her body had me fighting a grin. She was a bundle of nerves, and whatever ran through that pretty little head of hers caused her to pause with one foot out the door. “What’s the problem, beautiful?”

“We’re having dinner at your place?”

“That’s the plan.” A grumble from the front seat forced me to add, “You better scoot out or our cabbie is taking us for another spin.” Her pale-blue eyes glanced at the grumpy old man before coming back to my face. Feeling she needed reassurance, I leaned closer and placed my lips against her ear. “I don’t bite.”

“You goin’ or what?” Grumpy barked.

Resuming my position near her ear, I whispered, “But he may.” My comment garnered a small smile. But the way she puckered her lips and blew out a breath could only mean she was nervous to be alone with me. “Don’t you trust me, Cassie?” I asked as she followed me into the lobby.

“Of course I do.”

After a friendly wave at the doorman, I waited until we were at the elevator before asking, “Then why do you look like I’m about to bind and gag you?” I had to admit, just the thought sent a surge of blood down south. Seeing her widen her eyes and bite her lip, I had to refrain from moaning out loud.

“I don’t look like that,” she replied defensively.

“Yes, you do.” When I stepped into the elevator and she remained out of it, I folded my arms to prove my point. A forced smile spread over her lips as she stepped inside.

“I’m just... I’m not weird or anything... It’s just...” I began to enjoy her fumbling a bit too much. It made her equal parts awkward and sexy, again revealing the contradicting sides of who she was. I knew her well enough to know that silently staring at her drove her nuts. That observation was proven when she then rasped out, “You make me nervous.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” I said, punching my floor number. At my smirk, she suppressed her own smile and then rolled her eyes. “Why do I make you nervous?”

“I never know what you’re thinking, especially when you’re staring at me.”

The elevator jerked enough for her to tightly grip the bar behind her. Standing so close, I could smell her perfume. It was the same sassy scent she’d worn to dinner the other night—the same scent that stayed with me well after we parted. Mesmerized by the royal-blue specks surrounding her black pupils, before they faded into her pale irises, forced an urge to touch her. But the rose-colored natural tint of her lips fueled the need to kiss her.

“All you have to do is ask me. I have nothing to hide.”

“Okay.” She swallowed, and my eyes shifted to the tempting column of her throat. “What are you thinking now?”

“That I want to kiss you.” On my admission, those perfect lips parted while her eyes stayed focused on mine. “But doing so in an elevator doesn’t feel right. So I’ll wait.”

“You’re very presumptuous.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at her observation. “Am I?” The elevator’s ding announced our arrival. “Saved by the bell, Miss Brooks.” Stepping to the opened door, I waved her through with a smile. But just before we reached my apartment, I took her hand to stop her.

“It’s dinner, Cassie.” Her skittish behavior made me feel the need to say that out loud. I watched as her eyes searched my face before a sweet

smile spread. “We’ll talk, get to know each other. Okay?”

“I’m sorry. You must think that I’m...” I stopped her with a finger against her lips.

“All I think...” I said, raising a brow to emphasize my point, “is that you’re someone I want to get to know.”

Her eyes rolled down to where my finger was, and then raised again to meet mine. Smirking, I dropped my hand, allowing her to speak. “I think I’d like that too.”

The smile that appeared across my face couldn’t be stopped if I wanted to. There was something about this woman that awakened a part of me that had been dormant for quite a while.

The sound of the notches of my key sliding into my lock seemed amplified. It felt like we were on a precipice, and once we crossed the threshold things were going to change between us. When I moved aside to let Cassie in, she glanced at me before taking a step. It was then I realized she felt the same as I did.

Cassie set her small bag down and began to peruse the space. “Wow, this is beautiful.” Even though I had just moved in, pride swelled in my chest. Clean lines, contemporary masculine gray hues and décor, boasted my style—less is more. I watched as she walked deeper into my apartment. “Impressive that you’ve recently moved in. You’d never know it by looking around. I had boxes in my apartment for what felt like months.”

“Thank you. My studio is in the spare bedroom, so time was a factor.” Just as I was about to ask if she wanted a tour, she looked at the large portrait of Charlene. Granted, it was difficult to miss considering it covered most of my living-room wall.

Dread began to stir in my gut. There was no doubt Charlene was a stunning woman, and the picture accentuated all her best assets. Hazel eyes that could bring any man to his knees, a heart-shaped face, and pouting lips were all her. But the innovative way I edited it, by piecing together slices of photos, won me several awards.

She stood and studied the portrait. Part of me wondered what she thought of it, but for the small amount of time I’d known Cassie, I was sure

she was about to tell me. “She’s beautiful.” Cassie’s smile was brilliant when she turned to look at me. “Friend of yours?”

“We lost touch,” I murmured, rubbing the back of my neck. For some reason, talking about my ex-girlfriend with Cassie didn’t sit well with me. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“I’d love some.” I walked into my kitchen and poured us each a glass of cabernet. Cassie’s brows puckered as I handed her the glass. She hadn’t moved while studying the portrait. “Did I tell you I teach kindergarten?”

“I believe you did, why?” I took a sip of my wine, letting the tepid liquid rest on my tongue before swallowing.

“Well, anytime one of my students doesn’t want to talk about something, they change the subject... like you just did. If you don’t want to talk about her, we don’t have to, but getting to know each other was your idea... remember?”

What the hell was I supposed to say to that? She was spot on. Granted, being compared to a five- or six-year-old wasn’t an ideal compliment, but she sure pegged me perfectly. “It’s a long story.”

“Okay.” She began to casually stroll around my living room, looking at pictures. When she saw one of Luca, my sister, and my parents, she paused. “This is a nice picture. I don’t remember your brother having any of you at his place. If he did, our first meeting might have gone a bit differently.”

“Really?” I laughed. “You mean you wouldn’t have barreled into us?”

Cassie clucked her tongue on the roof of her mouth. “Take that back.”

“Again, you’re trying that tactic?” This time she was the one laughing. “The reason I have pictures and he doesn’t is probably because I’m always behind the camera. It’s a long-standing joke with our family. God forbid I were to die; there wouldn’t be any pictures of me.”

At that moment, Cassie set her glass down on the side table, pulled her phone from her purse, and held it in the air. “Smile.” Before I could decline, the shutter on her cell sounded. “There, now you’ll be immortalized in my phone.” Proud as she was cute, she tucked it back in her purse. “How about a tour?”

“Come.” With my hand on the small of her back I guided her down the short hallway. After I flicked on the light in my studio, Cassie took a step inside. A tornado of thoughts began to coil inside of me. How I’d love to photograph her, pose her in such a way she’d rival any model I’d ever shot.

“Wow, Dante.” She slid a fingertip down one of the rigid metal legs of the tripod. “This is really impressive.”

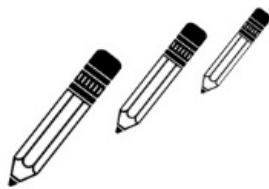
“Thank you. I was very fortunate to find an apartment that afforded me to have a studio at home. It makes my commute much easier... when I don’t have to shoot on location, at least.”

Cassie sighed. “I’d love to be able to work from home. I don’t even think I’d get dressed.” When I didn’t respond right away, because I was picturing Cassie naked, she added, “What I meant was, if I didn’t need to be in front of anyone, I would stay in my yoga pants all day.”

“Well, this is my office, so to speak, so I need to get dressed. However, if you ever want to be my subject, my wardrobe is negotiable.”

A deep blush covered her face. “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“Actually, I don’t.” I couldn’t blame her for the assumption, but I spoke the truth. None of my actions since meeting her had been typical for me. Her eyes stayed on mine for a few seconds. And whether it was the look on my face, or the definitive tone in my voice, based on her small nod and shy smile, she must have believed me.



Cassie

Every word out of the man’s mouth set my insides on fire. Were they just lines he used to get what he wanted? Or was what he said true? Caught in that magnetic pull he had over me, it took a few seconds too long before I could avert my eyes from his in an attempt to school my thoughts.

“Having you in here makes me want to get in photographer mode. Come.” He shifted his body toward the doorway, continuing the tour.

Lifting his hand, he pointed to an open door. “That’s the guest bathroom.” Dante then twisted a brass knob, looking at me with darkened eyes before opening the door.

Thunder impaired my hearing, knowing there was only one room left... his bedroom. So much could be said about where one slept. Did they use it as their place of solace? Was it decorated in deep rich hues or was it bright and cheerful? Were his walls covered with images of beautiful women?

Stepping inside, I released a relieved breath at seeing several landscape portraits rather than people. “Did you take these?” His returning nod seemed shy compared to the brazen man he was. The images he captured were mesmerizing, tranquil, hypnotic. The room instantly calmed in an understated way. “They’re stunning.”

“Thank you.”

Masculine cologne lingered in the air, forcing me to use every ounce of willpower I had to stop from audibly inhaling. His king-size bed was covered in a dark charcoal duvet. Unlike the collection of throw pillows I had on my bed, Dante had just four covered in burgundy silk pillowcases, propped up against the black-leather tufted headboard.

My hand itched to graze the fabric, which I was sure to be soft. “Your bed looks extremely comfortable.” Dante quirked a brow. *Jesus, Cassie, stop acting like this is the first guy’s bedroom that you’ve seen.*

“Like a cloud.” His lips twisted into a smirk. “Hungry?” *God, am I ever.* When I didn’t reply right away, Dante chuckled. “Come on, I’ll make dinner.”

Sitting at his small breakfast bar, I thought that watching Dante gracefully move around his kitchen was something to be seen. After only a few minutes he had zucchini, carrots, cherry tomatoes, and bell peppers on a cutting board. He filled a pot with water and put it next to a sauté pan on the stove.

Needing to occupy myself with something other than staring, I offered my assistance. “Can I help you with anything?”

Dante shook his head. “No, I got this. You like pasta, right? You’re not one of those people who don’t eat carbs, are you? Or allergic to gluten?”

“Me? No, I love carbs and gluten.” *Ugh, Cassie.* Who says they love gluten? What the hell was wrong with me? “Is there more wine?”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Dante said with a chuckle. “And yes.” He filled my glass and set the bottle down before resuming slicing vegetables as if he were a professional chef. Cords of muscles flexed in his forearm with every slice, chop, and dice. Funny, I never noticed a man’s forearms before meeting him.

“So both you and your brother like to cook?” I remember Sabrina telling me about the time Luca made dinner for her and won her heart with how much thought he put into it.

“It’s something my mother and grandmother instilled in us.” Dante walked over to the stove, put olive oil in the frying pan, and dumped in the vegetables. With a wooden spoon he had pulled out from a drawer, he began stirring while seasoning them. “This...” he said, holding up the spoon, “was what kept me and my brother in line. It only took one smack on the ass to know this was more of a weapon than a utensil. After that, our mother just needed to place it on the counter for us to obey.”

I laughed. It wasn’t the first time I’d heard about an Italian mother and a wooden spoon. “I’ll remember that.”

“I bet you will.” We stared at each other for a moment before the boiling pot caught his attention.

“Do you speak with her often? I know Luca does.” I goaded him further. “Or is he the favorite?”

“No, my little brother is just a kiss-ass. He always tried to outdo me, until I retaliated. But since you’re so concerned, I did speak to her the day after I met you. Of course, I had to tell her about the accident and my warm welcome to the city.”

The wine I sipped caught in my throat. Through a choppy cough, I sputtered, “You did not. I’ve met her, so to speak, and if you told her anything other than what a jerk you were that night, I might need to set the record straight. You know, Isabella and I are great friends.” Now it was my

turn to wink... even though that wasn't the full truth, it was fun to see him squirm. "Your brother introduced us via Skype one Sunday afternoon."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure to mention to her how I saved your ass when I spoke to the adjuster, not to mention your shy demeanor."

"Whatever," I teased. *Maybe goading him wasn't the best-laid plan.*

Fifteen minutes later, we were sitting at his dining table, enjoying the best pasta I had ever tasted.

"You like?" Dante asked before sliding a forkful of bow-tie pasta into his mouth.

"Yes, I like a lot." Not only did I like the pasta, I also liked the wine, the ambiance he created with soft music and lighting... and him. Oh my God, I liked him.

Crap.

Chapter 9

Dante

Dinner went better than I had hoped, except I had one problem... a big one. Hearing her moan after every other forkful of pasta made me rock hard. It took all the effort I could muster not to limp to the sofa we now sat on.

Everything about this woman intrigued me. There was so much to learn about Cassie, and tonight that would happen. Getting to know her on every level was my ultimate goal. Luca spoke so fondly of her, so I knew I needed to tread lightly. She wasn't just *some* woman—she was my brother's best friend.

“Tell me more about yourself.” I slowly brought my leg up on the cushion and turned to face her. “So far, I know you're a teacher and aspire to be the next female NASCAR driver.”

“Ha ha, very funny. What do you want to know?” Cassie nervously bit her bottom lip. “I'm really not that exciting.”

My head tilted to the side. “No, sorry. I'm not buying that. Have you always wanted to be a school teacher?”

“Pretty much. I've always loved being around kids. When I was a teenager, I'd volunteer as a reading tutor for underprivileged kids. There were so many who never had a bedtime story read to them, it broke my heart. Can you imagine not being able to read?” Her pale-blue eyes softened, but all I could think of was her reading me a story while lying in my bed. My silence prompted her to ask with a grin, “You can read, right?”

“If I say no, will you read to me in bed?” Granted, reading wouldn't be the first activity I'd want to partake in between the sheets, but it would be a start. She blinked at me, and then I got a scolding expression I assumed she practiced on her students often. “I'm kidding. I can read. Not one for books, though. I never really have the time to invest in them. I'm more of a... magazine kind of guy.”

“Magazines, huh?” Her full lips quirked to the side mockingly.

“Well, you know what they say, men’s magazines are known for their articles.”

She shimmied her perfect ass on the couch. “Yes, I know. I’ve read them.”

What? Needing to get the visual that took hold in my mind of a naked Cassie as the centerfold, I brought the subject back to her. “So you know my brother, and apparently my mom as well. Tell me about your family.”

“Not much to tell. My parents still live in the home I grew up in. I have a brother, Mark. He’s four years older and a cop in Colorado. Boring childhood.”

“Back up. Your brother’s a cop? I bet that boded well for your boyfriends. Nothing like meeting the girl’s family, especially when one is armed.”

“That wasn’t an issue. First, I had one boyfriend all through high school. Second, Mark was out of the house by then, so all Sterling needed to worry about were my parents, who loved him. Our parents were friends, and...”

“Hold on.” I lifted my index finger and asked, “Did you say *Sterling*? As in silver?”

Cassie snickered, but then scowled. God forbid she agreed with me. “Yes, I did. He was a very respectable young man.”

“Hmm... well, that’s your first problem. Where is Master Sterling now?”

“He has a very prominent dental practice in Stamford, Connecticut. Married to his college sweetheart, and last I heard he had three children and a golden retriever.”

“He sounds *super*.” No wonder she was wound like a top. She spent her formidable years with a dude named after flatware. “What caused the demise of your relationship?”

“Well, he was exactly the type of man my parents wanted me to marry. So instead, I went off to Fordham, moved to Manhattan after graduation,

and became a school teacher.” She waved her hand back and forth. “Back to you. You grew up in Milan, right? That had to be exciting.”

“It was riddled with culture, and I loved living there. I do miss my family, but I feel the States is where I need to be.”

“Well, Milan rivals New York City as far as fashion goes. Hell, they’re generally a step or two ahead in trends. Wouldn’t it make more sense for you to be there?”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” I winked. “I’ve been back, and it’s where I got my start. It was during an apprenticeship with a prestigious photographer when he realized I had a unique way of capturing an image. After I graduated, I ended up receiving several lucrative freelance contracts with high-end fashion magazines. From there, I moved around a bit, Chicago, LA, and then ended up here.”

“When did you start taking pictures?”

“My *nonno*...”

“Aw, that’s so cute that you call your grandfather that.” At my amused pause she added, “Sorry, continue.”

“Thank you. Anyway, he bought me my first camera for my eleventh birthday. He thought I needed to focus more, and what better way than looking through a viewfinder.” Shrugging, I added, “It was the best gift I’d ever received.”

She pointed to the portrait on my wall. “So why did you lose touch?”

My eyes cut to where she indicated. There was no doubt Cassie’s natural thirst for knowledge would steer the line of questioning, so I beat her to the punch. “She’s my ex.”

Her pretty blue eyes widened in shock. “Oh. Why did you break up?”

“She was offered a job in Paris that she couldn’t refuse. It was her dream gig, and my work was here.”

“Why do you still have her picture hanging on your wall? Do you still have feelings for her?” She continued to stare at it, and I may not have known her very well, but I could guess she was secretly comparing.

“No. You wouldn’t be here if I did.” Cassie’s gaze swung my way. “That picture was my first professional shot. It won me awards, and for the most part catapulted my career overnight. You may just see it as an unusually large picture of my ex in my living room, but to me, it means more than that. To me, it’s not Charlene Dupree, a woman I once dated. It’s the picture that kick-started my credibility as a photographer.” I dragged my thumb over my lower lip, only to notice Cassie’s eyes were no longer pinned to the portrait, but instead to my mouth. God, how I wanted to kiss her.

“That makes sense. She’s beautiful.”

“Yes, she is. But she doesn’t hold a candle to you.” Cassie scoffed. “It’s true. You have a natural beauty about you. Trust me, I know what I’m talking about. Even when you’re enraged, you’re stunning.”

A blush crept up her cheeks. Just like before, she said, “I bet you say that to all the girls.”

And just like before, I repeated, “Actually, I don’t.” Cassie averted her eyes. The woman had no idea how gorgeous she was. Everything about her, from the way she dressed to even her name, forced a commonality that didn’t fit. I didn’t know why I felt that way, but I couldn’t shake the suspicion that right beneath the surface was an extraordinarily brazen woman. “Is Cassie short for something?” I asked.

It looked like she didn’t want to say, but then quietly admitted, “Cassandra.”

“That’s a beautiful name, and much more fitting for you than Cassie.”

“No one calls me that except for my parents and grandparents.”

“And me.” She opened her mouth before quickly clamping her lips closed. “Would that bother you if I called you by your given name?”

“No.”

“Good. Can I tell you one more thing?”

Looking back at me, she nodded. “Sure.”

“I’ve been dying to kiss you all night.”

Her pink tongue swept over her bottom lip before withdrawing between her teeth. “You have?”

“Yes. I admitted I wanted to in the elevator. But now we’re here, and I can no longer pretend it’s all I’m thinking about. Tell me you want me to kiss you, Cassandra.” A bubble of hopeful expectation lodged in my ribcage. I waited for her reply, watching the fabric of her blouse tighten with each deep breath.

“I want you to kiss me, Dante.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper and sounded more like a plea, but I heard it loud and clear. I framed her heart-shaped face with my hands and drew her closer to me. Our lips were a breath apart. Her sweet perfume attacked my senses, and her soft skin felt like a balm under my palms.

When her baby blues vanished beneath her lids, my mouth came coaxingly down on hers. At first, our kiss was slow, and our lips took their time to become acquainted. I tilted her head and dragged my tongue over her bottom lip, gently sucking it into my mouth. Cassie’s fingers gripped the back of my head, pulling me even closer.

Our tongues met, and the connection sent a shockwave of ecstasy through me. She tasted like wine and sweetness—one of my favorite combinations. But Cassie was different than anyone else I had ever kissed. My entire body soared at the thought of making her mine. I wanted more of her... all of her.

Then she moaned and tugged my hair... and I was ruined.

On instinct, my hands gripped her ass, pulling her onto my lap. With her straddling me, and my back pressed against the supple fabric of my sofa, our bodies lined up perfectly. The position gave her the control to lead this dance between us.

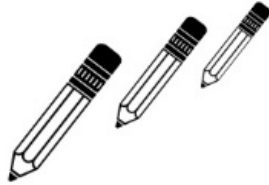
The brazen woman I knew was inside of her broke our connection to say, “I want you, Dante.”

“Want me to do what?” I knew what I needed her answer to be, but I wasn’t going to assume when it came to her.

“Take me to your bedroom.”

After a breath, I stood, lifting her with me, her denim-clad legs wrapped around my waist. Once again, I fused our mouths together and stepped toward my room. At the threshold, her wide-eyed innocence made me feel as though I was about to trespass. Needing reassurance, I asked, “Are you sure?”

Her hesitancy instantly changed to determination. “Yes, I’m sure.”



Cassie

His mouth twisted wryly before he trekked straight toward the bed and lowered us on the center of the mattress. Something intense flared through his smoldering expression.

Damn, I was a good liar. Was I sure? Hell, no, but I couldn’t dwell on the way his confidence intimidated me while making me forget all logic. Because if I spent one moment analyzing what was about to happen between us, I’d be halfway to the door by now. Deep down, the desire Dante stoked within me took over every rational thought in my mind. Bottom line, I wanted him... now. I needed him to fill that void I hadn’t realized was there.

I tried to control the dizzying surge racing through me. Despite my confident reply a few moments ago, he hesitated to measure my expression. Feeling that another vocal assurance wouldn’t prod him to continue, I tucked my fingers into the silky, thick strands of his hair and pulled his face closer. I may have initiated the next play, but he finished it by crushing his lips against mine.

Never breaking our connection, his hand snaked under the formfitting fabric of my top and rested on the bare skin of my waist. Somewhere along the way, I lost all control of motor skills. He controlled my breathing with each passionate kiss, my body with the firm hold he kept on my flesh, and my mind with every subtle shift his body made against mine. I was lost in every sensation he forced on me. With each move, a new wave of desire

rushed through me. I felt cool air replace his warm lips as he pulled away, and my lips tingled with the memory of his touch.

“Hands above your head, Cassandra.” The command followed by the use of my full name compelled me to comply. Not to mention that the way he rolled the *R* had to have been one of the sexiest sounds I’d ever heard. His left hand closed over both of mine, preventing me from touching him. I should have denied his request, but his words held so much promise.

My core ached for friction in the worst way. I swayed and raised my hips in hopes of meeting his. Spasms of need, want, and desire rolled through me. But Dante moved at his own pace and ignored my silent plea.

I couldn’t keep my eyes off his hand as it roamed my stomach. When it inched its way to the waistband of my jeans, my breath caught in the back of my throat. I was mesmerized by his touch—slow, methodical, and confident. My trapped fingers tightened around his, urging him to touch me. My body felt like a battery hooked up to jumper cables waiting for another volt of power. With just one kiss, combined with the way he touched me, I already knew having sex with Dante would surpass all others.

He skimmed his free hand until it rested between my legs, cupping me where I needed him most. “Is this where you want me?” His deep voice had me writhing on the bed.

“I think you know the answer. I never pegged you for a tease.” The words that left my mouth in his presence were completely out of character for me. Not to mention, the number of gorgeous women that he had had the pleasure of photographing, or doing God knows what with, should have intimidated me—but it didn’t. Instead, it gave me a sense of determination.

At my accusation, he grinned mockingly. It was then I realized I had just issued him a challenge... one I had no patience for. The prolonged anticipation was unbearable. He rubbed me and pushed the heel of his hand down on the spot that needed his attention. At my moan, a look of satisfaction grew over his face.

“Feel good?” he asked calmly.

How was it the man appeared to be unaffected by what we were doing? Meanwhile, my body was in a state of arousal that it had never felt

before. Needing confirmation, I shifted my left leg between his and felt his thick, long, hardened shaft on my thigh. I pressed upward and asked, “Does that?”

“Are you teasing me now?”

“No, just provoking.”

“Mission accomplished.”

Shifting his weight, he settled between my legs and ensured I felt every inch of him. Then without warning, he released my hands and stood at the end of the bed. Bereft, I grabbed the hem of my shirt and began to lift it over my head.

“Stop.” He flicked my sandals off one at a time, sending each to the floor. Dante raked his eyes over me seductively and said, “Take off your jeans.” Every time his gaze met mine, my insides coiled as a response. Without hesitation, my fingers worked the button, then the zipper, until I was able to shimmy the jeans over my hips and down as far as I could before he pulled them the rest of the way off.

“Now your panties.” The white lace constricted in the worst way. I knew they were wet, and I should have been embarrassed, but I wasn’t. Everything about tonight was a huge turn-on. Once again, I complied with his request.

Lying half-naked with knees bent, feet flat on the silky duvet, didn’t help my disposition. Nor did the way Dante appraised me... lustful eyes moved over my body in a seductive caress. My flesh prickled with every second that passed. He took his time, studying, assessing, all while his thumb methodically stroked his full bottom lip. I was exposed and turned on, the most I’d ever been.

“Beautiful.” Still fully clothed, he gripped his chin between his thumb and forefinger. His gaze slid downward, and I stiffened under his scrutiny. “Spread your knees,” he commanded as he yanked his shirt over his head. Each ridge of his tanned muscles, the silver bar that punctured his left nipple, down to the vee that disappeared into his dark low-rise denim jeans, made me want him even more. His expression, and the way he barked out orders, gave me a glimpse of Dante the photographer. Tonight, I was his

subject. Except he wasn't using a camera but instead photographing me with his eyes.

As he took a step forward, I could feel the sexual magnetism, and a natural self-confident aura, roll off him in waves. His candid stare remained bold and without reservation. Part of me wanted him to speak, hoping it would erase the element of surprise. But the other part couldn't wait to find out what came next.

Putting me out of my misery, he placed a hand on one of my knees while the other grazed the oversensitive flesh of my inner thigh. Just as his outstretched hand reached the juncture between my legs and exposed core, he stopped.

At first, his attention remained riveted on my face, but then it crawled down the length of my body, landing where I needed him most. He extended the tip of his middle finger, paused, and ran it ever so lightly up my seam.

"Jesus, Cassandra." A soft moan preceded his raspy confirmation that I was ready for him. "You're wet... and I'm hard as fucking stone knowing I did that." Responding wasn't an option, even if I wanted to. The only thing I could manage was a slow blink. "I need to taste you," he added, and I almost came from hearing the desperation in his voice.

Expecting his mouth, his fingers worked over my pulsating clit while he pierced me with his thumb. I bit my lip to stifle an embarrassing outcry. It was too soon to come undone, but with every simple move he made, it became nearly impossible to hold back my pent-up frustration. His thumb glided in and out as the knuckles on two of his fingers stroked over me with just the right amount of pressure.

Upon closing my eyes, white bursts of light danced behind my lids as my release came in an exhausting wave of pleasure.

"Look at me," he commanded. I obeyed and saw carnal appreciation in the smug look on his face because of what he just did to me. He dragged his thumb across his bottom lip, and then popped it into his mouth while sucking with a wink. "Fucking delicious." With our gazes tethered, that

signature move that I'd come to know, along with his words, practically caused me to climax again.

"God, you're sexy," I admitted. Clearly, all my inhibitions had vanished with my orgasm.

"It's because of how badly I want to fuck you."

"Then do it." Not wasting another second, he climbed onto the mattress to straddle me. In one swoop, he lifted my top, trapping my arms above my head and turning it into a makeshift blindfold, stealing my sight.

When I attempted to remove it from where he had folded the fabric over my eyes, he placed a firm hand on mine before whispering, "Leave it."

The imagery of his naked torso left a burning imprint on my mind. My senses heightened just as my nerves spiked. Being so vulnerable during sex left me feeling uneasy. Yet for some reason, I trusted him.

Strong fingers unclasped the front hook of my bra, exposing my breasts to him. Cool air caressed my hardened nipples, only to be replaced with his warm mouth. My heels dug into the mattress as I arched, forcing more of myself toward him. He accepted my invitation, laving at each breast and giving them equal attention.

Dante moved away, leaving me breathless and exposed. The sound of a drawer opening and closing before the telltale sound of foil ripping seemed unusually loud in my darkness.

More silence came, leaving me to wonder where he was or what he was doing. The longer I lay without sight, the more I craved Mr. Kinky to take me. A begging plea lingered around the edges of my mind but wasn't voiced. Without having to verbalize my desire, the coarse hair of his legs gave me the confirmation I needed that he was finally where I wanted him to be.

"I want to see you," I pleaded with a shaky breath.

"You will... but right now, I want you to use your body to feel me, Cassandra." At that, he entered me in a slow, deep thrust.

He was right. I didn't need to see him at that moment. In fact, without my sight I felt every delectable inch inside of me. Our bodies fused and

stilled, stealing the air from my lungs. Dante released a long grunt and began gently moving his hips. Each stroke became more intense, and each time his hips bumped into mine brought me closer to once again falling over the edge.

Oh my God.

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Chapter 10

Dante

Oh my God.

I nearly came the instant I plunged into her, and with every pump it became harder to hold back. My intention to make the foreplay linger backfired in an almost painful way as my cock hardened to steel. The way she was wrapped so tightly around me made it impossible to think straight, much less hold back.

If I were fucking anyone else, it would have ended by now. But I wanted to bring Cassie to places she'd never been before. Easier said than done, I thought, as I hung on to my sanity by a thread.

“Jesus, Cassandra, you feel so good.”

“Mmm... Don't stop, Dante.” A thin sheen of sweat coated her breasts. She looked perfect, blindfolded and writhing beneath me. The fact she trusted me enough to take away her sight, even if for a little while, spoke volumes. It made me wonder how far she'd let me take her. What limits she'd go to in order to experience pure carnal pleasure.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?”

Her voice was just above a whisper. “No, tell me.”

I smiled, although she couldn't see it. “Your neck...” My mouth sucked on her thundering pulse. “So graceful, yet it gives away your secrets.” Upon another thrust, I trailed my lips to her tits and bobbed between them, licking and nipping. “Your breasts... are a natural work of art.” Continuing down, I grazed my fingertips, tickling the ivory soft skin down her side, and I gripped her ass. “This ass... one day...” With each declaration, my hips accelerated and I pounded deeper and deeper into her.

The only sounds she released were sexy moans of ecstasy, and then her pink tongue peeked out and set me on fire. Attaching my mouth to hers, I

sucked forcibly on her bottom lip before saying, “And this mouth... like a drug to me.”

Cassie had a white-knuckled clasp on the pillow but still held back. “Your pussy is gripping me, and my restraint is failing. I need you to come, Cassandra... now,” I demanded before crushing my lips to hers and using my tongue to mimic how my cock fucked her. Taking it one step further, I shoved a hand between us to manipulate a fingertip over her clit. My touch triggered her hips to buck, her gasps to shorten, and her tongue to fervently tangle with mine. Thank Christ, she finally quivered around me. It took less than three seconds for me to join her.

The orgasm that wouldn’t end molested me from head to toe—my balls tightened, my cock pulsed. I came harder than ever, reduced to a mass of spent and exhausted muscle.

Her soft curves molded around my hard body. “Wow,” she said, and I chuckled at her adorable exclamation. I raised the fabric of her shirt over her head, freeing her arms to allow her to drape them around my shoulders. “Hi.” She was even more gorgeous with that just-fucked look... a look I proudly took credit for.

Kissing her eyelids, I smiled back. “Hi, are you okay?”

“Yes, great, except I can’t breathe, and I’m dying of thirst,” she added with a beautiful smile.

Not wanting to leave her warmth, I reluctantly pulled out of her with a groan. Cassie sighed before propping herself up. Those baby blues focused on my fingers as they rolled the condom off, tying it at the opening. “Wine? Perrier?”

“Tap?”

I laughed at her simple request. Cassie was refreshing on several levels. “Tap water it is. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be right here.”

“I would hope so, because we’re doing that again.” I shot her a wink and stepped away. In no time at all, I had her water and returned. Before climbing back on the bed, I set her water down on the side table and took a

moment to appraise the beauty that lay between my sheets. She removed her bra, and the sheet did little to hide the shape of her breasts.

Getting in beside her, I propped up my head on my hand. Cassie remained quiet, but her eyes never left mine. “What are you thinking?”

“That was amazing. I’ve never experienced anything like that before.”

“I would hope not.” I kissed her temple. “Next time, I won’t rush it.”

Her eyes widened, and her brows shot to her hairline. “Rush? And you’re quite confident there will be a next time.”

“Are you saying there won’t be? Don’t you want to feel that again, to come undone... to feel unadulterated passion?”

She reached over and took a sip of her water before answering me. “I’m not saying that. All I said was that you’re very confident.” Cassie’s trying to backpedal had me grinning. Realizing I wasn’t wavering on my declaration, she shook her head and conceded. “I want to be able to see you next time. You may see beautiful women all the time, but this isn’t a normal date for me.”

I snatched the water from her grip and took a gulp before placing the glass on the table. “Cassandra, I meant it when I said you were beautiful.” Her head predictably tilted away from mine, and I gripped her chin to force her to look at me. “I’ll tell you that until you believe me. For instance...” My hand outlined the curves of her body from waist to hip to ass. “I like this.”

“You like what?”

“Curves. The women I photograph are rail thin. No softness, no curves.”

She pulled the sheet up and tucked it around her. “Thank you... I think?”

The sudden shield she created meant she doubted my words. In an instant, the confident, daring woman I just had sex with vanished. “No thinking, Cassandra. Do you trust me?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think I’d lie to you?”

“No, but...”

Placing a finger to her lips, I stopped her negativity. “No buts. You’ll learn that what I say, I mean. Lying isn’t part of my repertoire when it comes to my personal relationships. Do I embellish while I work? Yes, but that’s because models can be prima donnas and if I didn’t, my days would be torturous. You’re different.”

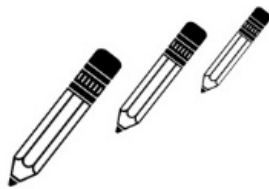
“Okay. I believe you. Speaking of bodies, yours isn’t too shabby.”

My hand rubbed my abs. “Meh, it’s okay.”

Following my lead, she brought her hand to my chest and traced my piercing with her fingertips. My cock jolted in response. “Right, and...” She lifted the sheet that rested on my waist and stared at my cock. “That... well... let’s just say he’s quite skilled.” Taking me by surprise, she leaned down and kissed the tip and flicked it with her tongue. *Fuck me.* “Tastes good too.”

“Keep that up and round two will begin immediately.” A mixture of pleasure and agony contorted my facial muscles. If I knew a way to fuck both her mouth and pussy at the same time, I would. “Cassandra, you’re killing me.” The smug look on her face caused me to pull her on top of me. “Open the drawer and get a condom. I wanted to wait, but you’re not giving me much choice.”

She giggled, and the vibration caused my dick to throb even more. Once I was sheathed, Cassie lowered herself and rode me until we both came with pure satisfaction.



Cassie

Where the hell is my bra? On all fours I scoured the floor in search of the damn thing. The darkened room wasn’t helping my predicament, but

leaving before the sun rose was my first priority. Finally, my finger grazed a piece of lace. *Thank God.*

I slipped it on and then found my panties a few feet away from my jeans. Once I had my shirt and shoes, I could commence my walk of shame. Glancing back at a sleeping Dante, I smiled at the memory of our night together. He looked so peaceful, which I was sure to be the opposite of what he'd feel when he woke to an empty bed.

Guilt began to settle as I finished dressing and then made my way to the door, but as soon as I saw that giant portrait of his beautiful ex, my guilt vanished... just like I did.

During the elevator ride to the lobby, I couldn't stop picturing details of his seductive foreplay. What I thought would be a wham bam turned into a major production. The man knew how to pleasure a woman, so much so I stared at the illuminated numbers on the elevator wall and contemplated pressing his floor indicator to go back up. The loud ding announcing I hit the lobby became my wake-up call to hightail it out of his building before I did something stupid... or more *stupid* than sleeping with Dante.

Thirty minutes later, I walked into my apartment and straight into my bedroom. It was so different from Dante's. Where his was large and belonged in a showroom, mine was a bit more of what I'd call shabby chic.

I plopped on my bed and hugged a throw pillow my grandmother made for me during her infatuation with needlepoint. The yellow pillow had robin's egg blue lettering stating *Be Happy.*

Huh. I was last night, and then I panicked.

Was he awake yet? If he was, why didn't he text me? I tossed the pillow aside and decided to take a shower before waking up the one person I knew could talk me off the ledge.

Not soon after, a sleepy Vanessa was at my door. "This better be good. I left a hot naked man in my bed with a sticky note stuck to his chest. Kyle isn't going to be very happy that I'm skipping our morning sex."

I rolled my eyes at my friend. "It is good. I mean, bad. Actually, it's scary... with a hint of crazy." Vanessa poured herself a cup of coffee and sat on my couch, watching me wear a path in front of it.

“Cass, what the hell is going on with you?”

My fingers twisted together before I forced them apart. Four steps in one direction, five steps in the other. Yes, I was counting my steps. Vanessa’s eyes followed my movements like I was a pocket watch attempting to hypnotize her. Stopping at my tenth pass, I flopped onto the chair, dropped my forehead into my hands, and let the confession fly. “I had sex with Dante last night.”

Silence.

After too long of a pause, she finally said, “Did you say you had sex with Dante?”

Sitting upright, I nodded. “Yes, twice. Well, one night... two times. Ugh. V, I slept with Luca’s brother.”

“You mean you had sex with a hot man. Who cares who he’s related to? Shit, Kyle could have been related to the pope and I still would have fucked him.”

“You probably would burst into flames if you met the pope.”

Vanessa shrugged. “Meh, it’d be worth it. That still doesn’t explain why I’m here and you’re not there.”

“I panicked.”

“Was his dick tiny? A grower-not-a-shower type? He did grow, right?”

“Oh my God! No, he’s very well endowed.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Was it awful?”

“No, it was the best.”

“Then I’m confused.”

“Me too, that’s why I left... I think.”

I stood and Vanessa quipped, “I swear if you start pacing again, I’m going to tie you to that chair. Now sit down and tell me all about it.”

“It started out very innocently. We went for a walk in the park, then he made me dinner at his apartment.”

“So far, I’m not seeing a problem.”

“I know, because there isn’t one. We sat on the couch and talked, and before I knew it he told me he wanted to kiss me, and damn what a kiss. I lost my mind. He forced my legs around his thighs, and V, it was unreal how he made my body spark to life with just his lips on mine. So what did I do? I asked him to take me to his bedroom. And before I knew it, I was blindfolded and on my way to having the best sex of my life.”

“Hold the phone. Did you say the best sex of your life?”

The fact she skipped over the blindfold part of the story wasn’t lost on me, but if she wasn’t going to dwell on it, neither was I. “Yes, the best.”

“I still don’t understand why you’re here.”

“I panicked,” I repeated. “For instance, he has a picture, and when I say picture I mean a mini-billboard, of his ex-girlfriend, Charlene Duplex or something, who’s a supermodel, plastered on his living-room wall.”

“Wait, do you mean Charlene Dupree?” I tilted my head like a puppy waiting for an explanation. “Kyle and I looked at her for our spring ad campaign, but she was unavailable due to previous obligations in Europe.”

“Well, that’s great.” I sounded like a jealous lunatic.

“You yourself said she was his ex-girlfriend. I’m still not understanding.”

“That’s not the point. Do you hear my phone ringing or him knocking on my door?” Vanessa shook her head. “Exactly, I probably did him a favor by disappearing and avoiding the awkward morning dismissal.”

Bang, bang, bang.

In unison, our heads whipped toward my door. “Kyle?” I asked in a squeaky whisper.

“Cassandra, it’s Dante. Open the door.”

I looked at Vanessa, who mouthed my full name. Waving my arms like an air traffic controller, I urged Vanessa to keep quiet. Naturally, my dear sweet friend ignored my plea and shouted, “Coming,” right before she opened the door. “Good morning, Mr. Kinky.”

“Mr. Kinky... I see Cassandra is one to kiss and tell.” My temperature surpassed the normal 98.6 degrees while the two continued to banter about me as if I wasn’t there.

“No, not everything, but the blindfold was a nice touch.” Vanessa slung her purse strap over her shoulder. “I better leave before Kyle is the next to show up, and then this’ll really be a party.”

“Thank you, V,” I said sarcastically. “You’ve been quite a big help.”

“My pleasure.” She flipped her hand in the air. “Bye, kids. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

When I turned, Dante crossed his arms in front of his chest and smirked. “Mr. Kinky? I’m flattered, and I haven’t even begun to scratch the surface of kink.”

Surface? Did he mean my surface? Mortification set in. Damn Vanessa and her nicknames. I nonchalantly played it off, but all the while I was sure my face blazed with embarrassment. “Vanessa likes to give men nicknames.”

“How did I get blessed with Mr. Kinky? Divulging secrets?”

“Me? No. Um... it was probably the nipple piercing.”

“Or the blindfold.” That mischievous smirk reappeared. “I was serious about scratching the surface. That was just a hint of what can come. You have no idea of the things I’m capable of.” He winked, and I stared at his lips. “All you have to do is say the word, Cassandra, and I’ll bring you to heights you never imagined.”

Holy shit. Needing to move on from this conversation, I asked, “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“No, I would like some answers.”

“I need coffee.” He trailed behind me as I made my way to my kitchen.

“Tell me why you left in the middle of the night.”

“Technically, it was the morning.”

He raked his hand over his more than five o’clock shadow. “Semantics. Talk to me, Cassandra.”

“I got scared, I guess.” My feeble excuse didn’t even make sense to me. “Maybe scared isn’t the right word. I panicked.”

“Why?”

“For one reason, you’re Luca’s brother.”

“You knew that before we had sex. Next?”

I blew a long puff of air through my lips. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Like I said, that’s not new news. There’s something more that you’re not saying... did I do something wrong?”

“*Wrong?*” This man standing in front of me was just the opposite. So much about him was right, yet a nagging feeling caused me to bolt that morning. “Dante, I meant it when I said it was amazing. But it all happened so fast. I’ve never had sex on the first date... if it was even considered a date, which makes this worse.”

“Technically, it was our second date.”

“Whatever. Maybe you’re used to casual sex, but I’m not. Hell, it’s been over a year since I’ve been with a man.”

“So you prefer women?”

“What? No. I meant a human man... you know, one that isn’t battery operated.” *God, could this be more humiliating?* Dante’s brown eyes darkened as he held my gaze.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not understanding the problem. Luckily, I am all man, and I don’t require batteries.” Shit, *all man* was an understatement. “Let’s sit and talk about it.” He gestured toward my sofa, and remembering what happened on his, I chose to sit at my kitchen table instead.

“Look, last night was incredible, and I don’t want you to think otherwise. But until I figure out what all of this is, we need to keep it to ourselves.”

“You mean, *I* should keep it to myself. You don’t think Vanessa isn’t going to tell Kyle, who in turn will tell Luca? Believe me, before you know it, they’ll all know. That is, unless you swore her to secrecy.”

Like a deer in headlights I stared at him and kicked myself for not insisting Vanessa not tell a soul. As quick as I could, I sent her a text. I let out a sigh of relief when she sent me an emoji with a zipper across its mouth. “She’s not going to say a word.”

“That should make you happy.” Although he smiled, his words were laced with a hint of annoyance.

Little did he know that I would love to tell all my friends I had the best sex of my life. That he made me feel alive, reckless, and more turned on than I had ever been.

Dante didn’t waver. He kept his eyes pinned to mine, and I felt the need to say, “I just need time to figure this out. This could be very awkward for all of us.”

Dante stood and started toward me, causing me to stand as well. “You’re overthinking this. It was just sex, Cassandra. People do it all the time. And it’s no one else’s business unless you make it theirs. There’s no need for it to be awkward.”

Just sex? Fine, maybe it wasn’t derived from an epic love story, or years in the making, but to me it felt more than *just sex*. My heart thumped against my ribs, and to be sure it wasn’t going to jump out and land right on my sleeve, I countered with, “Right, just sex. So why are you here again?”

“For one, you were gone when I woke up. Two, you might think last night was a one-time thing, and so you can put your pretty mind to rest, just sex or not, I woke up craving you.”

No one had ever said that to me before. Rather than be irked by his aloof demeanor, I was once again turned on. He assessed me as I processed what he said. By no means was he blind to my attraction. The sexual tension radiated between us in waves. *He craved me? Well*, I craved every inch of him filling me, his fingers touching me, and his mouth possessing mine.

Once again, I was entranced by him. And just when I thought he would reach out and touch me, to satisfy the pulse between my legs, the heat that swarmed through my veins, he turned and strode toward the door. It was clear I needed to be the one to say something.

“Dante?” He turned to look at me. “Thank you for last night. I really did have a great time.”

“I did too. And Cassandra,” he said with an all-knowing smile, “I can’t wait to do it again.” Before my brain could signal my mouth to argue that *we couldn’t do it again*, he walked out.

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Chapter 11

Dante

Tonight, Luca was home from his family vacation. To think my little brother had an instant family warmed my heart. He was always the most levelheaded and down-to-earth sibling, whereas Gianna and I liked to fly by the seat of our pants. Sadly, my sister wasn't here to witness our brother's joy. But soon enough, I was sure Luca would return to Italy to introduce Sabrina to our family. There wasn't a doubt they'd love her, and her son as well.

My cab pulled up to Dispatch. Once I slid my card through the reader, I got out and took a deep breath of the city's nighttime air. New York wasn't as bad as people made it out to be. Yes, it was congested and noisy, but that was what made it interesting. Everywhere I looked, I saw a picture. Whether it be a group of guys wearing their favorite team's logo on their chests or women dressed to the nines, each had a story to tell.

I yanked the door open and immediately felt a sense of community. In the middle of a metropolis, the bar owners had managed to create a comfortable atmosphere with booths, tables, and a long wooden bar. It didn't smell of stale beer or roasted peanuts, the floor wasn't sticky, and the music wasn't blaring. Instead, it was welcoming. If I hadn't just gazed up at the skyscrapers before walking in, I wouldn't think I was in New York but rather a small town in the suburbs.

The crowd's chatter filled the room as I wove my way through it looking for Luca. I found myself wondering if Cassie was there. When Luca sent me a text and told me he'd be at Dispatch with his friends, of course she popped into my head. Knowing she worried about what he would think of us weighed heavily on my mind. The thing was, when it came to Cassie, any and all reactions were reflexes. Maybe it was the way we met that set the tone; I wasn't sure. But I knew she turned me on like no other woman ever had.

I finally found them toward the back of the bar. Cassie, Sabrina, Luca, and Brae were on one side of the table, and Vanessa, Kyle, and Jude sat opposite them. Of course, Jude was directly across from Brae, leaving an empty spot between him and Kyle. Vanessa spotted me and put her hand in the air. A playful glint sparkled in her eyes. The woman was definitely trouble, but in a good way. I liked her immediately.

Kyle looked in my direction, as did Cassie, but then she whipped her head back toward the table so fast I couldn't help but laugh.

"Hey, how's it going?" I said as I approached them.

Luca stood and gave me a hug, "Glad you could make it. You remember everyone, right?"

"Yes, of course." I let go of him and gave Sabrina a kiss on the cheek. "Welcome back. I hope you all had a great time."

Sabrina's face brightened. "We did, thank you. It's good seeing you again."

After I shook the guys' hands and said hello to the women, I sat down. Cassie's eyes met mine, and I immediately wanted to touch her. She squirmed a bit in her chair, making me grin, which caused her to slice her gaze away once again. Yes, it was good knowing she was just as affected as I was.

A waitress came up to our table. Everyone else had a drink in front of them, so her attention was directed at me. "Can I get you something?"

"I'll have a Manhattan, please." She sauntered away after checking on the rest of the group.

"So how are you liking New York?" Brae asked with a huge smile.

"Yes, Dante. Tell us," Vanessa interjected. "Do anything exciting yet?"

Everyone waited for my reply... everyone but Cassie. "It's been great. Besides the contracts that brought me here, I've lined up some clients and have more shoots scheduled."

Kyle lifted his beer in appreciation. "Must be rough photographing beautiful people all day, and this city is filled with beauty." Vanessa elbowed him in the ribs, but he placated her by smashing his lips against

hers. When they were done with their public display of affection, he tossed his arm around her shoulders. “Do you have a line of them waiting for a piece of you yet?”

“Seriously, Kyle?” Luca chuckled. “He just got here. Give the guy a break.”

“Speaking of beautiful people... when we were in California, everyone looked like a model,” Sabrina said... and thank God changed the subject. “Luca took us to Rodeo Drive, and I immediately felt like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*—less the hooker part, of course.” The ladies laughed, but Sabrina shrugged. “It’s true, though. Every other person looked like they could step right into a fashion magazine.”

As Sabrina filled us in on their trip to California, it reminded me of the time I’d spent there. I couldn’t help the feelings that began to resurface. Being a photographer, I was afforded the opportunity to immerse myself in the culture and I also met several famous people. The West Coast served its purpose to extend my client base and grow my brand, but it also was the place where I’d lived when my heart was broken.

“You worked there for a while, didn’t you, Dante?” Kyle said with an easy tone that caused the muscles surrounding my spine to tense.

“Yes, I did.” I looked at Sabrina. “You’re beautiful, so I’m sure you fit right in.”

Luca kissed her chastely. “She was the prettiest one there.” Sabrina blushed at his compliment.

Brae smiled at their exchange, then turned toward me. “Dante, tell us a little bit about you. We know you’re a photographer, but what do you photograph? I’ve always been envious of people who can take good pictures. I can’t even take a selfie without cutting half my head out of the picture.”

Jude laughed at his wife. “She’s not kidding.”

“High fashion, mostly.”

Kyle chimed in, “That’s right, you won an award for shooting... um...” He turned to Vanessa. “What was her name? We were going to use

her for a campaign.”

When I glanced up, Luca had a pained look on his face, and Vanessa exchanged a look with Cassie. Right then I knew Cassie had told her about Charlene and the portrait that hung in my house.

“Babe? Do you remember?” Kyle asked again.

With a bit of reservation, Vanessa said, “Charlene Dupree.”

Kyle slapped the table. “That’s it. Damn, she’s stunning. Wait... is that the model you were dating? When we wanted you to come to the city once, you couldn’t because you were on vacation with the love of your life. I remember Luca saying she was a model.”

Jesus, Kyle, shut up.

All eyes were on me, including Cassie’s. The indifferent expression on her face caused an uneasy feeling to spread in my chest, one I wasn’t familiar with. Keeping my gaze tethered to hers, I replied to Kyle. “Yes, that’s her. I wouldn’t call her the love of my life. She’s just someone I dated.”

Brae sighed. “Do you still see her?”

“No.” The word came out sharper than I intended. The last thing I wanted to do was take a walk down memory lane when it was filled with nothing but potholes.

“Ooh, I love this song.” Vanessa popped out of her seat and tugged on Cassie’s hand. “Let’s go dance, ladies.” As if it was choreographed, she dragged Cassie off as the other two followed them to the dance floor with their hands swaying to the beat of the music. *Thank God for Vanessa.*

Jude spun around and gave Brae a quick glance before returning his attention to Luca, who looked like he was ready to explode.

“Sorry about that,” Luca said before taking a swig of his beer.

Jude and Kyle’s eyes ping-ponged between my brother and me. “What did we miss?” Jude asked.

“It’s fine. It was bound to come up.” I turned to Kyle and Jude, who looked confused. “When Charlene broke up with me, it wasn’t the best time

in my life. So if we could change the subject, that would be great.”

Kyle nodded. “Sorry, man, I didn’t know. She shall not be mentioned again.”

“I don’t hate her, I just don’t want to talk about our relationship.”

“Noted,” Kyle said with a smile. “So you and Cassie didn’t look like you were going to rip each other’s heads off. That’s a good sign. Much better than the last time you two were in a room together.”

Not really, since the last time I was in a room with her, we talked about her walk of shame out of my apartment after spending the night having fantastic sex.

“I’m making an effort. I apologized, and we decided to call a truce.”

Luca nodded with a smile. I knew my brother wanted us to find peace with each other since Cassie was an important person in his life. The last thing he wanted was for his brother and best friend to not get along. That being said, I was also confident he didn’t want us together. Not for any other reason than if it didn’t work, it would be awkward. But if you looked at this group of friends, they were all connected romantically.

The way I understood their dynamic, Cassie, Vanessa, and Brae were all friends before they hooked up with the guys. I didn’t know the history, but that seemed to work out okay. My reputation wasn’t as outlandish as everyone thought. Yes, I loved having fun and pushing boundaries, but I wasn’t an asshole.

“She’s a good person,” my brother said poignantly.

“She is.” Not wanting to put my cards on the table, I added, “That is, when she’s not acting crazy.”

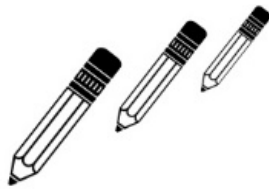
Luca laughed. “You bring out the best in everyone. So you like her? Because that would make my life much easier.”

Like? I thought about the time we spent together. How we danced at Alessandro’s, the way she took interest in my work, which in itself was a complete turn-on. Memories of how her lips felt against mine sent a surge of adrenaline straight to my groin. Along with how sexy she looked with her eyes covered in the makeshift blindfold. But fuck me, images of the

way she wrapped her legs around my waist as I buried myself in her wet heat were burned into my memory.

“Yeah, I like her.”

The band switched gears and started playing a slower song. Brae, Vanessa, and Sabrina came back to the table to collect their partners. Once the others walked off, I asked Vanessa, the one I knew was on our side, where Cassie was. When she said the ladies’ room, I waited until she and Kyle joined the rest of their friends on the dance floor before heading in Cassie’s direction.



Cassie

My reflection didn’t lie; I was a nervous wreck. Anyone who knew me would be able to tell I was about to come out of my skin. Even doing my best to not look at Dante didn’t work. His voice was enough to make my panties wet.

A couple of women stood at the sinks next to me. I couldn’t help but notice how carefree they were. I used to be that way—pre-Dante. Now I couldn’t look at the man without remembering how he kissed me, the way his body moved as he pushed in and out of me, and how glorious my orgasms were.

I washed my hands, swiped on some lip gloss, and ran my hand over my hair before pulling the door open to rejoin my friends. As soon as I stepped out of the ladies’ room, deep-brown eyes stared at me. Dante leaned on the wall, his right foot flat against it, his arms crossed in front of his chest. Damn, he was sexy.

“What are you doing back here?”

“Waiting for you.” His hand gripped mine and he tugged me through a door in the back. A dim desk light illuminated the small room.

“Dante, we shouldn’t be in here. Everyone will be looking for us.”

“They’re all dancing. We have time.”

Not wanting to waste any of that time arguing, I acquiesced. “What do you want?”

“You.” His eyes twinkled, but that didn’t hide the devilishness of his thoughts. “Just a taste.” He leaned forward and brought his lips to mine in an urgent, possessive kiss. “Cassandra, it was killing me sitting across from you and not being able to touch you. Rest assured last night wasn’t just a fluke.” He kissed me again but all too soon broke our connection and said, “Luca’s happy we like each other.”

“Like each other? What did you say to him?”

“Nothing.” A sly, crooked grin appeared on his gorgeous face. “Since we weren’t at each other’s throats, he asked me if I liked you.” His look was one of faint amusement. He reached out and tucked a few strands of hair behind my ear, and then let his touch linger on the curve of my neck, sending tingles from the roots of my hair down to my toes. “Want to know what I told him?”

My gut instinct was to say “No.” But the memory of Vanessa’s voice sounded in my head... *inner vixen*. “Yes.”

His penetrating eyes made it difficult not to sway on my unsteady feet. “Yes. I do like you.”

Thrill and anxiousness filled my head and the one-word question—“*Really?*”—spilled out of my mouth.

His expression went from amused to lustful and hungry. “Yes, really. I find you fucking sexy. When I think of you, I no longer picture that annoying woman who hit my ride.” He winked and the corners of my lips curved up. “Instead, I picture the gorgeous woman sprawled out on my bed. I can’t help but get hard at the memory.” My eyes fluttered to the bulge in his jeans before meeting his again. “Feel free to check for yourself.”

I didn’t for fear it would lead to fucking him in a closet... although the thought of doing so was extremely tempting. So instead I took his word for it. That grin appeared again and he continued. “Last night was a surprise, and I’m all for surprises...” He slowly dragged his finger from my cheek to my jaw, then my neck, until he grazed the skin above my cleavage. “I think

you're smart, gorgeous, and feisty as hell. I've never wanted to shoot anyone more."

"You want to shoot me?"

That damn smile was back. "You bet your sweet ass I do."

His soft lips found that tender spot on my neck, the one that sent a chill down my spine and liquid fire to gather between my legs. "Dante," I breathed out in a rasp.

Soft kisses trailed to my jaw before his mouth was a whisper away from mine. "Yes, beautiful... do you want me to stop?"

I gently shook my head while my hands fisted the soft cotton of his T-shirt. It needed to come off. I wanted to feel his body... his bare skin and every ripple of muscle. *What was going on with me?* "No, but... we can't do this... here."

"You're right. We'll be here all night. Let's go dance." Placing his hand on my back, he led me out of the small room and toward the dance floor. No one noticed where we came from. Our friends were still in each other's arms, swaying to the music.

Taking a position on the edge opposite the others, he stepped closer until there was no space between us. There was nowhere to hide, not from his gaze, not from feeling his excitement pressing into me. There was also no way to pretend he didn't affect me. Not when my entire body ignited to the point of discomfort. And I wasn't sure if it was my lack of transparency, or how my body responded on its own accord, that made me feel sexy and frustrated all at the same time.

"I do really like you, Cassandra."

"I really like you too."

"When can I see you again?"

I stared into his eyes with a snarky expression. "You're seeing me now."

"Not good enough. You know what I mean."

I lusted for this man more than I understood. It was difficult separating being friends and detaching the emotions that came with being intimate. I had never engaged in casual sex. Aside from Dante, there wasn't another man I'd been intimate with who I didn't feel love for. Love and sex were one and the same for me; one led to the other. And it was clear it wasn't for him.

Every sign down the path we'd taken pointed at this being only about sex. That wasn't what I was looking for, nor was it something I was familiar with. Everything that we shared the other night threw me off balance.

"What's going on in that pretty little head?" he asked, staring with purpose.

"Look, the other night *was* a fluke. I know you said it wasn't, but how could it have been anything more? We went from fighting to sex in a matter of days." Remembering where we were, I glanced at my friends. Brae was lost in Jude, but Luca and Vanessa noticed us. Bringing my attention back to Dante, I said, "This isn't the place for this conversation. I'm not even sure if we need to have it."

"We do need to have it. And I'll prove to you we aren't a fluke."

Maybe *fluke* wasn't the right word choice, but nothing about this made sense. It didn't matter what Vanessa said to me. Overthinking was my norm, sensibility was my middle name, and throwing caution to the wind was not in my DNA.

Which meant three strikes against a man like Dante.

Chapter 12

Dante

Labor Day weekend meant the city was quiet. While my brother and his friends frolicked in the Hamptons, I scoured the thousand or so pictures I took during my last shoot. Jude and Brae had a house out there and being part of their group meant I received an invite as well. Unfortunately, deadlines in my profession didn't adhere to holiday schedules. When one of the biggest fashion magazines demanded the photos be edited by Labor Day, it meant no fun for Dante.

Having been at it for hours, I stretched before reading my emails. Most of them were regarding upcoming shoots, but then I saw one that brought a smile to my face. It was from my mentor and good friend, Matteo Romano. When I was just starting out, I did an apprenticeship at his studio in Milan. Thanks to him, I became the photographer I am today.

Matteo was an older man, closer to my father's age than mine. He had won several awards, had been published in various magazines and books, and was featured in several prominent galleries. The numerous accolades he acquired made him a world-renowned photographer. Clients would put shoots on hold to have him behind the lens. The man told a story with his camera like no one else could. In other words, he was everything I strived to be.

My eyes scanned his message. Matteo was inching toward retirement and slowly cutting back. The best thing about photography or any creative art was that even after the creator was gone, the work still lived on... a legacy of sorts. Matteo didn't have a wife or children. He had devoted his life to creating beautiful images, and one day I hoped he'd pass the torch to me.

Being featured in a gallery was a dream of mine. My work hanging on display in an art museum would surpass anything I could have imagined. I loved my job, but I couldn't see myself doing it forever. At some point, all

the gorgeous faces started to look the same. After years and years in the business, the thought of doing what I did for the sake of art and not a paycheck would be the ultimate reward.

Thinking of Matteo always had me remembering home. It'd been too long since my last visit. I opened up my calendar, even though I knew I didn't have time for a few weeks in Italy. Maybe over the holidays I'd surprise my parents and just show up.

That was another downside to my profession... time to relax. There was always a shoot or a model needing new headshots. Fuck, at times it all seemed so ridiculous. The fashion industry and their arrogance—it wasn't like they were curing cancer. The older I got, the more I realized my entire adult life revolved around my career.

Procrastination wasn't my thing, so I powered through until the last image was perfect and slammed closed my laptop.

While my face was plastered to the screen, daylight turned to dusk. Exhausted from doing nothing but sitting, I got myself a beer and headed out to my balcony. The humidity smacked my face the moment I stepped outside, making me envious of Luca and the gang hanging at the beach and not in a concrete jungle. I felt antsy, restless. Grabbing dinner alone held no appeal, and neither did taking a walk only to sweat my ass off because of the stagnant air.

I had maybe a few hours left before I was done. A quick glance at my watch had the wheels in my head turning. After a few internet searches, I checked the train schedule and packed a bag. Thirty minutes later, my ass was in a cab heading to Penn Station.

By the time I got to Brae and Jude's house it'd be past midnight, but I didn't care. I deserved a day at the beach... swimming in the ocean... having a cocktail... with a sexy blonde at my fingertips. Since seeing her at Dispatch, we had unresolved business to discuss... the topic of us.



Tires crunching on the gravel drive slashed through the silence. “Nice house,” my driver said, ogling it from his window. *Nice?* The place was a beachside fortress. I could definitely get into hanging out here for the rest of my life. Faint waves could be heard in the distance as I exited the car with my bag and approached the front porch.

I tracked the sound of voices and followed the paver-stone path to the backyard. When I reached my destination, I was greeted by an impressive deck complete with a bubbling hot tub in one corner of a large rectangular pool, enough furniture to furnish my apartment, and an outdoor kitchen that would impress most professional chefs—*yes, I was definitely glad I decided to leave the city.*

The group of friends sat around a patio table, laughing and chatting, and the only thing missing was Cassie. At my approach, Jude looked over with a frown until he realized who it was. “Hey, man. You decided to join us after all.”

“I did. It’s hot as balls in the city.” As soon as the words were out, I shrugged an apology. “Sorry, ladies.”

“It’s much cooler out here. Come sit, and I’ll get you a nice cold beer,” Brae said as I climbed the steps toward them. She left her husband’s lap, his eyes following her the entire way. That dude had it bad.

“I’m glad you’re all still up,” I said as I made my rounds, shaking hands and kissing cheeks. “I had visions of sleeping out on the porch until morning.”

“You finished all your edits?” Luca asked as Brae returned with my beer.

“I have a few more hours, but most of them are done.” I took a long swig and tried for nonchalance when I asked, “Where’s Cassie?” My first thought was I schlepped all the way out there and she decided to stay behind. That would suck.

“Cassie hit the sack a while ago,” Vanessa offered, and then studied my reaction. But when I remained quiet, she felt the need to add, “Our girl desperately needs excitement in her life.”

“I’m sure it’s not easy on her being the only one here unpaired,” Sabrina said lovingly, playing the good cop.

“No, Cassie doesn’t care about that. Give her a quiet corner and a book, and the girl is in heaven,” Brae said matter-of-factly.

Jude leaned toward his wife and nuzzled her neck. “That sounds like your Saturday nights before I came into your life.”

“You’re a funny man,” she said before sticking her tongue out.

“We’re outta here,” he said, grabbing his wife and dragging her away without apology. Brae giggled in protest, but then quickly changed her complaints to a *good night* to the rest of us. “Dante, your room is next to Luca’s,” she called right as Jude threw her over his shoulder and sprinted into the house.

“What just happened?” Sabrina asked Luca, but Kyle responded, “He’s rude as hell. We only hang out with him for his nice beach house.”

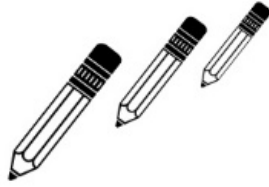
Rude or not, it took minutes before Kyle and Vanessa took off as well, leaving me with my brother and his girl. Either they felt bad ditching me or had more self-control than the rest of them. They ended up hanging out with me until I finished my beer, then left me alone in the sultry night air, jealous they all were doing things to their girls that I ached to do to Cassie.

Left to my own devices, and not ready to head to bed yet, I reached down and grabbed my camera out of its bag. Most of my life was spent staring through the viewfinder. For me, it changed the perception of things; it made me more cognizant of the world I lived in. It afforded me with an appreciation that all things held beauty.

Scanning the dark night, my finger started clicking the shutter button, capturing the way the moonlight danced on the dark ripples of the ocean, the way the stars dotted the sky, and the way the tips of the waves rolled onto the shore. Each of those things happened every day, yet each time they were different. That was the beauty we were all surrounded by, and what we failed to stop and appreciate.

Hearing a giggle from inside the house made me smile. It could have been any one of the ladies. Except Cassie. Thank God she didn’t bring someone here. That thought never crossed my mind until Sabrina

mentioned her being the only one not paired off. I thought, *She is paired off, she just doesn't know it yet.* I took one more glance at the ocean before whispering, "Until tomorrow, Cassandra."



Cassie

I woke to the smell of bacon and six noisy people chatting and laughing downstairs. Last night, the crew decided to head into town today to explore and shop. I easily passed, not needing to be the *seventh* wheel. Since I knew I'd have all day to myself, I turned over and went back to sleep. School started next week, which meant days like this would be few and far between, if at all.

My entire body felt rested as I stretched out on the luxurious bedding. The house had been quiet for the past few hours, and my stomach rumbling was what had me finally ready to leave the heaven of my bed.

There was something about beautiful weather, and not having plans, that made me feel more wired than a triple-shot latte. I popped out of bed, pulled my hair back in a messy ponytail, washed up, brushed my teeth, stripped out of my pajamas, and decided to wear my black string bikini. Normally, I'd be a little more reserved, but everyone having left, and not knowing anyone on the beach, gave me the confidence to wear something a little skimpier.

I slathered on sunscreen, tied the strings around my hips, back, and neck, and pushed my boobs up to give them maximum fullness. I slid on my sheer cover-up and flip-flops, and twirled in front of the mirror, ensuring all necessary places were covered. Snagging my beach bag and romance novel off the side table, I headed out to the kitchen.

Whistling caught my attention, causing me to stumble. I wasn't familiar with the tune, but it was a happy one. When I peered around the corner, my heart stammered just like my feet had. *Dante*. What the hell was he doing here? Rather than announce myself, I took a moment to appreciate

the man—low-hanging black board shorts, no shirt, and the sexiest bedhead that only someone with his good looks could pull off.

He leaned casually against the kitchen island, drinking a cup of coffee and peering out the window. The vee in his hips had my tongue poking out of my mouth to wet my desert-dry lips. Glancing down at myself, I cringed. Yes, he'd seen me naked and complimented my body, but I was sans makeup, and knowing the type of women he was used to, I couldn't help but feel a bit self-conscious.

Despite my reluctance, I did my best to tiptoe into the room... not an easy accomplishment given my footwear. His head spun in my direction and that smile that could make a woman stupid flashed across his face.

“Good morning, Cassandra. I didn't realize anyone was home. Would you like a cup of coffee?”

I straightened my spine, hoping my boobs, which I'd just positioned, didn't flop out of the small triangles. “Good morning. What are you doing here?” When his eyebrows arched to his hairline, I amended my statement. “What I meant was, I didn't realize you were coming here this weekend. I thought you had work to do. We haven't spoken in days.”

“I finished earlier than planned and hoped we could talk this weekend. I'm not here to pressure you, just to enjoy your company and to relax. Everything else we can play by ear.” I had to admit hearing that calmed me a bit. It was the unknown of our relationship playing out in front of our friends that gave me pause. But having him there, looking all sexy and irresistible, rebuked my concerns.

With a stunning smile, he pushed himself off the island and walked to the coffee maker. Pulling the pot out, he held it up. “Coffee?”

“Yes, please. Black.”

His muscles flexed as he tipped the pot to fill a mug. When he turned to face me, his eyes raked over my body. Looking back, there was never a time in my life when a man made my body temperature rise the way Dante had. He was a human flame and I was a taper of paraffin wax. I took a step toward him and reached for the cup of the steaming beverage. He turned it so I could grab the handle. “Thank you.”

“You look beautiful this morning.” He leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Not that you don’t look beautiful all the time.”

“Thank you,” I repeated. The man was a talking-book boyfriend. Yes, I loved romance novels, and I had one in my hand that I was ready to devour. Who could blame me for wanting to escape into a fantasy world? All the heroes I’d read about knew just what to say and treated their women like princesses. Maybe that was my problem. I wanted to fall in love like the heroines in a steamy romance. Was it a practical way of thinking? No, of course it wasn’t, but it also didn’t matter.

“What do you have there?” He tipped his head toward my book. “Ahh, yes, I heard you’d be happy relaxing and reading.” A devilish grin sprouted. “It looks sexy.”

Glancing down as if I hadn’t memorized the cover, I looked at the man and woman embracing. Okay, they were doing a bit more than embracing. Her legs were wrapped around his hips as he pinned her against a wall. Sue me for wanting a little excitement on the pages.

Not wanting to make a big deal of it, I merely shrugged. “It is.” I mimicked his move and motioned toward his camera. “Planning on taking pictures today?” Memories of our walk in the park and of Dante taking pictures of obscure objects flew into my mind.

“You never know when inspiration will strike.”

He winked, and like a few moments ago, I began to heat up from my insides out... and it wasn’t because I had just taken a sip of my coffee. I plucked a muffin off the platter that sat on the island. “Yes, well, as long as you don’t point it at me.”

“Sorry, sweetheart. I can’t promise you that—you’re extremely inspiring.”

The vast room started to feel like a broom closet. “Well, I guess I’ll see you later.”

As gracefully as I could, I maneuvered the sliding door open before stepping out into the salty humid air. When he called out, “Sooner than later, Cassandra,” our eyes met, and he grinned at my playful smile.

I set up my tanning area, chaise lounge positioned perfectly so the sun would hit my body, a small table to hold my coffee, and no other chairs around me. Perfect. With my earbuds in, Rob Thomas's soothing voice brought a smile to my face as I enjoyed my breakfast in peace.

Finally, being able to breathe, I let out a sigh, slid on my sunglasses, and started my new book. It was time to get lost with a billionaire and his assistant. I couldn't help but giggle at the cliché, but this was so much better than reading to five- and six-year-olds. Not that I didn't love reading to them about the little engine that could, but my little engine needed to get revved up... and not by a drop-dead-gorgeous sexy photographer.

As I turned the page to begin chapter four, the sun started to make my body sweat. I untied my cover-up so it fell to the sides, making it easy to free my arms. My skin had started to redden. I set my book next to my now-empty coffee cup and began reapplying my sunscreen.

When I sat up and glanced at the water, people had gathered on the beach. Some were just lying on towels or chairs; others were frolicking in the water. There weren't many, but enough to tease me to want to do the same.

Leaving Rob Thomas and my sexy billionaire on the teak deck, I headed toward the shoreline. Grains of sand filtered through my manicured toes as I left small footprints behind me. I preferred Jude's heated saltwater pool, but how could I come to the Hamptons and not dip my toes into the ocean—no matter how much it freaked me out?

As I slid my index fingers under the bottom of my swimsuit so it would no longer feel like a thong, I heard a distinct click. *Dante*. Trying to act cool, I ventured forward far enough that the surf hit me mid-calf. Scooping the ocean water with my hands, I cooled off my arms and again heard that sound. *Shit*.

I peered over my right shoulder, and sure enough, there was Dante standing ten feet behind me with his lens pointed in my direction. My glare was enough to make him chuckle.

"Stop taking pictures of me," I said in what Vanessa called my teacher's voice. But he was not deterred, eliciting several more clicks.

Damn him. I fisted my hands on my hips. “Dante, I mean it. You better knock it off.”

He lowered the camera and teased, “Or what?”

“I’ll hurt you.” His deep chuckle forced me to stomp toward him in the most unladylike fashion. Water splashed all around me until my feet hit hard-packed sand. His continued laughter fueled me. “Aren’t you afraid your camera is going to get wet?”

“Nope, it’s waterproof.” He casually pointed it at me, and once again I heard a click.

“Give it to me.” My hand darted forward, but he lifted it above his head. With one of my hands on his arm, I jumped like an idiot trying to grab it. The jackass pointed the camera down and continued clicking.

It was clear I amused him. His lips quirked to the side before letting out a howling laugh. *That’s it!* I twisted my sandy leg around his, lining up our ankles, and in a swift move pulled my leg forward, causing him to fall backward. What I didn’t prepare for was his hand grabbing my arm, taking me down with him.

We both landed with an oomph—him in the sand and me on top of him. Then he pushed the button on his camera one more time. Our eyes met, and suddenly the humor in his gaze was replaced with lust.

“Cassandra, if you wanted to be on top of me, all you needed to do was ask.”

“You wish.” It took all I had not to grin... because that was exactly what I did wish for.

“I do,” he said with a seductive timbre in his voice and a subtle shift of his hips. This time, it took all I had not to moan.

Ignoring the fact that other vacationers were around, I could feel the excitement growing in his shorts. I wasn’t sure if it was the fact that the hot billionaire just took his assistant on his desk that had me riled up or because the most gorgeous man I’d ever known was beneath me.

Dante cupped the side of my face with his free hand. “Kiss me, Cassandra.”

Just hearing those words proved this had nothing to do with the billionaire and everything to do with the photographer—not that I didn't know that already. I leaned forward and out of the corner of my eye spotted his camera. This was my chance. Our lips were just a breath away when I popped off of him, snatched his camera, and laughed as I ran back to the house.

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Chapter 13

Dante

If she wanted to play, I'd play. The tiny black fabric perfectly highlighted the curves of her ass as she ran ahead of me. When she craned her head back to see how far behind I was, her tits looked as though they were ready to escape the scraps shielding them.

Her laughter sounded like a melody as she made it to the deck stairs. It would have been easy to catch her, but seeing Cassie carefree and playful was worth her thinking she'd bested me.

When we were both standing next to the pool, breathing heavy, her a little more winded than me, she snapped my picture. "How does it feel?" she said with friskiness before bringing my camera to her face again for another shot.

Glancing down, I spotted her book. There was no way she could grab it before me, unless she dropped my camera, which I knew, *or hoped*, she wouldn't do.

Cassie's eyes narrowed as I opened the page just before her bookmark. "Ahem." My eyes scanned the words, and I couldn't help but grin. Was this the stuff she was into? Who knew?

"Here," she said with a nervous voice, and extended my camera toward me. "Take it and give me my book."

"No way, this is too good." Cassie's glare turned into a wide-eyed look of horror. "*Ethan pushed my body over the edge of his expansive desk, forcing papers to fly to the floor. Heat pooled between my legs, wetness coated my panties as my boss shoved my skirt up to my waist. With gentle force, he grabbed my wrists in his hand before the cool metal of cuffs bound my arms together.*" I glanced up, and Cassie's face was beet red, but I continued. "*The thought of getting caught by another employee should have scared me, but instead, it thrilled me. I knew of Ethan's history, his love of BDSM, and if that's the way he wanted me, then that's what I would give*

him. His deep voice rumbled, *'I'm going to fuck you like you've never been fucked. Spread your legs and show me how wet you are...'*” I arched a brow and looked at Cassie. “Wow, Ethan’s a kinky fucker.”

She reached forward, offering me my camera. “Can I please have my book back?”

“Will you let me take a picture of you?”

She let out a resigned sigh. “Okay, if you stop reading.”

“Deal.”

Once we made the swap, my camera for her romance novel, she crossed her arms in front of her chest while still hanging on to her book. “How do you want me?”

“That’s a loaded question, but for now set the book down and lie on the chaise.”

Like a good model, she did as I asked. Cassie’s creamy skin, now tinged with a bit of sun, contrasted perfectly with the dark-blue cushion.

“Let your hair down.” She pulled the rubber band out and shook her head. Errant strands framed her face. I stood at the end of the lounge, bringing my camera to my eye. “One arm up, and with the other, take your fingers and grip the string of your bikini bottom.”

I wasn’t going to have her pull it, because unlike her book heroine, I didn’t want anyone walking in on us. Everyone could be back soon, and there was no way I was going to put Cassie in that position. Plus, I decided, her body was for my eyes only.

“Don’t tug on it, just hold it out to the side.”

She let out another resigned sigh but did as I asked. “Now look at me.” Like before, she glared. I let out a chuckle. “Not like you want to kill me, but like you want to fuck me.”

Surprisingly, that was all it took, because the expression on her face morphed into something I didn’t know existed. It was different from the way she looked at me when we were on my couch. This was a woman who knew how good we were together. How her body came when I plunged deep inside of her. It was *my* money shot.

“Perfect. Now smile, beautiful.” A brilliant smile lit up her face, causing my breath to catch. Fuck, she truly *was* perfection, in the most natural of ways. After a few more shots, I lowered the camera. “Okay, we’re done.”

Cassie sat up with a flourish. “Did I do it wrong? I looked stupid, right?”

Wrong? Stupid? This woman had no idea the effect she had on me. “No, Cassandra, just the opposite. Unless you want me to take you upstairs and fuck you, I need to go for a swim. Join me?”

Although I was only half kidding, by biting the corner of her lip, without words Cassie conveyed that was exactly what she wanted as well.

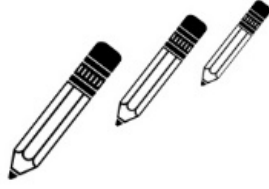
“How about we take a walk on the beach instead? The water was so cold,” she said with a small smile. Her seemingly innocuous comment forced my eyes to focus on her breasts. She’d been out of the water for a while, yet those perfectly pebbled nipples still taunted through the slinky black fabric of her bathing suit.

I slid my gaze back up to her face in time to witness a rosy tinge spreading over her cheeks. “Okay, beautiful, a walk it is.” I picked up my camera and vowed no more pictures of her would be taken without her permission.

Cassie reached into her bag, tucked her book away, and shrugged on her cover-up. I hated seeing that little black bikini hidden beneath fabric, even if it was sheer, but it was probably better for my sanity.

In two swift movements she had her ponytail refastened on the top of her head. “Ready?” she asked, looking so young and... I didn’t want to use the word *innocent*, as I knew there was a streak in her that could bring any man to his knees. I’d seen it, a conspicuous hunger that made me want to do filthy things to her and then hold her the rest of the night.

Side by side, we headed down the deck stairs toward the beach as I subtly adjusted myself. Nylon board shorts weren’t exactly ideal at hiding a man’s truth.



Cassie

The narcotic power of his words and actions made the ache between us grow. Even him joking about my book and taking pictures of him lit a fire within me. Damn this man and his sex appeal. The thing was, it went beyond that. Below the brawn and cocky attitude was a kind man—one who could make me lose all sense of reason.

Warm salty air fluttered around the hem of my cover-up. Everything about my feet in the sand, the sun shining, and the sound of the ocean made me happy. But the way Dante looked at me rivaled all other things. His eyes held a possessive quality, one I'd never seen aimed in my direction... it was one that defied reason, but I oddly enjoyed it.

“This was the perfect end to my summer vacation. The next ten months of my life will be spent in a stuffy classroom.” It wouldn't be long until the air cooled, leaves turned different shades of red, and sweaters replaced sleeveless shirts.

“I thought you loved being a teacher,” Dante said with curiosity.

“I do. It just takes me a little bit to get back into the swing of things. By October, I'm ready for fall, but summer is my favorite time of year.”

“I can understand that. I'm not a fan of the winter months either. That's why living in California was right up my alley. Even at its coldest, it didn't compare to November in Chicago.” Dante shivered at the memory.

“I'm assuming that in your line of work you would be on the West Coast more often than Chicago. Unless, unbeknownst to me, Chicago has turned into a fashion mecca.”

“I was under contract with *Flair* magazine but much prefer to freelance. There's something to be said about making your own schedule and deciding what and who to photograph.”

“To me the entire world of fashion photography seems exciting. Was that what you always wanted to do?”

He let out a hearty chuckle. “No, that’s just half right. I’ve always wanted to be a photographer, but the fashion part fell into my lap... sort of.”

“How so? Did you know someone in the fashion business?”

“Not exactly,” he said, coming to a stop beside me.

“What?” I asked, grinning at the guilty look written all over his face.

“Let’s sit.”

“Oh... I need to sit down for this?” The trepidation in his eyes caused me to plant my ass on the sand, anxious to hear what he was hiding.

Dante turned to look at me. “One other person knows about this. Can you be trusted?” His words were teasing, but the question was straightforward.

Not knowing who the other person was, or what he was about to confess, there was only one way to answer. “Yes, you can trust me.” A shot of heightened anticipation touched my spine. “But I’m dying to know. So spill it, Benedetto.”

His mocha-brown eyes crinkled with amusement but continued to gauge my expression. “While in college, Luca and I were lucky enough that our parents footed the entire bill. However, my extracurricular activities were on me, and California wasn’t inexpensive. My time was limited, so I needed a job that didn’t take a lot of hours but made me a decent amount of money...”

“Oh my God, you were an escort?” I half joked, until I realized he wasn’t laughing.

“No... close. I was a stripper.”

“You’re funny.”

“I’m serious.” He shrugged like it was no big deal. “It’s why I got my nipple pierced. Helped with tips.”

I tilted my head, absorbing what he had casually dumped on me. “I can see it.” Remembering how he moved at Alessandro’s, I most definitely

could imagine Dante on stage as a room full of women gawked, shoving money into his... “What did you strip down to?”

“A very skimpy G-string,” he responded, raising a brow. “You’re imagining it, aren’t you?”

“Most definitely.” Why bother denying it? I would need to see that routine in person.

Reading my thoughts, his expression turned from teasing to smoldering before he said, “I’d be happy to give you a private performance whenever you like. I may be a bit rusty, but it’s probably like riding a bike.”

“I couldn’t ever do something like that.”

“Sure you could.” As I shook my head in denial he reached over, surprising me by cupping my face. “Cassandra, the way you danced with me, the way you posed for me, you absolutely could if you allowed yourself to let go.”

“Let go?” I said with a sarcastic laugh. “I don’t know the meaning of it. Even after all those years in dancing school, ballet was my only option because of its sophistication.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “Sophistication? Dancing should be an expression of one’s self. Did you even like ballet?”

“No,” I responded truthfully. “It was boring.”

“So then why did you do it?”

“It was all part of the Brooks family protocol.” I stopped, not wanting to get into it with him. The last thing I needed was for Dante to think I was some sort of prude. Then again, it could explain my behavior since the night we had sex. Changing the subject, I asked, “I still don’t understand how that led to photography.”

“The owner of the club I danced in knew I studied photography and asked me to take shots for her ad campaign. Seemed reasonable, and that was something I could use on my résumé. A big fashion editor saw the ad, and long story short, my stripper career ended shortly after, and my fashion photography career began.”

“Now that makes sense. I guess things happen for a reason, and stripping led you to your dream job.”

“Not exactly. I do love what I do, but it wasn’t always what I dreamed of.” I watched as he distractedly plucked a flat shell from the sand and rubbed it between his fingers. I took the opportunity to admire every manly inch of him. The camera strap crossed over his lean, tan torso, just below his piercing. The sun highlighted every dip and crevice of muscle. Even the position of his bent legs, long and muscular, peppered with the right amount of hair, was a turn-on. But I’d have to admit, watching as he sat contemplating whatever was on his mind, wondering what caused his jaw to tighten and his throat to bob with a swallow, made him even more intriguing... and even sexier.

“What do you dream of doing?” I asked, it being the next logical question. Dante’s contemplative gaze swung my way and his eyes widened a fraction, making me wonder if he had been so lost in thought he didn’t hear me.

“For one semester I studied abroad, and luck brought me the opportunity to complete an apprenticeship in Milan under the notorious photographer Matteo Romano. We developed a friendship, and I eventually became his protege. That experience changed me.”

Hearing what inspired Dante fascinated me. “How so?”

“Because of Matteo, I’d love my work to be in a gallery someday, a museum maybe. An exhibit of stills and not people. I’d love to travel every corner of the earth and encapsulate its uniqueness. Not everything is beautiful. Being able to take something ugly yet make it interesting enough to have it speak to the person staring at it is what challenges me. I see a story in everything I shoot. One of my goals is to have my photos capture either a person, place, or time. Maybe even an inanimate object... the subject isn’t as important as the story it holds.” That surprised me more than his admission of stripping. He looked so comfortable photographing people, until I remembered him stopping to take a picture of a pigeon at the park, which along with his admission suddenly gave a deeper retrospective of the man behind his lens. “You look shocked by that,” he said, picking up on my reaction.

“No, not shocked in a bad way. It just seems so different than what you actually do photograph.” I didn’t want to insult him. Insinuating he had that artsy quirk that made people who didn’t appreciate art question why he saw beauty would out my insecurities. Or reveal why I questioned how he believed I was pretty enough to be photographed by a professional like him.

Dante continued to stare at me, waiting for an elaboration. “Okay, like that day at the park, the things you took notice of confused me. And the framed stills in your room. I get it now. A brilliant photographer can find beauty in anything, and not just gorgeous supermodels. Now that I’ve gotten to know you a bit, I think you possess that quality, Dante.”

In the way he regarded me for a moment, I wondered if he understood why I felt unworthy of being photographed. “I don’t find beauty in everything, Cassandra. But when beauty does capture my attention, it tends to consume me.” He paused, allowing me to absorb his words. “Back to you. I’m curious about this protocol you mentioned in your family. Tell me what you meant.”

“I’d rather not.” That wasn’t a road I wished to travel with Dante. Hell, Mr. *Intriguing in everything he did* wouldn’t understand the world I grew up in. I stood and brushed sand off the back of my legs. “Ready to head back?”

He gripped my wrist and tugged hard enough that I landed on his lap. His compelling gaze boring into mine felt more serene than interrogating. After he cocked a brow and I still hadn’t spoken, he said, “We’re staying right here until you explain.”

Chapter 14

Dante

Forcing Cassie on my lap with her face inches from mine, her sweet ass pressing against my cock, may not have been the best-laid plan on my part. Because all I wanted to do was roll us over to devour every inch of her... public beach or not.

Needing to avoid being arrested, I repositioned her until she straddled my thighs and her butt rested on the space of sand between them. “So? I’m waiting. What did you mean about protocol?” Predictably, her crystal-blue eyes shifted away from mine. Holding her chin between my thumb and forefinger, I brought her attention back to me. “Talk to me, Cassandra.”

“It’s stupid, and embarrassing.” Wisps of her blond hair gently blew across her face. I tucked a strand behind her ear, prompting her to explain with my expectant expression. “I had a very structured childhood. A dad on the medical board, a mom involved in every charitable event our town hosted. Private schools, etiquette school, and not only the ballet classes I mentioned, but ballroom dancing as well. Because we all know possessing the skills needed for a proper foxtrot is what life is all about,” she rambled on, finishing with an exasperated eye roll. “It was all a bit stifling, until I got to the city and started teaching. I love my parents, and they are very generous and good-hearted. They’re just a bit dull.”

What she just revealed explained a lot, although I had suspected a naughty side through sparks of mischief in her eyes when we had sex. In the short time I’d known her, I could tell she was so much more than a kindergarten teacher who loved to read.

“Was teaching your idea or theirs?”

“Mine. If they had their wish, I’d be married to a surgeon, raising my own kids and not a classroom full of others’ children.” She paused to stare at the ocean. “I love kids, love watching them grow and mature under my instruction. Encouraging them to be whatever they want to be.”

“But?” I could tell she became increasingly uneasy under my scrutiny, but I wasn’t going to back down. Cassie needed to be challenged. Maybe *challenged* wasn’t the correct word... provoked, stimulated, spurred to step outside her comfort zone?

“But nothing.”

“Is teaching your dream job?” As she parted her lips to speak, I stopped her by brushing my thumb across them. “Don’t say yes yet. Think about it. If you could do *anything* at all, what would you love to do?”

With the sexiest show of confidence, she looked me in the eye and said, “Strip?” That one fucking word unleashed a barrage of lust that traveled from my brain to my cock. The way my mouth hung open in shock must have been what caused her to giggle adorably. “Gotcha.”

When I gripped her ass and pulled her closer, close enough to torture me, the levity fell off her face. “Be careful, Cassandra. Kidding or not, I’ll be holding you to that.” My eyes dropped to witness her tongue skimming over her lips. Ignoring everything and everyone, I closed the distance and did what I’d been wanting to do all day.

I was pretty sure the way our bodies pressed together, while our mouths forgot we were on a public beach, could be considered indecent. Honestly, I had zero fucks to give. The more I tasted her, the more I fought the urge to lay her flat and fuck her senseless.

Everything I’d missed since our night together came crashing back into my subconscious. And I hadn’t realized I missed it so fucking much until now. I knew I wanted her, but damn, I really hadn’t considered how much. Scenarios began flipping through my mind as I weighed the consequences of staying where we were or running back to the house and hoping the rest were still out. The dilemma nagged with each heated kiss, each grind of our hips. I needed her, and a ridiculous part of my logic actually considered taking her right then and there.

Funny enough, though, a higher power felt otherwise, because a surge of water came rushing over our bodies, causing Cassie to squeal. The goddamned surf snapped her back to reality, forcing her to bolt off my lap. Annoyed, she lifted her drenched cover-up to wring it out, and in the

process revealed those stunning toned legs. While coated in sand and seawater, getting a glimpse of the black nylon covering her pussy made it impossible for me to stand without bringing attention to the hard-on tenting my suit.

“Oh my God! I have sand everywhere. Something is on me!” She reached around to the back of her leg and plucked a piece of slimy seaweed off. “Eww!” After flinging it away, she started spinning, mimicking Wonder Woman while peeling off her wet, sand-coated cover-up and dropping it to the ground. In nothing but that fucking string bikini, a visual I’d never forget, she asked, “Is there any more on me?” Ignoring her, I lifted my camera and started snapping shots in rapid succession to capture it for selfish reasons. “Dante! Stop taking pictures and help me! I feel gross.”

“Okay, okay.” I chuckled and still managed to take two more shots before conceding to her demands. In a swift motion, I set my camera on her discarded clothing, tossed her over my shoulder, and ran into the ocean. It took a few seconds for it to register where we were headed. At the first splash of salt water, the squirming and squealing began.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m helping.”

While hanging upside down, her hands clenched the sides of my waist. “This isn’t helping. I swear to God if you drop me, I’m going to kill you.” Undeterred by her threat, I took a few more steps into the ocean, earning me a firm slap on my left ass cheek. My response was to smack her back. “Ouch!”

“I thought you wanted to play?”

“I’m not playing; we need to get back. You’re making things worse. Now I’m even more drenched than I was before. Let me down.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I slowly lowered her, enjoying how every inch of her slid down every inch of me. First, her tits grazed my shoulder. Then, with my hands on her rounded ass, I positioned her body flush against mine, giving her no other option but to straddle my torso. “Since you riled me up, before I attempt to walk back to the house, I need to cool down.”

Another wave rushed behind my legs. The shift in our bodies, manipulated by the water, caused Cassie to settle against my erection, garnering a small moan from her and a louder one from me. With her arms around my neck, her legs gripping my hips, and her eyes boring into mine, she wasn't helping our predicament.

"I riled *you* up?" Her voice barely above a whisper made me wish we were on a secluded beach.

"Yes. You. Now kiss me, Cassandra. And then we'll head back."

"Dante, that's how we got here to begin with... from one kiss gone atomic. You're not capable of one kiss."

Not agreeing with her assessment, I took matters into my own hands, cupped the back of her head, and crushed her lips to mine. When she didn't resist, I decided if she thought the first one was atomic, then I'd make sure this one would be nuclear.

The combination of saltiness, blending with her natural sweetness, made her lips one of the best things I'd ever tasted. As my tongue tangled with hers, our bodies clung together like magnets. Each swell of surf moved us like we weighed nothing. Her grip around my neck tightened; mine on her head and ass did as well. And just when things were getting good, a huge wave decided to end our foreplay yet again.

I surfaced first and caught a glimpse of Cassie sputtering a few feet away. "Are you okay?" I asked, reaching for her to pull her back into my hold.

"No!" She wasn't amused at my chuckle, but survival had her accepting my help by jumping back into my arms. "Get me out of here, please. I hate the ocean."

"Then why are you in it?" I asked, earning me a glare. "The ocean is one of my favorite things."

"I love to look at it from afar. There are things that live in here I don't want to meet. It feels gross, sand gets everywhere, and it's itchy. The walk back is going to be torture."

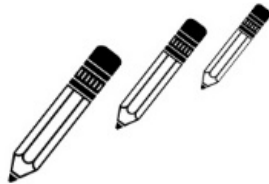
“I’ll carry you,” I easily offered. After picking up her cover-up and my camera, I then squatted and said, “Hop on.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.”

To my delight and without hesitation, she jumped on like a spider monkey and quipped, “Please don’t think less of me for accepting. Thank you.”

“Never, and it’s my pleasure.”



Cassie

Damn. I was sure I looked a mess—matted seawater hair, wet sand everywhere. Even through my disheveled state, the man made my body fill with need. Why? What was it about him that made me crave more? With each step he took, the more my hands itched to slide up and down his wet torso. My lips begged me to kiss his slick neck, and my vagina ached for him to turn, head back to the water, and fuck me.

Trying to fight or deny Dante’s sensuality was futile.

The walk back took no time at all, most likely because all I could think of was our time together in his bedroom. Christ, I wanted this man more and more with each minute I spent in his company, and despite trying, I wasn’t hiding it very well.

I thought back to Vanessa’s simplification of the situation. “*You’re both adults. What is it with adults denying themselves because they think it’s wrong?*” As I hung on his hard, muscular back, my arms snaked around his shoulders, my feet bumping against his thighs with each step he took, and it was harder and harder to argue with her rationale.

Laughter filled the air as Dante climbed the steps to the deck. When we were spotted, it was as if everyone forgot what they were talking about.

The only sound left was the surf behind us and the seagulls singing overhead.

They were showered and neatly dressed, and sitting around the table laden with fresh fruit and a variety of cheeses. The men were enjoying beer, while the ladies were having margaritas. *God, I could go for one of those.*

“Looks like we missed the party,” Dante said with amusement.

Eyes as big as frisbees stared at us. Glancing at the stunned expressions, I was at a loss for words. Of course, in true Vanessa fashion, she popped a grape in her mouth and smirked like the devil. “Looks like you’re having a party for two. Did you kids have fun today?” she asked, before she began to chew. “What does Dante charge for piggyback rides?” She tossed in a wink for good measure.

“I hate walking in sand while wet,” I said with a shrug, pretending *this was no big deal*. Except it was.

“Where have you guys been?” Brae asked next. “We’ve been back for a while.”

“We went for a long walk,” Dante responded for me. “What did you guys do?”

“We went shopping and then once Kyle started bitching and moaning, we hit a brewery,” Vanessa said. “He hates shopping.”

“Well, that explains all the smiles,” Dante said with a chuckle.

I relaxed my legs a bit and whispered, “Put me down, please.” Dante craned his head back just a bit, squeezed my ass, and set me on my feet. “Thank you.” Trying to be cool and unfazed, I ran my fingers through my soaked hair, but they got stuck at the ends. Sabrina cringed and probably wished I was in her salon right now. Truth be told, so did I. Looking at everyone, I decided to focus on Vanessa. “Yes, we did have fun until I was attacked by seaweed.” I swept my hand in front of myself. “Hence the reason I look like this.”

Her smirk deepened. “Mm-hmm.” *Ugh. I should have focused on Brae.*

Dante set his camera on the table before offering me my soaked cover-up. “Cassandra, do you want this? It’s drenched.”

Luca, who was mid-swallow, began coughing. Once he regained his composure, he looked at his brother. “*Cassandra*? No one calls her that.”

“Well, that’s her name. And I do.” Everyone’s eyes bounced between us, while I stood stiff as a board that people could easily have used to surf on.

Kyle cocked his head to the side. “It is?”

We all turned to our fun Canadian friend. “What did you think it was short for?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I didn’t. I just thought your name was Cassie. Like mine is Kyle.”

“It’s a nickname, just like how you call Vanessa, Nessa.”

Kyle winked at Vanessa, who added, “That started when we started fucking.”

“Anyway,” I said, trying to take the attention off of myself, “what’s the plan for tonight? Is Jude gracing us with his fabulous grilling skills?” I snagged a towel and wrapped it around my waist before Brae handed me a margarita.

Jude cleared his throat. “Thank you for the compliment, but we’re going out for an early dinner.”

“Dinner? It’s closer to lunch,” Dante quipped.

“It was all I was able to get. Our reservations are in forty-five minutes. Our ride will be here in twenty.”

Was he kidding? It would probably take me an hour just to get all the sand off of me and out of my hair. Meanwhile, Dante casually sat down and popped open a beer like he didn’t have a care in the world. “I hate to be a wet blanket, but I can’t be ready in twenty minutes.”

“You have to come, Cass! We’re all heading back to the city tomorrow.” Brae gripped her husband’s arm and pouted. “Can you call to see if they’ll move it?”

“Babe, I practically had to sign over our firstborn to get in.” He turned his focus back to me. “How quick can you be ready?”

“An hour?” Deep down, I knew that would be tight.

“We’ll go on ahead... Dante, you hang back and drive Cassie over when she’s done. The keys are in the kitchen drawer. Take whichever car you want.”

Dante was quick to agree while giving me one of his salacious smirks, one that held and held. After what transpired on that beach a few minutes ago, I knew that look. I *knew* he knew we’d be alone in twenty minutes. I *knew* he knew what we had just done was vivid in my thoughts.

I didn’t think I had it in me to push him away, as I was still pulsing with lust even after being tossed around like a piece of driftwood. Screwing in his apartment with no one the wiser was one thing, but I didn’t think I could pretend nothing happened with Vanessa the bloodhound lurking about.

Deciding to take matters into my own hands, and avoiding a possible encounter on his terms, I snatched my wet cover-up and said, “I’m going to go get ready. It’ll take most of the hour to get the sand out of my hair. Dante, I’ll meet you in the kitchen when I’m done.” Not waiting for a response, I grabbed the rest of my stuff and hightailed it off the deck like my ass was on fire.

Chapter 15

Dante

The way she tried to act cool was adorable. Did she truly think she was that great of an actress? Besides the constant blushing, fidgeting, and shifty eyes, didn't she realize the way we kept staring at each other was a big-ass red flag?

No doubt our friends, and my brother, were on to us, so pretending seemed ridiculous. Even still, I happened to enjoy watching her fumble awkwardly. It was what drew me to Cassie to begin with on the night she hit my ride. The way she stood with hands on hips, trying to come off prim and proper in that ridiculous dress with pencils all over it, made me hard as stone. It was the two sides of her, equal parts geek and vixen, that I found hard to resist.

After Cassie sprinted off the deck, I waited a few minutes before excusing myself. Brae explained where I could find what I needed to shower, and I nodded with a polite smile, knowing damn well what I *needed* wasn't in the bedroom I had slept in last night.

Not having a clue which of the four guest rooms Cassie stayed in, I opened two doors before hearing the sound of water running. With a quick glance behind me, I slipped in and turned the lock. Noticing she had left the bathroom door slightly ajar, my suit was on the floor even before I stepped into the steamy room.

The sight of her naked silhouette behind the frosted glass stopped me in my tracks. How she stood with her back to me, revealing the contour of her perfect ass, was a thing of beauty. The way she lifted up on her toes every so often, causing the lines of her legs to lengthen, was something I could've watched all day.

Christ, I desperately wanted to photograph her naked... and one day I would. I just needed to broach that delicately. The thought of her in my studio, my instructions manipulating her legs, arms, and the positioning of

her head, excited me more than anything I'd ever shot in my career. A hint... a tease... a suggestion of the type of power she possessed over me would create a work of art that was all Cassandra.

Although not as big as a master-bath shower, there was still plenty of room for the both of us. I debated announcing myself but decided to slip in behind her, leaving no room for argument. What had happened between us on the beach left me thrumming with need. And if I had any doubt she didn't feel the same, I wouldn't be there forcing the issue. But I *knew* she felt the same... I *felt* how much she felt the same. Every part of her screamed for me, even if she tried to deny it.

The skim of my hands around her narrow waist caused her to gasp. I didn't apologize for being there. I didn't give her the opportunity to say it was wrong or that we shouldn't be doing this. I merely grabbed the shampoo off the marble shelf, flipped the cap, poured a bit in my hand, and began massaging it into her scalp.

"You're evil," she whispered on the tail end of a moan. Meanwhile, she went lax against me as I kneaded my fingers in her silky blond hair. With each stroke at her temples, her sounds became more aggressive... more feral. Every slight movement she made caused blood to rush directly to my cock. He wanted her... he wanted in.

"I'm evil? How so?" I asked, my lips on her ear. Goosebumps spread over her warm flesh, and I smiled at how her body never failed to respond to mine. Rivulets of soapy water slicked down the slopes of her breasts, funneling through her cleavage and over her rosy nipples.

"Because I can't resist this, that's how," she uttered, barely above a whisper.

"Then don't resist it, Cassandra." After her hair, she allowed me to *wash* every part of her. There wasn't an inch of her warm skin spared from my touch... except her pussy. I purposely avoided it, teasing to bring her to unimaginable heights.

She leaned back, using my body for balance. Reaching behind her, she gripped my neck to brace herself while on her toes. The position forced her breasts forward. I cupped them while skimming my thumbs over her

pebbled nipples. Wordless moans filling the steamy space instigated the need to hurry and finish the washing ritual, so I could bury myself deep and defile her. As a temporary substitute, I shamelessly rubbed myself against her to convey what I wanted.

“Dante...” She abruptly stopped her words, yet wiggled her ass against my cock, poking the beast within me.

“Hmm?” I asked, knowing her wheels spun with apprehension. “What, Cassandra? What is it you want to say?”

“The others...” Confirming my suspicion, she added, “They might hear.”

“Don’t worry about the others. Stop worrying about anything but us. Are you ready to surrender to this?” Using my touch to persuade, I skated my hand down her body toward her thigh and then into the gap between her legs. The move was met with silence, until my fingers brushing over her warm folds caused a whimper. “How does that feel, Cassandra? Am I satisfying your ache?”

“No... you’re worsening it.”

At her admission, I slid a finger inside her tight channel while my thumb firmly circled over her clit. “Is this better? Are you ready to surrender to me?”

“Yes, on both counts.” She allowed me to use her body by widening her stance, and by leaning on me for support, she gave me the permission I needed to soothe the ache I was responsible for.

My finger stroked in and out of her, and by adding another, I stretched where my dick wanted to be. Curling them just enough, I grazed that tender spot that acted like a detonator. Her warm pussy pulsed around my fingers, intensifying *my* ache to fuck her.

Having her coming apart at my hand, moaning through her pleasure without abandon, became the worst form of torture. But I’d take the torment, and a million forms of it, just to have her naked and wet against me.

After one final spasm, she relaxed, waited a few moments to catch her breath, and then turned to face me. Her blue eyes were wild with lust, her face flushed with pleasure. While staring into my eyes, she gripped my cock in one hand. “What about your ache, Dante?” she asked, stroking me in a tit-for-tat retaliation.

“Cassandra,” I growled, trying to maintain even a thread of control. But with each grope, that restraint I fought for frayed like a worn pair of jeans. It was when she dropped to her knees and pulled me into her mouth that my composure imploded. She barely got more than my tip in, because before we both knew what was happening, I had her straddling my body with her back up against the cold tile wall. “I’m fucking you, Cassandra. Right now, *raw*. Just you and me. All you need to do is tell me if I have to pull out.” She stared at me, shock and hunger fighting equally in the pale-blue depths of her eyes. “Do I?” I repeated through gritted teeth.

“I’m on the pill.” She met my gaze with a determined one of her own. And while her eyes boldly drilled into mine, I slid into her tight, wet heat.

“Jesus Christ.” I hadn’t fucked bare in years, but regardless of how long it had been I couldn’t ever remember it feeling this incredible. Almost to the point of debilitating, because there I was buried to the hilt, flesh to flesh, and I had yet to move.

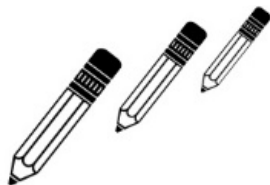
“Faster,” she barked, not too kindly. And if I weren’t in the midst of a sexual meltdown, I would have laughed. But that would require basic motor skills, which I lacked at the moment, and it took every fiber of my being to remind myself to even breathe.

All the teasing, kissing, and foreplay we’d danced around since the first time we fucked fueled what happened between us in that steamy shower. As I pumped into her over and over, I knew whatever this obsession was, it needed to continue.

“Be mine,” flew out of my mouth before I could stop it. A slow blink meant she heard me. With our gazes tethered, she parted her lips, but no words came. “Say it, Cassandra,” I added almost angrily. Goddamn, I needed those words as much as I needed to come inside her. And both acted as an accelerant to the blaze smoldering within me.

Finally, her muscles contracted, her grip tightened, and her orgasm ripped through her. “I’m yours.”

At hearing that, I came harder than I ever have. This woman flipped my world upside down in a few short weeks. I liked that she had... and that should have fucking terrified me, but it didn’t.



Cassie

Damp sheets cocooned around our naked bodies. Dante’s suggestion of foregoing dinner seemed brilliant on the precipice of my third orgasm, but as my stomach rumbled with hunger, it might not have been such a great plan.

“Hungry?” Dante asked with a chuckle.

“I could eat.”

His lips pressed against my shoulder blade. “What would you like? I could send Luca another text and have him bring you something.”

A giddy snicker bubbled out of me. “No way. Right now, we’re the topic of their conversation. Haven’t you heard my phone buzzing since our lame excuses of you being tired and me being sunburned? Vanessa is having a field day with this.”

Cool air hit my backside just before a warm hand struck my right ass cheek. “Hey! What the hell did you do that for?”

“Now you look sunburned to me.” His laugh, followed by a kiss to where my skin tingled from his palm, had me forgetting my irritation. “Did you like that, Cassandra? Has a man spanked you before?”

Avoiding his question, I asked, “Weren’t we talking about dinner?” He resumed nibbling my shoulder, and I’d come to learn enough about him to know his silence meant he was waiting for me to answer his question. “Yes and no.”

Dante flipped me around, hedging his thigh between my legs, and stared into my eyes. “Yes and no, what? Yes, you liked it?”

Admitting that I liked his hands on me wasn’t easy. But for some reason, confessing such a personal yet embarrassing truth would be liberating, so I went for it. “Yes. And no one has ever spanked me before. Just you.”

“And that’s the way it’s going to stay. Only me. I only want my hands on you. I meant what I said in the shower.” His fingers traced my face from the apple of my cheek down and across my jawline. “You’re mine, nobody else’s.”

Hearing a man like Dante claim me sent a surge of heat to the apex of my thighs. The urge to grind against his leg combated with the natural impulse to challenge his arrogance. Yes, it was a complete turn-on that he wanted me. Yet my pride won the argument, forcing me to ask the questions I needed answers to.

“What about you, Dante? Who do you belong to? Who else will you be spanking?”

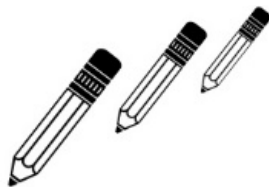
His brows furrowed, and as quickly as strong lines formed on his forehead, they smoothed. “What are you asking? Do you want me to be yours?”

“If I’m going to be yours, then we should be exclusive,” I said with a firm tone.

“You never asked.” His soft lips brushed against mine. “Say it out loud. Let me hear you say the words. Guessing isn’t my strong suit, Cassandra. If you want me the way you know I want you... the way I claimed you as mine, then you need to say it.” His thigh nudged against my sex. “If there’s something you like, you need to tell me.” His fingers clawed my ass. “If there’s something you want to try, you need to voice it.” He rolled onto his back and pulled my body on top of his, framing his hips with my legs. “If you want to top me, you’re going to have to admit you do.” Dante’s deliberate maneuvers resulted in his eyes boring into mine as his erection teased my opening.

I knew the game he played. Every taut muscle on his torso awaited my response. And there was only one way to answer him... to acknowledge what he already knew to be true. While on my knees, I slicked his dick with my arousal, lubricating him just before impaling myself. “You’re mine. Just mine. Only mine,” I demanded.

His face was full of satisfaction, shining with unwavering peace. “Only yours.”



Morning sunlight created a prism of colors against the crystal champagne flute. After claiming each other, we were famished. Raiding Jude and Brae’s refrigerator, Dante and I decided on a smorgasbord consisting of anything that didn’t require cooking, including a bottle of chilled champagne.

Today we would be heading back to the city, and if we didn’t get our asses moving, I wouldn’t put it past Luca to leave us. The man was ruthless about keeping on schedule. Remembering the morning after Jude’s wedding, when he threatened Kyle would be walking home for taking so long, spurred me to get out of bed.

When I stood and stared at the gorgeous man still asleep, I wished I didn’t have to move. We’d created our own little haven. Reality loomed around the corner. I looked upward as if asking for guidance. I’d be going back to work tomorrow, and I didn’t know Dante’s schedule. Who knew where his job could take him? What would happen if he was given an assignment away from New York?

With the new day came new concerns. Our worlds couldn’t be more different. He photographed beautiful women for a living, where I disciplined and instructed five-year-olds. I couldn’t help but wonder if our declarations last night were made under the throes of passion. Would he feel the same today? Now that I’d gotten a taste of being Dante Benedetto’s lover, I wasn’t sure I would be okay returning to my mundane life. One that

didn't consist of sleeping in his arms and feeling his lips against mine. How would one get over a man like him? If the day came, could I handle losing him?

With a sigh, I lowered my eyes to see Dante studying me. Surprised he was awake, I didn't say a word. "What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," I said with trepidation.

"You're lying. Just like last night, you need to talk to me."

Last night. My mind was a crystal ball, and he was a psychic reading it. I needed to remember to keep some thoughts to myself. If I only possessed that talent, things would be far less difficult.

Dante propped up on one elbow. "You're wondering what's going to happen once we return to our normal everyday life, right?" At seeing my halfhearted shrug, he patted the mattress. "Come here." Taking my hand in his, he laced our fingers together. "Is that it?"

"Yes. You can't blame me for wondering what's going to happen once we step outside this room?"

"I'll tell you what's going to happen. We're going to go to work and do our jobs during the day. Occasionally, we'll text or maybe I'll come and take you to lunch. Then when we're off the clock, we'll be together... my bed or yours; I'll leave that up to you."

"So it's just about fucking?"

"No," he said with a smirk. "I'll also feed you."

"I'm being serious, Dante."

His hand rested on my knee, his pinky tucked behind it. "What changed from last night? We went to bed with an understanding. You woke up and are now questioning it. Nothing between the time I closed my eyes and opened them changed for me. Did they for you?"

I took a moment to stare at the sincerity in the depths of his brown eyes. "No, but it's easy to get swept away when we're together in a beautiful home, surrounded by luxury. When we get back, everything will be different."

“The only thing that’s changing is geography, and how we act in front of our friends. If you want to be concerned about anything, be concerned that I’m not going to be curtailing my desire for you... no matter who’s around. Just prepare yourself, Cassandra. I don’t play games.”

With that, he palmed my face with his strong hands and reminded me how much desire he could unveil with just a kiss.

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Chapter 16

Cassie

As Sabrina and I were getting ready to walk out of the house, Luca honked the horn. We found him and Dante standing behind his SUV, waiting for us. “How long does it take to pee?” Luca scolded, holding Sabrina’s door open.

Sabrina shut him up with a kiss before turning toward Dante. “Do you want to sit up front? It’ll give you more leg room.”

Dante opened the back door, and said, “No, thanks. I’ll sit with Cassandra.”

Sabrina and Luca exchanged a look before she hopped in and buckled her seatbelt. After I slid in behind Luca, and Dante closed the door behind me, my heart started to beat a bit faster. We were really going to do this... and I knew he had something planned, although I had no idea what. As soon as Dante closed his door, the large space felt tiny and my anxiety spiked.

Luca craned his head back, looking at us between the bucket seats. Before he could say a word, Dante blurted out, “We’re a couple. I like her, she likes me, get used to it.” I almost released an exhale of relief, thinking that wasn’t so bad.

Sabrina twisted around, her face next to Luca’s. “Yay! I’m so happy.” She then pecked Luca’s cheek before turning back and clapping her hands. “This is fabulous, right honey?”

“Fucking awesome.” Luca’s eyes ricocheted between us, but when Dante laced his fingers with mine it forced Luca’s line of sight down. “Seriously, though, as long as you both are happy, I’m happy. But, for what it’s worth, I’m Switzerland,” he said, raising a brow and staring at his brother for a few seconds longer than necessary.

The two exchanged an unspoken dialog before Dante barked, “Just drive.”

After Luca finally pulled away from the house, Sabrina sighed. “I love this place.” Luca grabbed her hand, bringing it to his lips for a kiss. “Dante, did you know the reason Luca and I are together is because of Cassie and that house?”

“That’s not true,” Luca refuted. “I would have come to you eventually.”

Sabrina’s nose crinkled. “*Eventually?*”

I interjected, “Hey, what matters is it worked out, right?”

Dante added, “All I know is my brother is the happiest he’s ever been. How you two got there is inconsequential.”

“What about you two? How did that happen? At Vanessa’s party you wanted to kill each other.” Sabrina turned into her super sleuth hair stylist / therapist mode.

“Yeah, I’d like to know that too.” Luca’s eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, where mine landed on his reflection.

“Are you asking for details, brother? You know how it goes, food, conversation, and before you know it, one thing leads to another, clothes come off...”

“Enough,” Luca snapped, stopping Dante’s explanation right before my smack to his chest did. “I meant, you two weren’t exactly subtle that you screwed around when you got back soaking wet yesterday.”

“Yesterday?” Dante and I looked at each other with a grin. *Were we that obvious yesterday?* Assuming he wondered the same, I then heard him say, “It’s been happening for weeks,” earning himself the slap I held back before. “What?”

“Weeks?” Luca’s head pivoted, only to whip right back to watching the road.

“Don’t listen to him, it’s only been one week or so.” I tried placating him.

“Still!” As Luca freaked out, I could see the lift of Sabrina’s left cheek, revealing a smug smile. “Babe, did you know about this?”

“No, but I think it’s great.” Her hand landed on Luca’s thigh. “Stop with the third degree.”

“Thank you, Sabrina. I think it’s great too. I was getting tired of hiding how much I want to devour this beauty.”

“Dante.” Where my expression was one of mortification, my sexy cohort’s face shined with a steadfast tranquility like he hadn’t a care in the world.

He opened his mouth to speak, only for the Bluetooth to chime with an incoming call. “Saved by the bell,” he said, winking at me before kissing my cheek.

“Weird. That’s my mom’s number,” Sabrina said, pressing the accept button on the touchscreen panel. “Hi, Mom. Is everything okay?”

“It’s me, Mommy. Where’s Luca?”

“I’m here, buddy. What’s wrong?”

“Scottie is wrong... again.”

Sabrina released a burst of air. “Mikey, you made me nervous. What are you and Scottie fighting about now?”

The adorable voice I missed went on to detail the latest fight between him and his best friend. When I had them both in my class, the two were inseparable yet argued about any and everything they could.

As Mikey rambled, Dante tugged on my hand, bringing me closer. Expecting him to whisper an apology into my ear, his lips landed on mine in a very intimate kiss, forcing me to push him away and causing him to chuckle.

“It’s not funny,” Mikey whined.

“I’m not laughing, buddy,” Luca quickly responded. Even while he placated his girlfriend’s son, the rearview mirror clearly revealed the exasperation he felt through his expression. “That was my brother.”

“Oh, Uncle Dante is there? Did you beat him in soccer again?” Mikey, like a squirrel, abandoned his earlier rant.

“He wishes,” Dante said before Luca could agree with him. “Yes, it’s me, Mikey. I look forward to showing you who has better soccer skills.”

“I can’t wait... Mom, can we go to the park tomorrow so I can play soccer with Luca and Uncle Dante?”

“No. Tomorrow is school shopping day,” Sabrina said, quickly derailing his excitement train.

“Oh, man. I hate school.”

“Hey, I heard that.” Silence allowed me to then say, “It’s Miss Brooks. You’re busted, little man.”

“Please don’t tell Mr. Carson,” he pleaded. “Jared said he and his mom saw you and Mr. Carson eating pizza, and he’s your boyfriend, and now my teacher, and he’ll be upset if he knows I hate school.”

“Um...” I said, as Dante leaned closer and said, “*Boyfriend?*”

“Mikey, that’s not true,” Sabrina interjected. “Luca is driving. Can we continue this when we see you in a few hours? Grandma and Grandpa are bringing you to Luca’s apartment tonight.”

“Oh, yay. Can Luca make me his carbonairia again?”

“Carbonara,” Luca corrected.

“That’s what I said.”

“Yes, I’ll make you carbonara. Now be good and we’ll see you soon.”

“Okay.” The line went dead before his mother could add any farewell of her own.

Sabrina twisted, her eyes wide with concern. “I’m so sorry about that.”

With a wave of my hand, I said, “Stop. There’s nothing to apologize for. It’s just six-year-olds gossiping.” The levity in my voice did little to remove the bafflement from Dante’s face. Sabrina smiled and faced forward.

“Who’s this Carson person?”

Despite the fact Dante’s question had been asked in a normal tone of voice, I lowered mine to say, “He’s only a colleague.”

“Who likes her,” Luca offered.

“Seriously?” I glared at him through the mirror. These Benedettos had no filter.

“What?” My friend asked with a shrug. “It’s true.”

“Anyway...” Sabrina gave her boyfriend the same evil eye I had. “I guess we’re having carbonara for dinner,” she said, changing the subject. “Would you two like to join us?”

Before I could say we’d love to, mainly to avoid being alone because I knew an interrogation was imminent, Dante answered for both of us. “We’ll take a rain check,” he said, confirming I had a lot of explaining to do.



Dante

That was the longest fucking ride in history. With each question that popped into my mind regarding this Carson prick, two more followed. By the time we finally made it into the city, I had a list a mile long. Of course, accepting gossip from a six-year-old seemed all kinds of ridiculous, but my brother’s quip, and Cassie’s avoidance of the subject, was what instigated my curiosity *and* annoyance.

Leaving Cassie no choice but to come back to my apartment, I dropped our bags with a resounding thud the moment we stepped into the door.

“Okay, I get you’re mad...” She turned, hands on hips, scowl twisting her perfect pink lips. “Like I said, he’s just a colleague, and we’re friends.” The pause probably had been intended for my response, but none came. She went on to say, “Yes, he does like me, but besides a few casual dates, nothing happened.” I took one step closer, and she instinctively took one step back. “Pizza... a few walks in the park... a kiss on the cheek,” she added, aware that with each of my steps, she ran out of space before hitting my kitchen counter. “Then you came along...”

I killed her explanation when I first crushed her body and then her mouth to mine. Every ounce of ire, confusion, jealousy, and want that I’d

held in for the past three fucking hours surged forward through that kiss. I left her panting for air and clasping my T-shirt. The way her pupils swallowed the cornflower irises of her eyes, the way her creamy skin flushed pink, denoted she wanted just what I needed.

My attention focused on the column of her throat working a nervous swallow. “He’s just a nice guy I work with, Dante.”

“Exactly. A nice guy that you see every fucking day, who probably wants to have ordinary sex with you. I’m not that guy, Cassandra. If you haven’t realized that already, let me spell it out for you. We will never have mundane sex... ever. There will be times I’ll tie you to my bed and fuck your cunt until it pulses around me in need of release.” Her hips bucked forward, subconsciously, perhaps, but I took the opportunity to grind my growing erection against her. “I’ll suck your swollen clit until you beg me to stop, and even then, I won’t until your taste is seared on my tongue. Your nipples will beg me to bite them, to take them between my teeth until pain turns to pleasure. You will come at my hand, tongue, and cock more times than you can count. I will ruin you for all other men—nice or not. Do you understand me?”

Her eyes, now wild with lust, looked into mine. “Is this how it’s going to be with us? Are you always going to act like a possessive Neanderthal? Has that worked for you in the past?”

“No, I’ve never felt the need to act like one in the past.”

The heavy lashes that shadowed her cheeks shot up. “Oh, is that so? But you feel the need to control me?”

“This isn’t control, Cassandra. It’s just a reminder in case this *nice* guy tries to get more than friendship from you.”

“I don’t need a reminder. I’m not the girl who falls into bed with men on a whim, or one who gives in easily to any man who pays the slightest bit of attention to her. What would you like to hear? That when I close my eyes at night, it’s you I dream of? That when I think about being with you, I want to reach into my panties and touch myself?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want. And, come tomorrow, when you look at Mr. Carson, I want you to remember what I’m about to do to you.”

She coyly worried her bottom lip, bringing her body flush with mine. “What are you going to do to me?”

“Mark you. Defile you. Ruin you... prove to you that your body was meant for mine.”

Her pink tongue swiped across the seam of her lips. “Yet you’re still talking.”

If I wasn’t so dead set on fucking the sarcasm out of her, I’d laugh. But instead, I pulled her into my bedroom and ordered her to get on my bed. She complied and, even fully clothed, the sight of her turned my cock to stone. “Kneel in the center and then get naked.” I strolled over to my dresser and picked up one of my many cameras. It was time to broach the subject, to push her comfort zone. Sure enough, Cassie’s eyes widened in shock. “Go on, do it slowly, Cassandra.”

“Dante, I... I’m not sure I can do this. Having naked pictures taken of me where others could possibly see them...”

“Only my eyes will see them. Trust me?” I brought the camera to my face and focused through the viewfinder. Cassie’s tits rose and fell with each deep breath, but otherwise she had yet to move.

Like a deer in headlights, she stared at me. “I don’t know how to do this... will you direct me?”

“Yes.” Wanting to capture her innocence before I turned it into unadulterated lust, I snapped a few shots. The sound of the clicks caused her breath to catch. “Relax. Start with your tank top. Grip the hem and slowly drag it up over your head. Before tossing it aside, I want you to hold a pose with your arms raised.” Cassie complied. Bashful eyes looked up at me through her long lashes. “Smile, beautiful.”

Her tentative movements made her sexier than she already was. Little did she know how the camera was eating her up. Seven more clicks in rapid succession fired before her eyes met mine again. “Now your bra. Lower the right strap, letting it drape on your arm. I want your eyes to follow it.”

Cassie didn’t know it, but she was a natural. The tilt of her head made her silky blond hair drape over her face, causing a curtain of intrigue.

“Fucking perfect.” I moved around the room, capturing different angles. “Now the other side, then unhook it and let it drop.”

Like a good student, Cassie followed directions. When her bra hit the top of her legs, exposing two flawless breasts with nipples so hard they could cut glass, I added, “Touch yourself. Caress your breasts like you’d want me to.”

This time she didn’t hesitate or waver in her movements. Expecting her to be soft and gentle, my cock jerked when she aggressively tugged her nipples between her thumb and forefinger in a hard pinch. “Jesus Christ,” I hissed through gritted teeth. My finger held down the shutter button, not wanting to miss one second. But when Cassie took it upon herself to slide her right hand into her shorts, I went from instructor to witness.

For the first time, the small square that brought images to life felt inconsequential. I abandoned my initial goal of capturing each sexy nuance that Cassie could offer. A smirk spread across those lips I craved when she looked at my tented shorts. Various retorts flew into my mind, but none made their way out of my mouth. And then she lifted her hand to lick her middle finger... game over. Fuck, I thought I had the upper hand in this little game, and with one look, one calculated move, she took control.

She watched me place the camera down. Like a seductress, she said, “Is there a problem?”

“Photoshoot is over.”

She batted her lashes and said with a pout, “But I was just starting to get into it.” In the depths of her eyes, I knew that she knew she was playing with fire.

“The only one getting *into* anything is me.” Leveling her with a pointed look, I stripped out of my clothes, moved onto the bed, and removed her shorts and panties with one swift tug. Once I had her naked, she tracked my path to the dresser, where I pulled out a pair of silver handcuffs. Seeing her breath accelerate caused a smug grin to spread on my face.

“You okay with this?” I asked, holding them up and waiting for her consent.

“More than.”

“I knew you were a kinky girl. It’s time to kick it up a notch.” She remained silent until I had her properly restrained. And then, one by one, I ticked off all the things I said I would do to her a few minutes earlier. I sucked her swollen clit until she begged me to stop. I bit and nipped every part of her, marking her, owning her. I tormented by hand, tongue, and cock, having her come more times than she could count.

The last thing I did was to plunge in slowly, making good on my promise to ruin her for all other men.

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Chapter 17

Cassie

With the school year well on its way, it was funny how quickly the days flew by when a sexy photographer demanded so many of them.

I had spent most of my weekends with Dante... whom I couldn't get enough of. He pushed my sexual palate to new heights. He raised the bar, created an appetite for more, and eliminated the word *mundane* from my vocabulary.

It was easy to get lost in our hot relationship, but I needed to maintain some semblance of a routine during the week, or not only would my job suffer, my independence would. Of course, I was over the moon Dante wanted to spend as much time with me as he could.

On my request, we had yet to officially come out as a couple. That meant a lot of our dates ended at his place or mine. Dante enjoyed teasing me over my naivety because he was sure we were only fooling ourselves.

When the weekend came to an end, the same argument occurred when I insisted on sleeping in my own bed alone. The man didn't understand that even though I only taught five-year-olds, my days started early, and my evenings ended the same way. For instance, I came in extra early to change the apples on my bulletin board to pumpkins in preparation for fall. That meant I was in bed last night by nine.

My job meant everything to me. I wouldn't change a thing. And as exciting as my personal life had suddenly become, I relished the familiarity of my weekday schedule.

I was already in love with the kids in my class. Eleven little boys and ten little girls who would one day be our leaders and our voices, kids who would hopefully make a difference in the world.

Some may think being a kindergarten teacher consisted of coloring in the lines and recess, but even though those things did exist, I did my best to

include life lessons with everything we did. I had created a professional show-and-tell of sorts a few years back. Twice a month, one of the parents would come in to explain their job to the kids. It always made the kids' day, taking them away from schoolwork for an hour or so, yet teaching them so much more than they learned in books.

Today, Lianna's dad, the firefighter, was our Career Champion. Firefighters were always a hit with kids. They'd get red hats and ask about driving in the big trucks and sliding down poles. It couldn't have been planned better since rain was coming down in sheets, which prohibited enjoying the playground during recess.

I grabbed my purse and bagged lunch from the bottom drawer of my desk before leading the kids to the cafeteria. Sounds of chatter and laughter, which warranted any and all lunch moderators to take a pain reliever before entering the room, filtered down the hallway. Thankful that I wasn't one of them today, I waved to my class and went to the teachers' lounge to relax for the next forty-five minutes.

Bland yellow walls, plain wooden tables, and worn carpet didn't boast of relaxation, but the serene quiet normally did. Except today, a few teacher's aides were clamoring about a man they'd seen in the office.

I've never seen anyone that looked like him before.

Do you think he's a new teacher? I wonder if he needs help setting up his classroom.

I hope he's single.

I hope he isn't a parent.

Rather than eavesdrop or inquire about who they were talking about, I decided to sit by myself and enjoy my meal in peace. No sooner had I unfolded the brown paper bag when a page came over the loudspeaker. "Miss Brooks, please report to the office. Miss Brooks, please report to the office."

Shit. Now what? I tossed my chicken salad sandwich back into my bag and headed toward the office. A laugh I knew well filtered through the glass partition, and when I looked in, it was confirmed.

Dante sexily leaned against the counter, speaking to Marjorie, the receptionist. Naturally, whatever he said caused the woman to blush. A pale-blue T-shirt molded over his physique, and darker circles from the raindrops made the color as deep a blue as the jeans he wore. In addition, the damp sexy waves of his ebony hair meant the man was too cool for an umbrella.

I pulled open the door, his eyes landing on mine. A broad smile grew across his handsome face when he said, "Hello, Cassandra." My heart thumped against the center of my ribcage at the way my name rolled off his tongue, and with it came reminders of all the filthy things he did to me.

"Dante." When all the women in the office stared at me, I felt obligated to return a smile while pretending my thoughts were G-rated. Tugging Dante by the arm until we were in the vestibule, I leaned in and whispered, "What are you doing here?" Unfazed by my discomfort, he bent down and kissed my lips. "Dante, I'm at school."

"Afraid you're going to get detention?" His eyes focused on my mouth, and I instantly felt desire sparking to life in my lower half.

"No, fired."

"For talking in the hall? It's not like I dragged you into a storage closet to see what you have on under that short skirt. Speaking of, you look beautiful. I love when you wear skirts. It gives me easy access." He wiggled his eyebrows, causing a deep blush to creep up from my breasts to my cheeks.

It took about five seconds for my brain to snap out of the fantasy his words conjured up in my mind. "Stop that," I scolded, and the bastard chuckled. This man made me stupid whenever he spoke to me like that. "You still didn't answer my question."

"I brought you lunch. I remembered last week you told me this was your lunch hour." With a grin, he lifted a wax-coated paper bag from a place called Pasquale's. "Did I get the time wrong?"

"No, it's perfect timing." Suddenly, the name registered. "I love that place." The moment I said that, the rest of the puzzle pieces fell into place.

“Wait, that’s your uncle’s restaurant. I’ve been there with your brother. The food is amazing, and your uncle is adorable.”

“Yes, good looks run in our family.” A huge flash preceded the clap of thunder that rattled the windows. “I was hoping to eat at one of the picnic tables, but seeing the weather isn’t cooperating, is there a place we can have lunch inside?”

“My classroom. Let me get you signed in, and then we can head back.” The ogling commenced as Dante signed in and left his license with the office, and there was no doubt in my mind the ladies would be searching his name on social media as soon as we walked out.

“Miss Brooks,” Marjorie said, stopping us before we left. “You just received a call from Mr. Maurice, Lianna’s father. He apologizes, but due to the storm he needs to stay at the firehouse.”

“Ugh. Okay, thank you.”

Dante opened the door for me. “Who’s Maurice?”

“It’s Mr. Maurice, and he’s a student’s father who was going to talk to my class today about being a firefighter. It’s sort of a career show-and-tell that I like to have for them. But because the rain isn’t letting up, I’ll have twenty-one restless and disappointed five-year-olds who won’t even be able to go outside to fill the time.”

“What if I came back and spoke to the kids? I’ll bring a camera and let them take pictures. Then I’ll have them printed, and you can give them their shots as a keepsake.”

“Really? You would do that? Aren’t you busy?”

“No, I’ll make it work. Just let me know what time to be here.”

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure, Cassandra.”

Once we were sharing my desk as a table, Dante and I enjoyed our meal. “This was a very nice surprise. Thank you for bringing me lunch. Ravioli was much better than what I had planned on,” I said, tossing my empty container in the trash.

“My goal is to please you.”

Please me. The man could no doubt achieve that. “I’ll have to remember that,” I teased.

He reached for my hand under the desk and moved it to his thigh. “That goes both ways, Cassandra.”

At that moment, a bell dinged, indicating lunch was just about over... thank God. Having Dante in my classroom wasn’t good for my blood pressure. “On that note, I need to get my class.” I stood and asked, “Can you find your way to the office?”

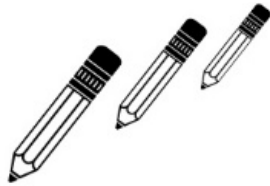
“Yes,” he answered, coming to stand before me. “What time should I be back?”

“Can you be here a few minutes before two?”

“I sure can.”

“Oh, and can you leave out the part where you photograph naked supermodels?”

He pretended to ponder my request. “It could be a hit with the boys.” I shoved his chest and he grabbed my wrists. With a quick glance over his shoulder, he pulled me to him for a passionate kiss. Before I could protest, he broke the connection, winked, and walked away. “Bye, beautiful.”



“Guess what today is?” I stood at my desk, meeting each pair of widened eyes. Hands flew up, and I called on Jody to answer.

“Friday.”

My giggle was automatic, forgetting five-year-olds took words literally. “Yes, it is Friday... but it’s also Career Champion Day.” Shouts and clapping erupted on cue. “Okay, everyone... settle down.” I couldn’t blame them for their excitement, which was the main reason I kept my news to myself until the last possible minute. I also always left strict

instructions with the parents not to tell their children if they were scheduled to come to school. That lesson I learned the hard way. “In just a few minutes, we are going to have a photographer visiting us. Do you all know what a photographer does?”

Again, hands shot up and waved in the air, trying to catch my attention. “William.”

“They take pictures of babies.”

“That’s right, but they also take pictures of adults, and places to visit, and even of animals and other things.” The sound of a firm knock had all their heads flipping in that direction. “Okay, kids. Remember, best behavior,” I said, as butterflies took flight in my stomach. With my back to my class, I allowed my genuine smile to spread once I opened the door for Dante. “Hi.”

“Hey, beautiful,” he whispered. Giggling and chatter behind me forced my attention back to the class.

“Boys and girls, this is Mr. Benedetto. Can you all say hello?” A chorus of *Hi, Mr. Benedetto* had Dante grinning as we made our way to the front of the classroom.

“Hey, everyone. I’m so glad to be here.” His eyes landed on Andrew, who had his arm raised so high he needed his other hand to hold it up. “Yes, buddy?”

“Whose dad are you?” I rolled my lips over my teeth when Dante’s eyes cut in my direction. Rather than save him, I took my chair, crossed my legs, and waited for what he would say. “Well... no one’s. I’m here as a special visitor of Miss Brooks.”

Good answer.

A few more random questions were asked, ones that had absolutely nothing to do with photography, until I intervened. “Mr. Benedetto, can you tell the class what your job entails?” I asked, communicating with my eyes to keep it clean.

His full lips pulled to the side in a smirk. “Of course.” One by one, Dante pulled equipment out of his black bag, explaining each camera and

its purpose. I watched with pride as he had the class captivated with stories of people and places he photographed. Every so often, he presented a large photo, maybe of a beautiful beach or a cute puppy playing in a park.

For the next hour, the feelings I held toward Dante somehow morphed into something different. Until then, most of my emotions were passionate. But this Dante, the funny, kind, charming man who had twenty-one five-year-olds riveted, managed to have my heart melting with a newfound appreciation.

The five-minute dismissal warning bell sounded, and my students grumbled. *Never* had that happened in my career.

“You guys need to go, but if it’s okay with Miss Brooks, I’ll come back again.”

Like I could say no after all the pleading and begging that his statement instigated. “Yes, that would be great. Thank you, Mr. Benedetto.” I stood and announced it was time to begin our end-of-day routine.

As the kids retrieved their backpacks and lunch boxes from their labeled cubicles, Dante came closer and asked, “I hope I didn’t overstep by offering that.”

“Not at all. I’m a bit surprised you want to come back.”

“Why? They loved me,” he touted with a proud smile.

“Yes, they did.” And that was an understatement. Just one hour in, they most definitely fell in love with him. Then there I was, a month after meeting him and going from dislike to what started to feel like love... if that was even possible.

At first falling in love with Dante seemed unlikely. Mainly because men like him didn’t fit into the fairy tale. But today, he took that theory and turned it upside down, negating everything I *thought* he wasn’t. Today, Mr. Benedetto saved the day, and he became my knight in shining armor.

The second bell sounded. “I need to get them to their rides.”

“Can I wait here?”

“Sure, I’ll be right back.”

Like ducks in a row, my class waved to him as they filed out. We then all followed the green line painted on the floor that led to the front doors of the school. Once I made sure each of my students was with their designated transportation, I headed inside.

I walked a bit quicker than normal to get back to where I knew Dante was—and also to avoid any questions from the busybodies in the office. I could only imagine what ran through their heads.

When I walked into my room, Dante sat at my desk as if he belonged there. He flipped through the spelling sheets the kids turned in before they went to lunch. I didn't say anything right away, amused as he picked up a red pen to do my job.

“Playing teacher, Mr. Benedetto?” I leaned my hip against the edge of my desk. That devilish up-to-no-good expression of his spread, but he didn't look up. After a few more checkmarks, and a star drawn at the top of one of the papers, he finally acknowledged my presence.

“Bobby needs to work on his spelling.”

I shook my head. “Bobby is dyslexic.”

Dante's face paled. “Oh, sorry. Maybe I shouldn't correct your papers.”

“I'm kidding. He's not a very good speller, but he's also four. His birthday is next week.”

“Smart-ass.”

I laughed with a shrug. “So, did you have fun today?”

“I did. They're great kids. You're very good with them.” He got up and stood in front of me. “But now that we're alone, all I can think of is bending you over this desk, hiking up that sexy skirt you're wearing, and fucking you.”

A gasp flew from my mouth. “Dante.”

“What?”

“First off, that would never happen. Second, that's now an image I won't soon forget.”

“It wouldn’t happen here. I can get a nice wooden desk for my apartment, complete with dings and dents,” he said, closing the gap between us.

“Ahem.” I snapped my head up to find Thomas standing in my doorway. “Sorry to interrupt.”

Instinctively, I tried to put space between myself and Dante, who was now standing spine straight while glaring at Thomas.

“You’re not interrupting” came out of my mouth, high and pitchy.

“Yes, he is,” Dante grumbled before tossing his arm around my shoulders. I looked up at him with narrowed eyes. “Just kidding.”

Thomas walked in and smiled before offering his hand to Dante. “I’m Thomas Carson, a friend of Cassie’s.” My heart jackhammered, not knowing what Dante would say to unsuspecting Thomas. He often lacked a filter when I needed him to practice discretion.

“I’ve heard a lot about you.” Dante’s voice sounded an octave deeper than normal. When Thomas’s smile widened, Dante added, “From your student, Mikey Callahan.”

“Oh... right. He’s a great kid.”

“Yes, he is. Mikey is my brother’s future stepson.”

“I’ve met your brother; he’s a nice guy.” Silence fell, and the two men both looked at me. Lost for anything to say, anything at all, Thomas saved the situation by adding, “Anyway, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“No problem,” Dante offered. “Did you need something specific?”

What the hell was happening?

Thomas’s gaze cut to me before returning his attention to Dante. “Um... no. I was just going to tell Cass to have a great weekend.”

“Oh, she will.” Dante the caveman kept a possessive hold around my shoulders as he once again answered for me.

“Thank you, Thomas. I hope you do too.”

“I’ll see you on Monday.” Thomas gave Dante one more glance. “Good meeting you.”

“Yeah, you too.”

When it was just the two of us, I pushed Dante to the side, my hand meeting firm muscles beneath the soft cotton of his T-shirt. “What the hell?”

“He wants what’s mine.”

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously? No, he doesn’t.”

“Cassandra, the man wants in your skirt. If I wasn’t here, he would’ve asked you out.”

“Pfft. How do you know that?”

“Because that’s what I would have done. Luckily, you’re coming home with me.”

“You’re very sure of yourself.”

“Yes, I am. Now grab your things and let’s get out of here. I have plans for us.”

His demands and the way he talked to Thomas should have annoyed me. Instead, they did the opposite. Every part of me was turned on to the point of it being painful. The one thing I was sure of, Dante would be more than happy to relieve my ache.

Chapter 18

Dante

Waking up with Cassie's leg wrapped around mine like a vine clinging to a tree was the best way to greet the day. Rather than move, I took the opportunity afforded to me and studied her for a moment. Her pale ivory skin, her slender neck that beckoned me to kiss it, and her pink lips that even in her slumber curved up at the corners made my heart race. There wasn't one thing that didn't attract me to Cassie and make me want to keep her here. That notion should have created nervousness or fear, but it had the reverse effect.

Unable to withstand the torture of not touching her, I gently tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear, trailing my middle finger down her jawline. The morning sun seeped through the sides of my curtains, creating the perfect light and shadows on her. The only thing stopping me from grabbing my camera was not wanting to leave her warmth.

Cassie shifted her legs and arched her back. Perfect, high, perky breasts that could seduce any man were mere inches away from me. My resolve began to fade, and as soon as her eyes fluttered open, I wanted to give her an encore performance of last night.

A shrill buzzing sound coming from my front door stole my attention. Who the hell was here on a Saturday morning? *Shit. Hailey.* I completely forgot I had rescheduled yesterday's shoot for today.

Cassie's eyes opened and her smile widened. "Mmm... good morning. Was that your doorbell?"

I slid out of bed and hastily threw on a pair of boxers, jeans, and a T-shirt. "Yes, sorry, I completely forgot. I had to reschedule the shoot for *Taunt* magazine that I had on the calendar yesterday afternoon. Let me call downstairs and have my doorman send her up in ten minutes."

As if a cold glass of water was dumped on her naked body, Cassie popped out of bed, eyes wild with panic. "There's a model here?" She

grabbed a pillow and held it against her body as if it were a shield. “Did you say *Taunt* magazine? Like the men’s magazine full of naked women?”

“And articles.” I winked, but Cassie frowned. “What?”

“Why is the shoot here? Why not at the magazine?”

Her snark was obvious. “Hailey is leaving for Europe tomorrow, which is why I’m working on a Saturday. The magazine contacted me to get it done.” My explanation softened the lines in her forehead. “Anything else you want to know?” She shook her head petulantly. After I called down to the front desk, I turned back to Cassie. “Get dressed and meet me in my studio.”

“What? Why?”

“Please, Cassandra. I want to show you that what I do is just a job. Humor me.” Even though she was affronted by my request, she dropped the pillow and picked up what was left of her panties and skirt.

“You really had to rip this last night?”

I shrugged. “Sorry, you’re too tempting, and I had no idea the zipper was on the side. Help yourself to my clothes.” After a quick peck, and leaving her with a doe-eyed expression, I hustled to the bathroom to get cleaned up.

Fifteen minutes later, Hailey and I were going over what *Taunt* expected of her. Yes, the majority of today’s shots would be nude, but it didn’t faze me. There was only one woman who had an effect on me, and she just walked in looking gorgeous.

Cassie’s hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, leaving a few loose strands to frame her face. Rather than a T-shirt, she put on one of my dress shirts, tied in a knot above the rolled waistband of a pair of my shorts, leaving a hint of her smooth tight skin peeking through.

Breaking my conversation, I walked to Cassie and kissed her on the lips. “You look beautiful.” Turning to Hailey, I said, “Cassandra, this is Hailey. Hailey, this is my girlfriend, Cassandra.” Upon hearing the word *girlfriend*, Hailey’s eyes narrowed. “Is it okay if she sits in on today’s shoot?”

“The more the merrier,” Hailey quipped.

“It’s nice to meet you, Hailey.” Giving me her attention, Cassie asked, “Where do you want me?”

Peering at her intently, I couldn’t voice that I wanted her tied to the bed so I could fuck her the way I wanted to start our day. Instead, I pointed to the chair in the corner. “There will be fine.” She wordlessly nodded and sat on the plush armchair, the lack of emotion on her face worrying me a bit.

Without haste, direction, or using the privacy screen, Hailey stripped out of her clothes, adjusted the diamond stud in her navel, and stood in front of the bed. Mimicking Cassie’s words, she asked, “How do you want *me*, Dante? Just like last time?”

This wasn’t my first shoot with Hailey, nor was it the first time she came on to me. However, it was the first time I had my girlfriend present. My sole reason for that was so Cassie could witness, for herself, that when I photographed a model it was just work... nothing more.

I adjusted the silver-lined black umbrellas at the head of the bed and grabbed my camera. When *Taunt* sent me the prospectus for the shoot, their criteria were shots one expected to find in a “rub one out” kind of publication. On the provocative scale of my profession, this shoot was the worst it could get. Afterward, witnessing how I handled it should eliminate any insecurities Cassie had about my job.

“Okay, let’s start with a few full-lengths before you get on the bed. Use the scarf to cover the important parts.” Hailey smiled, grabbed the navy fabric, and turned sideways with a slight arch in her back. She positioned the material over her fake breasts before pitching them forward. She then brought her hand to her hair and sensually pouted.

There wasn’t a doubt that the camera loved her. She’d been a model since she was a teenager, and now at the age of twenty-four, she knew every nuance and look that would work. She also knew where the money was. Many of the younger models ventured into nude shots because magazines such as *Taunt* paid big bucks. Years ago, and before my time, it could be a

blemish on a young model's portfolio. But this generation considered it a badge of honor. It was all kinds of sad.

I pressed the shutter button, taking a series of stills, my eye depending on the viewfinder of my camera while directing her.

“Cover your bare breast with your arm, and keep the scarf over the left one. Let's leave something to the imagination.” Hailey laughed, and I did as well, both knowing that wasn't her strong suit. The first time I shot her, she was more than eager to strip and show me all God had blessed her with. *Shy* was not a word I'd use to describe her. If she weren't a model, Hailey could be an exhibitionist.

Every few clicks, Hailey would turn, pout, or smile while using the scarf teasingly to hide slivers of her body. With her back to me, she craned her head and looked over her left shoulder before switching sides. When I followed Hailey's sightline, Cassie sat rigid, her expression void of any emotion. The only reason I kept working, and not stopping to talk to her, was the sooner I finished the sooner Hailey could be on her way.

After a few dozen low-key shots—well, as low-key as they could get—it was time for the centerfold shot... the moneymaker, as some would call it.

“Great job, Hailey. Time for the shot that will sell the magazine.” At my announcement, the way she peered at my girlfriend meant she'd flaunt it to the hilt. But I had a job to do, and that was all this was.

“Kneel on the bed, sit back on your heels, and spread your knees.” Hailey did as asked by exposing her bare pussy without shame. “Hold the scarf between your breasts and let it fall between your legs.” I waited for her to comply and snapped a few more pictures. “You can lose the scarf now.” A wry smile crept across her face as she dramatically dropped it on the floor. “Okay, now move like your lover's hands are your own.” Knowing exactly what I wanted, she left one hand on her thigh and the other skimmed up her flat stomach to her breast.

“Sit down in the center of the mattress, lean back on your hands, back straight, and bend your right knee.” I took a few shots. “Drop it to the side a bit, Hailey.” Widening her stance just enough, she allowed for me, and

those who would be buying this magazine, to see that she was wet. She let her bronze-gold hair cascade down her back. The resounding sounds of clicks rang through the otherwise quiet space.

I hadn't looked at Cassie yet, but I could see out of the corner of my eye her posture hadn't relaxed.

"Dante?" Hailey said my name as if she had just run a marathon. "Do you want that pose we did last time? You know, the one where I touched myself? You liked that one, right?"

Shit. She knew I did because it was a hot-as-fuck picture. But if I admitted that, it would seem as though I liked it for me rather than for what it was. "It's what *Taunt* wants, not me."

Hailey placed her finger on her pelvic bone and slid it down to where she almost entered herself. That's when I made the mistake of looking at Cassie. She was an open book. Her mouth tightened, her jaw clenched, and she looked at Hailey as if she was in a daze. In lightning-fast speed I got the shot I needed. "That's a wrap. You can get dressed now. Use the screen, please."

Hailey got off the bed and gathered her clothes. She glanced at Cassie. "Did you enjoy that?"

Cassie forced a smile. "You're very good at what you do."

Disobeying my request, Hailey slid her bra on and buttoned her sleeveless blouse. "Thank you. Dante brings out the best in me... always has." Only then did she disappear behind the privacy screen.

Before I could say a word, Cassie stood and left the room. Without hesitation, I followed her into the hall and pulled her in for a hug. "I'm yours, Cassandra. That was just work." Her arms went lax around me. "Stay here while I walk her out. I'll be right back."

Once Hailey was gone, I hustled back to my studio, finding Cassie staring blankly at the bed. "Cassandra?" She turned to me but didn't say a word. "Are you okay?" My plan to prove that photographing naked models did nothing for me backfired. Cassie had to realize she was the only one who could get me hard as steel by just breathing.

“Yes, I’m fine.” Her words held no truth to them at all. I don’t know whom she was trying to convince, me or herself, but either way she failed. When I cocked my brow, she added, “That’s a lie. Why did you *really* want me in here? To show me how you spend your days? Show me the type of woman you want? So when I look in the mirror I see...” She swung her hand down her body. “This... All while knowing you want that?” Her petite finger pointed at a still of Hailey on the laptop screen. An indignant expression meant she believed every word out of her mouth was the truth. I knew Cassie well enough to know when she got defensive versus apathetic, like now.

“You’re kidding, right?” A touch of embarrassment caused her to fidget with my shirt, pulling it tighter across her chest.

“I’m not mad, Dante,” she said, her voice remorseful. “But if this was your way of showing me what you want from me...”

Not letting her finish, I crushed my mouth to hers, searing our lips together, tasting every crevice of her mouth with my tongue. Breaking apart, I looked into her eyes. “I don’t want that from you. Not in that way... not for a magazine or for anyone else’s eyes.” I watched her work down a swallow. “All I could think of was you during that shoot and it wasn’t because you were in the room. It’s because your scent is on my skin. Your taste is on my tongue. Your come is on my dick.”

Cassie started coming to life. She anchored her hands to her hips. “You had her kneel just like you had me pose. How do you think that made me feel?”

“It wasn’t my intent. It was to show you that you’re the only one for me. I don’t screw around with models... ever.”

“Except for Charlene.”

Her words hit me like a slap to the face. “Charlene?”

Tilting her head, she challenged, “You screwed around then, didn’t you?”

“Forget Charlene. She was in the business and knew what my job entailed... you don’t.” I could tell my words irked her. Even after I pulled her into my hold, her defiant stance remained rigid. “It’s different with you.

When you posed for me, all I wanted was to bury myself inside of you. When I'm working with models, there isn't any blood flow to my dick. There aren't any visions of her cunt pulsing around my cock. Only you." My explanation helped her posture to relax, but I could tell her mind still ran a mile a minute with doubt. "Cassandra, talk to me."

After a beat, her tenacity returned full force. "How would you feel if Thomas walked into my apartment naked? What if I spent my days watching him touch himself while I stared at him... because it was my *job*? You think Thomas wants me, but there's no doubt Hailey wants you." My entire body coiled like a snake waiting to strike. "I can see it in your eyes that you wouldn't like it."

"I'd hate it. I just wanted you to understand, Cassandra. To put you at ease, not to upset you or make you feel unsure. Models like Hailey are superficial, a chrysalis that never develops into a beautiful butterfly. You *are* that butterfly. Or like carbon dug from a rock, hoping to become a priceless diamond, but no matter how they're cut or how much they're polished, they will never shine the way you do." I cupped her face with my hands, forcing her eyes to meet mine. The sweet cornflower irises that I'd never tire of looking at shimmered. "You are my diamond, Cassandra. Please tell me you understand that."

Her eyelashes fluttered. "Yes, I suppose so. It's just hard for me to wrap my head around."

"What is?"

"That you would want me."

Want was an understatement. *Desire. Need. Covet.* Those were the words that came to mind. Rather than say anything, I picked her up and laid her on the chaise longue in the corner of the studio. Cassie's eyes flared with desire. Easily yanking my too-big shorts down her legs, I exposed her to me. "Didn't feel like wearing my boxer briefs?" She shook her head while bringing her bent knees together, blocking my view of what I wanted. "No." I pushed them apart, wrapped my hands around her slim calves and yanked her to the edge of the chair.

The sound of my jeans hitting the floor, followed by my boxers and shirt, had Cassie writhing on the tufted leather surface. I stroked my cock, her eyes tracking each pump. When my thumb brushed over the crown, taking a bit of moisture with it, she licked her lips. I could have very easily slid it in her mouth, but instead, I impaled her pussy with one swift thrust.

“Goddamn it, Cassandra, you’re the only woman who makes me come apart at the seams. The only one who could send me over the edge with just a smile.” She moaned and wrapped her legs around my waist. “Since the first time I saw you, I knew you’d bring me to my knees.”

She let out a giggle that I felt through her core. “Really?” I pushed in and she gripped the hair at the nape of my neck. “Even when I was yelling at you?”

“Yeah.” I breathed out in a rushed huff. “I thought of all the ways I could shut you up.”

That caused an unadulterated laugh so deep both our bodies vibrated. “I probably would have slapped you.”

I thrust my hips forward, my balls whacking her ass. “And I probably would have liked it.”

“You’re crazy, do you know that?”

“Yeah... I am... about you.”

Chapter 19

Cassie

Where are you?

I read the text and rolled my eyes.

And stop rolling your eyes.

The second text caused my ire to dissolve and a giggle to escape. How could I be annoyed at him? That sexy man wanted me. My absence, if even for an hour, caused him to seek me out. Never, *ever*, had I felt so desired. But that didn't mean my head wasn't spinning over the hurricane that blew into my life named Dante Benedetto.

With a goofy grin, my fingers flew over the screen as I typed back a response.

I'm leaving in ten minutes. Chill.

The dots danced, and an immediate reply appeared.

I'll show you just how chill I can be when you get back here... with my mouth between your legs.

Holy hell, this man. How could someone even respond to that? *Thank you? Yes, please?*

After our whirlwind morning, Dante said he had a few hours of editing to do before the photos needed to be sent to *Taunt*, and I took the opportunity to go back to my apartment. I had no clothes to wear besides his, no makeup, no deodorant... although, I loved smelling like him.

Still. We'd been together since he'd brought me lunch the day before, and if I hadn't insisted on giving him time to do his job, I'd be on his couch right now... or maybe tied to it.

Was that normal? I tried to remember if my friends, when they began their relationships, were with their guys day and night. And thinking back, I did recall barely seeing Brae or Vanessa once Jude and Kyle got their hooks in them.

Regardless, I couldn't help but wonder how we got there. Was it two people building a relationship or was it infatuation? And needing time away from him had little to do with wanting space, but more to do with worrying whatever this was between us would fizzle out as quickly as it sparked.

The buzzing of another text forced me to hurriedly throw the last of my things into the small bag I had packed. Once I took a quick mental inventory of what I'd need until tomorrow night, including the black dress Dante bought for me, I grabbed my phone, purse, and bag to go back to his place. On the way down in the elevator, I glanced at the text. Through that damn group chat app she loved, Brae asked if anyone was up for Dispatch later tonight. Not knowing what Dante wanted to do, I waited to respond until I got back to his apartment.

As if reading my mind, Dante texted right after Brae, but it was directed only to me.

Don't respond to Brae yet. I have plans for us tonight.

You're so bossy.

What came next was a picture of Dante, erect and in all his glory, with the words:

No... he is.

Even while alone in the elevator, my cheeks blazed as my thighs instantly pressed together. Desire flared in every nerve ending south of my belly button. He wasn't kidding when he said he'd ruin me for all others... it already had happened.

Through naughty texts, Dante continued to entertain me, making the trek uptown go by in no time at all. Just as I swiped my card in the cab's credit-card reader, a knock on the window caused me to jump.

"It sure took you long enough," Dante said the moment he opened the door. With one hand on my bag, and the other gripping my wrist, he practically dragged me through the lobby of his building.

"What's the rush?" I half asked, half laughed, once we were inside the elevator. No response came, because my back was up against the wall and his mouth was on mine before the doors even slid shut. The kiss lasted the entire ride and left me panting. "You missed me," I said matter-of-factly.

"As if my texts, and the dick pic, didn't clue you in to that already?" He pulled me by the hand until we stood in his foyer, where he resumed our make-out session. Kissing him usually led to all sorts of salacious foreplay, which usually led to him inside me.

A teeny, tiny seed of doubt festered, wondering if he was so worked up because of Hailey's pictures he had been editing. But as quickly as it pricked deep inside, it vanished, remembering all he had said after that shoot.

Regardless, my attention was caught by Charlene's picture over his shoulder as she stared back at me. Dante followed my gaze before bringing his chocolate-brown eyes back to mine. "It's just art, Cassandra."

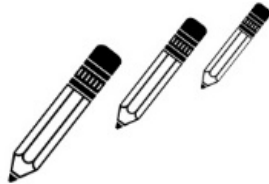
"I know," I said with a genuine smile. I truly did believe her face on his wall no longer had anything to do with their relationship. That didn't mean I liked looking at it. He continued to study my expression for a few long moments, and I tried to make it as tranquil as possible.

Before I knew what was happening, he walked over to the picture, lifted it off its hooks, and leaned it against the wall, facing backward. I couldn't believe he had done that, and I was sure the shock I felt replaced the easygoing aura I struggled to maintain.

He came back to stand before me. "Now go put on that dress I know will hug every damn one of your curves so we can get out of here. Don't forget your *come fuck me* heels."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see." Raising my brow in protest of not being in the know, Dante shook his head. "Don't give me that look, Cassandra. For once just do what I say."



A familiar door came into view as our cab rolled up to the curb. It didn't take long for my pulse to quicken, remembering the last time we were there. Dante might have called it dancing, but I considered it just another method of Dante's foreplay... and it worked.

Once again, Marisa greeted us at the door. Dante kissed both sides of her cheeks before reintroducing us. Unlike before, I knew what was coming, and my anxiety wasn't from nerves but from anticipation.

With his hand possessively holding mine, we wove through the small crowd. The deep bass of the Latin music pulsed around us. Rather than stop at the bar for cocktails, Dante led me straight to the dance floor.

The thin silk material of my dress, and the smooth fabric of his slacks, made a poor barrier against his hard muscles. Every nuance, ridge, and dip could be felt as though we were naked. Maybe that was his plan when he bought this band-aid of a dress.

Dante placed one hand on my ass and pulled me into his body, sending an electrifying shudder to reverberate through me. My body had become a

live wire, and Dante was the spark plug. His leg slid between mine, forcing the hem circling my thighs to rise.

Falling in line with his moves, I crawled my fingers up his back, around his shoulders, and into the collar of his dress shirt. He pitched his pelvis forward, providing the friction I needed. Our hips rolled in unison, simulating making love and not merely dancing. My body knew how to move with his, and all the apprehension I'd felt the first time no longer existed. Even my trepidation of feeling inadequate with the skilled dancers around us vanished. Tonight, it was just Dante and me in our own world.

One song melded into the next, and before we knew it the only thing that kept us vertical was the fact we were in a public place. Dante's shirt exposed a tantalizing patch of tan skin at the base of his neck. As always, the outline of that damn piercing beckoned my mouth to suck and tug it with my teeth.

He squeezed my ass harder as his lips took residence all over my skin. They traveled from my neck to my jaw, my lips, and anytime they landed on my ear, he'd nibble my lobe and whisper a naughty thought—the last of which was how badly he wanted to bury his cock deep inside me. We were working ourselves into a frenzy, and if we didn't get out of there soon I'd be dragging him into the ladies' room.

"We need to get out of here, Dante." My plea was met with dark, lustful eyes. "Please."

"I have a better idea, Cassandra."



Dante

I hesitated before opening the door. A mixture of intrigue and fear had those cornflower-blue eyes widened in expectation. "Ready?" I asked, trying to give her one more out. But at her nod, just as she had when I brought her up the curved staircase to the private rooms, the eagerness and curiosity she felt appeared to override any nervousness.

Still gripping her hand, I opened the door with the key Marisa provided and led her into the room. A dim burgundy glow, coming from the tube lighting running around the ceiling's perimeter, gave a womblike atmosphere. It illuminated the space just enough to reveal a black leather chaise, a matching couch, a few scattered tables, and a sex swing suspended in the corner.

Just thinking about her naked, restrained while free for my taking, caused my cock to swell with want.

Cassie pulled out of my grip, took a few tentative steps forward, and appraised what surrounded us. She held herself tightly as her gaze swept over the room before landing on my face. "No bed?"

I almost laughed at the one thing she noticed, and not the other obvious aids clearly there for patrons to enjoy during coitus. "No. It's more for exploring than straight up fornicating."

"Have you been in here before?" she asked, her insecurity revealed by a firm bite of her bottom lip.

"Not this room."

"How many rooms are there?"

"Four." Sparing her the next question that no doubt bounced around in her mind, I added, "I usually kept to the one room we used."

"We?"

"The rare times Charlene and I were in Manhattan together, we'd occasionally come here." I wasn't discomfited to admit it had been my ex that I'd been there with. I strived to always be honest with Cassie, and I wanted her to do the same. "Does that bother you?"

"No," she responded easily. "We both have pasts, and that was well before we met. I am relieved there aren't ghosts of the two of you in here, though."

I closed the distance between us, coming toe-to-toe but otherwise not touching her. "I don't have any ghosts, Cassandra. It's just you and me." Her eyes tracked the slow movement of my hand as it raised up to cup her chin. "I didn't bring you here to relive some erotic fantasy I once had. I

brought you here to create our own. This is something I enjoy doing, and I want to share that with you. I also want you to feel comfortable telling me anything that's on your mind, anything you would like to explore, or not. If this is too much, I'll throw you over my shoulder right now, hail a cab, and take you back to my place to fuck you senseless." I skimmed her bottom lip with my thumb before bringing her face closer to mine. "But if this is something that interests you..." I then took her hand and pressed it against my hardened cock. "Then I'll bring you to a level of pleasure that you've never experienced in your life."

In her eyes, I could see the stages of her decision-making. "I want you to... to give me that. I crave it, Dante. I never realized how much before you came into my life. I trust you and want you to share all your fantasies with me... I want to be your fantasy."

My lips were on hers in an instant. She immediately opened for me, allowing my tongue to stroke, to tease. I may have started the kiss, but she took over, sucking on my tongue and molding her curves against my body. I wasn't sure if it was her last declaration or if it was me that caused a switch to flip.

Cassie held nothing back. Nowhere could I detect any doubt, any shyness, any hang-ups on her part. Maybe it was the exhilaration of being a wall away from others bursting with their own sexual escapades, or maybe it was a precipice she finally hurtled within her, but either way, the door had been opened for me.

With our mouths fused, our tongues dancing as erotically as our bodies had downstairs, I found the zipper to her dress and lowered it. My palms sought out the smooth, warm skin of her back, searching for more of her flesh to touch. Dragging the silky fabric with my hands, I peeled it away until it restricted her arms. I broke the kiss and allowed the dress to fall, only to catch sight of it pooling at her feet. "Fuck," escaped without conscious thought. Seeing her in the skimpiest black lace bra, one that barely covered her nipples, and a matching thong forced my hand down to bring relief to my engorged cock.

"It's new." She looked at me with a blazing intensity. "So where do you want me?"

“Everywhere.” I offered my hand, which she accepted, and helped her step out of her dress. The photographer in me snapped image after mental image of the perfection that was Cassandra Brooks. The stark contrast between the black lace and her creamy skin, the way her curves called to me, and how golden spun silk framed her gorgeous face all made her the most priceless work of art I’d ever seen.

Wordlessly, I led her to the one place I desperately needed her. The grosgrain straps holding a minuscule leather hammock would give me unfettered access to every part of her body. Again, just the thought sent a surge of anticipation through me, rivaling any and all previous feelings of lust.

Cassie pivoted on her stilettos and stripped herself of her thong and bra. Wearing only her heels, she looked up at me before reaching for one of the foot-straps. “This is interesting.” The corners of her mouth quirked up at the sides, most likely wondering how it all worked.

I placed my hands on her waist and hoisted her up so the curves of her ass were nestled on the leather seat between two horizontal straps. Taking the loops that she had just had in her hand, I placed one foot in and then the other. On her own, she gripped the harness attached to the ceiling.

Seeing Cassie in this element, one so far removed from her own, gave me pause. I needed to take a moment to study her. Taking a couple steps back, I stared at the woman who was not only my fantasy, but one who had taken a piece of my heart.

The swing rocked back and forth, bringing her bare pink pussy closer and closer to me. My resolve was starting to diminish, but this was all about her tonight. All about showing her a piece of my world. I reached into the side table, pulling out a black-lace blindfold along with a rectangular box.

Cassie’s eyes widened before softening. “Everything here is brand new. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried,” she whispered, sounding like a true seductress.

“Good. Now close your eyes.” Once I impaired her vision, I watched as her breasts rose and fell with every deep breath. Her legs flexed, causing the swing to move. Not being able to wait a second longer, I pulled the

apparatus toward me and kissed her lips. “Fucking beautiful... and addicting. That’s what you are, Cassandra. And mine.”

“Yes, yours.”

I popped the lid off the box, took out a vibrator from its packaging, and rubbed a dab of lube around it. It wasn’t as large as I was, but it was going to serve its purpose. I gently pushed Cassie back and when she swung forward, the tip of the purple toy entered her. My thumb then pushed the button, bringing it to life.

The buzzing sound brought a smile to my girl’s face. Even with her eyes closed, she knew what was coming. Stopping her mid-swing, I teased her pulsing clit with the toy. She bucked forward and moaned “That feels so good. Please... don’t stop, Dante.”

Stop? Was she kidding? I was just getting started.

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Chapter 20

Cassie

Every part of my body ached in the most delicious of ways. As I sat in the restaurant waiting for the girls to arrive for brunch, I couldn't stop remembering the menu of erotic delicacies Dante manipulated my body with. The way he touched me with his fingers, tongue, and sex toys ignited my inner fire. And each time he did, and I took a deep sharp breath, he'd moan in satisfaction.

The swing held and moved my body, making me pliable, and open, to anything he desired. Being blindfolded, limiting my sense of sight, only heightened the other senses and brought me to a place I didn't even know existed. The entire experience left me with a newfound sexual appetite. By the time we left Alessandro's, I was on such a high, and Dante was my drug.

Giggles and chatter brought me out of my daydream. Looking up, I saw Brae, Vanessa, and Sabrina heading in my direction.

"Good morning, sunshine," Vanessa said, plopping in the chair across from me and next to Sabrina. Brae followed, kissing the top of my head before sitting to my left.

"I hope you weren't waiting long, Cass," Brae said before signaling for our waitress. We all ordered coffee, and, of course, Vanessa ordered our customary mimosas.

"Not at all, but you're usually the first one here, Brae."

"Well, Jude was being Jude this morning, and it took me a little while before he released me."

Vanessa rolled her eyes. "That man is as possessive as they come. I'm surprised he doesn't make the guys come here rather than go to the gym on Sunday mornings."

“Don’t give him any ideas,” Brae said with a smirk, although she truly didn’t look too upset that her husband was a classic caveman when it came to her.

The waitress returned with our beverages, and once she took our orders conversation resumed.

“I love Sunday brunches. Thank you for including me,” Sabrina said with a genuine smile.

“Of course.” Brae reached across the table to clasp her hand. “We’ve been meeting for Sunday brunch for so long. It used to be every week, but once the men came into the picture we were forced to give them one Sunday a month,” Brae informed with an eye roll. “They know not to complain, or we’ll go back to weekly brunch. If Desiree were here, she’d be annoyed we conceded at all.”

“Oh, please,” Vanessa said with a sarcastic gape. “You were worse than Des. You and your damn yoga. I should kiss Soren’s feet for sinking his claws in you, or I’d be dead by now because of all the damn namaste torture you subjected us to.”

Brae scoffed, “Your core is suffering, Vanessa. If you stuck with it, you’d have more stamina.”

“My stamina is just fine.”

“Well, I appreciate the girl time,” Sabrina said with a sigh. “Luca takes Mikey out for breakfast on the Sundays I join you guys. It gives me time to sleep in, and it gives them time together. Between Mikey and work, I relish the mornings when I don’t need to set an alarm clock.”

“That’s so sweet.” Brae’s dreamy expression brought a smile to my face. It warmed my heart how happy she was, and that reminded me of my own euphoria.

“Technically, it’s still Saturday night for me,” Vanessa announced with a wink. Lifting her mimosa, she added, “That’s why I need this to wake up. Once we got home from Dispatch, Kyle caught his second wind.”

Before the conversation took a turn down Vanessa’s sexual avenue, I quickly veered it to safer ground. “How was Dispatch last night? Oh, did

they have any info on the Halloween party yet?”

“Yes, they did, and Jude pitched a fit.” Brae sipped her mimosa with a frown. “He said no way would we be doing that again.” The memory of last year’s contest, or more so debacle, caused a giggle to erupt.

“We had so much fun, though,” I argued. The group of us went as superheroes, but we competed guys versus girls. “Please don’t tell me he’s going to wear a suit and be a Swedish businessman.”

“No, by the end of the night I coerced him to dress as a couple this year. But he has full disclosure and approval on what I decide.”

Sabrina laughed. “Hearing how Jude destroyed his own costume to cover up Brae’s bare legs, and how Kyle was mistaken for the Riddler all night, had me cracking up.”

“It was a mess,” Vanessa quipped. “I agree with Jude. If we do it this year, Kyle and I are fending for ourselves.”

“V, please don’t come as porn stars,” Brae teased.

“No promises.” Vanessa focused on me, but I was back to daydreaming about Dante. Every time I blinked, I remembered where Dante had been just hours ago. Even my fingers tingled, recalling the way he sucked on them as if they were sweeter than any lollipop he’d ever had. *The man’s tongue should win an award.*

“Hey,” Vanessa waved her hand in front of my face. “Where did you drift off to? You look all...” She studied me for about half of a second. “Just fucked. That’s what you look like.” She narrowed her eyes before the widest of smiles grew across her lips. “Cassie Brooks, are you holding out on us? Where were you last night?” A sly, wicked expression altered her smile. “Or should I say... Cassandra, who were you with last night?” she asked, rolling the *R* just as Dante did when he said my real name. “Funny how Dante was busy last night as well,” she added, tapping her lip with a finger in thought.

I practically choked on my mimosa, not prepared for my traitorous friend to sell me out. Sabrina and I glanced at each other, but being the type of woman she was, she sipped her coffee and didn’t utter a word.

Brae angled her body toward mine, waiting for the scoop. “I knew it!” She wiggled a finger at me. “You’re not fooling us, missy.”

In true Vanessa fashion, she smirked, complete with an eye roll. “Yep. Cass has been doing it with Mr. Kinky,” she said, mimicking Brae’s finger motion. “So was I dead-on with the nickname?”

“Why keep it a secret? It’s not like we all didn’t figure it out in the Hamptons.”

Vanessa nodded at Brae’s claim, rubbing her hands together like she was ready to discuss a plan of attack. “Okay, so the cat is out of the bag. Time for details, please, because last *I* heard, you two were just fucking.”

“Wait... wait... wait. Last you heard?” Brae said with a squeak to her voice before looking around and taking it down a notch. She looked at Sabrina, searching for answers. “Do you know what’s going on?” Sabrina’s one-shoulder shrug spoke volumes. It was now Brae’s turn to glare at me. “Really, Cass?”

“What? It’s fairly new. Well, it’s been a while, but...” I stopped when the waitress reappeared with our meals. Once she was out of earshot, I decided to come clean. “Dante and I first got together shortly after Vanessa’s party, but we made it official Labor Day weekend.”

“That long?” Brae’s gaze swung from face to face, searching for answers. “Here I was all excited another love connection happened in our Hamptons house. What a bummer.”

“We told no one, except Luca and Sabrina on the way home from your place. And Vanessa only knows because she’s like the CIA and pulled it out of me. If it helps, Desiree doesn’t know yet.”

“Gee, thanks. So how serious is it?”

“We’re exclusive.” My romantic friend predictably released a heavy sigh. “It all happened so fast. I went from loathing the man to... well... you know. Anyway, he’s not as awful as the night we met. In fact, he’s the opposite. It’s hard to explain, and I know we’ve only known each other for a little over a month, but it seems longer. I really like him.”

Brae covered her heart with her hand. “I love that.” That was right up her alley, considering she was the matchmaker of the group. “Keep in mind, Jude and I only knew each other five weeks before we fell for one another. Love doesn’t have a timeline.”

Love? I never said anything about love. Did I? No. No way.

Sabrina beamed. “I’m so happy. Luca and I talked about how great it is. Although, he keeps saying he’s Switzerland.” Hearing that deep down Luca felt things would eventually go sour between us caused a twinge of doubt. Remembering how every minute spent with Dante so far had been nothing short of wonderful nudged it away.

Vanessa raised her orange effervescent cocktail, and we followed suit. “To our hot men, hot sex, and a life full of surprises.”

Surprises. If these ladies only knew what Dante had introduced me to already, but I kept that information to myself. Vanessa would have a field day if I offered up too many details.

Brae, still stuck on my announcement, brought the conversation back to Dante and me. “So, is he as romantic as Luca?”

No, romance wasn’t Dante’s forté... and there was no way I’d open that can of worms with Vanessa. I did go on to tell them about the day he came to my classroom, and that I watched his photoshoot for *Taunt*. That tidbit of information even had Vanessa gawking at me.

“I know, it was odd, but he is really good at what he does. His pictures are stunning, and there’s no wonder he’s won awards for his work. But I’m not going to lie and say I enjoyed it or that I’d want to do it again. Seeing him studying another woman, a naked woman, just about brought me to my knees... and not in a good way.”

Brae shook her head. “I couldn’t do it. Sorry. No way would I watch Jude two feet away from a naked woman, even if it was platonic and part of his job.”

Sabrina and Vanessa agreed, but that was who Dante was. And if I wanted to be with him, which I did, then I’d need to accept it. During the shoot with Hailey, my mind reeled with experiencing firsthand what he did for a living. But once he broke down his reasons for wanting me there, and I

analyzed how different he was directing her versus when he had directed me, all confirmed his motive for my presence.

What bothered me more was knowing that wasn't his dream job—not just photographing women, but people. He had so much more to offer than bringing a centerfold to life.

A camera to Dante was equivalent to when a writer brought a pen to paper, or an artist stroked their brush onto a blank canvas.

The rest of our brunch was spent talking about the men in our lives, and with laughs and giggles we all wondered if they were sitting around the gym talking about us.

“Oh, you know they are,” Vanessa said confidently. “They’re addicted... as they should be.” Her statement caused a flutter, reminding me of Dante using those exact words. The feeling was mutual.



Dante

If it weren't for Cassie's brunch date with her friends, and my promise to meet the guys at the gym, we'd still be in bed right now. The workout had managed to keep me occupied, my body at least. My mind was set on a seductive blonde who fucked me up in so many ways. This came out of the blue, and for some odd reason, rather than fighting it, I welcomed it.

Afterward, the guys all dispersed to get back to their women. However, my woman banned me from seeing her because her day was filled with errands and chores. Even though I offered to help, she declined, knowing we'd get nothing done. So instead, I went home and called my mother.

During our Skype call, Ma insisted on speaking English to practice what she'd been learning. Now that her favorite son had an American girlfriend, she was on a mission to be fluent in time for Luca to visit Milan with Sabrina and Mikey.

But that only caused the call to be even longer than needed. Not to mention, for the tenth time in as many minutes, the screen scrambled with a distorted image of my mother's face. The call would go on for days at this rate, which was why I was the bad son who barely called. My patience began to wear thin.

"Dante... Dante... Where are you?"

My sigh preceded my confirmation, "I'm still here. Ma, when I come visit I'm getting you a new computer."

"This one just fine," she argued. If it was just fine, then why was it taking forever to merely say a few words? Her image reappeared, only to show her face so close to the screen all I saw were nostrils. "Ma, please back up." Instead of moving her face back, she pushed the monitor away, but miraculously it worked. "Okay, don't move."

"Okay, I try. So your brother tells us you have a girlfriend."

Her statement stunned me, so much so she now thought my screen had frozen. *That bastard.* I would kill my brother... first maim him, then kill him.

"Dante... I know you hear me. What her name?"

I truly would kill my brother for this. There was no avoiding the subject, and if I tried I'd no doubt get a phone call a day from her until I came clean. "Her name is Cassie," I conceded.

A visible frown marred her forehead, even through the static. "Cassie? Luca has a friend Cassie."

"Yes, he does."

"Same girl?"

"Yes, it is."

"She's very sweet. I like her a lot, but Dante..." She stopped, and I knew the rest of her comment would warn me to tread carefully. My mother knew me well, and after Charlene she doubted I could commit again.

"Yes, she's very sweet. And I need to go. We have a date," I lied.

"Dante..." The suggestive tone meant I was about to get an earful

“Ma, I know what you’re going to say. We’re only dating, not getting married, and I need you to focus on Luca for now. I hear he’s asking Sabrina to marry him.” *There... that’ll teach the jackass.*

After a short pause, she began rambling in Italian at Mach speed, and I loved that I had managed to derail her. “I love you, Ma. Say hi to Pop. I’ll talk to you soon.” I kissed the air, tapped the end call button, and instantly dialed my brother.

“Hey.”

“Don’t fucking *hey* me. A little warning would have been nice, you dick.”

He chuckled at my rant. “Enlighten me as to why I am a dick?”

“Ma.”

“Oh.” Another laugh came over the phone. “She wouldn’t stop asking questions on when I’d propose to Sabrina, so to deflect, I told her about you.” The tone of his voice held no remorse when he added, “Oops.” *Oops my ass.*

“Well, I told her that proposal was soon. Touché.” I hung up, feeling confident the fake news to my mother had earned me some peace and quiet for now. That was, until Luca spoke to our mother again, got harassed, and threw back his own volley. My brother and I had played this *rat each other out* game since we first learned to speak. Over the years, the stakes grew, and I could only imagine what he’d say to her to get back at me. Payback was a bitch, but game on.

I spent the rest of my afternoon catching up on emails and edits. One email I received late last night, the request for a custom shoot in San Francisco, meant I would be traveling most of the last week of October.

Knowing I’d be gone for that long, and not having seen her since earlier today, I itched to be with Cassie. I knew if I called her, she’d no doubt inform me of all the work she had to get done, since Sunday nights were when she prepared her lessons for the week. On a spur-of-the-moment move, I grabbed my keys and locked up, deciding to show up at her place unannounced. I’d use the pictures her class had taken on Career Champion Day as an excuse to be there.

What would she do, kick me out? *I'll take my chances.*

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Chapter 21

Cassie

As I graded papers, I laughed out loud at some of the things my students wrote down. They were instructed to write one sentence on what they were going to be for Halloween. If they didn't know how to write the word, they were supposed to draw a picture instead. That provided me with a great perspective of how many words they knew. What I received was an array of comical responses, most of which had nothing to do with what their costume would be, but instead their favorite thing.

I was so lost in thought, it hadn't registered that my door buzzer had sounded. Like an idiot, I looked up and around my apartment, wondering what that noise was. Waiting for it to happen again, it was my cell phone that buzzed next.

Where are you?

Hawaii.

Stop rolling your eyes, smart-ass. *How did he always know?* Let me in.

So surprised he would be standing outside my door, I forgot what I looked like when I followed his command. There he stood, blatantly ignoring my no-Sunday rule, looking ridiculously handsome.

“Hey, sexy,” he said with a wide grin. My hand flew to the top of my head, where a messy bun fastened with pencils must have looked like a squirrel had set up his home in it. Not to mention the nerd glasses perched on the tip of my nose or the mismatched pajamas that had seen better days.

Undeterred by my appearance, Dante tugged me into his arms and kissed me like it'd been days and not hours. For a moment, he managed to have me forgetting my strict regimen. Until he pulled away and smiled with smug delight like he'd effectively won this battle.

He skimmed his nose along mine. "Promise me you'll wear these sexy glasses one day and nothing else."

In spite of my breathless state, a touch of annoyance revealed itself in my question, when I asked, "Why are you here?"

"I wanted to see you."

"You did?" I asked, surprised again by this unpredictable man. "But we agreed no Sunday nights."

"I never agreed to that," he said, squeezing between me and the doorjamb. "I'll just stay an hour." With my hands on my hips, I watched him remove his jacket before getting comfortable on my couch. "Why the chagrin?"

"Um... because I have a ton to do, and that won't happen if you're here."

"I'll be a good boy. Plus, I have these for you." He reached inside his jacket, retrieving a small manila envelope. "Here are the pictures your class took when I was there."

I pulled them out, sitting beside him to flip through them. "These are great; they're going to love them. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He waved toward the papers scattered all over my coffee table. "Need some help? Coloring was my best subject."

I looked at him with mock exasperation, although my heart betrayed me as it fluttered wildly in his presence. "My class was told to share what they were going to be for Halloween."

Dante leaned forward and picked up a student's paper. He furrowed his brows and turned the paper every which way until it was upside down. "Is..." He tipped his head to read the name. "Matthew going as a penis?"

"What?" I snatched it away and scoffed, "It's a banana, you pervert."

“Oh.” He snatched it back and pointed to the two circles at the base of it. “What are these things? Coconuts?”

“That’s the peel. It loops at the bottom.” Dante squinted as if he were looking at one of those Magic Eye pictures and waiting to see what I did. “Just give that to me. You’re incorrigible.”

“I’m going to need to see a picture of this kid in his costume.” His long fingers continued to pluck through the rest of the pictures, raising them one by one to admire the work of a kindergartner. From the corner of my eye, I saw him drop one as if it were on fire.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he quickly responded, burying the picture deep under the pile.

Narrowing my eyes at his atypical behavior, I dug through and pulled out what he had been looking at. “Do you have a problem with Teddy’s teddy bear?”

“No,” he muttered, leaning his body farther away from mine. “I’m thirsty. What do you have to drink?” Popping up off the couch, he beelined into my tiny kitchen to rummage through my fridge.

“Spill it, Benedetto. You know you can tell me anything.”

“I know.” He leaned against the counter, putting as much distance between himself and the drawing I held in my hand.

“Then why are you all the way over there?”

I watched as he took a long swig of water and waited for some sort of explanation. Dropping Teddy’s artwork on the pile, I folded my arms and waited, much like he did whenever he wanted me to talk.

“Fine, but can you stick that under another picture?” Only after I followed his request did he come back to sit beside me on the couch. “No one knows this except for my family, and I will deny it if you tell a soul.” After a quick nod, I crossed my heart while rolling my lips over my teeth to avoid laughing. I couldn’t imagine what it was that had him practically sweating beside me. “When I was a kid, and Luca was a baby, someone gave me a haunted teddy bear.”

The church giggles that used to plague me as a child hit full force. He took one look at my soundless, shaking body and bolted off the couch. “See, this was why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“I’m sorry...” A strangled snort escaped before I raised my hands and pleaded, “I didn’t mean... I just...” Oh, fuck it. I let the hysterics take over, doubling at the waist as my laughter consumed me.

During the time I lost my shit, he remained calm beside me. “You know, for a kindergarten teacher, you’re not very sympathetic.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeated, running my fingertips beneath my eyes to catch the tears that leaked. By placing a supportive hand on his arm, I attempted to demonstrate the sympathy he claimed I lacked. “Okay, sweetie, tell me what happened.”

“No.”

I leaned in, placing my lips on his ear, and whispered, “Please. I promise I won’t laugh again.” To up the ante, I nipped his lobe between my teeth as my other hand fondled his piercing.

“You’ll have to do better than that, Brooks.”

With my lips still on the column of his neck, I murmured against his skin, “Okay... what if I agree to a Sunday sleepover?”

“Now I know you really want to know.” A long, dramatic sigh came, and then he gently pushed me away. The torment he felt was obvious in the frown lines on his forehead. He looked so distraught, I felt bad for laughing. “I had gotten a teddy bear that had one of those stupid voice boxes. Every night, just as I was about to fall asleep, it would hiss, ‘DANTE,’ all sinister and evil.”

Using every fiber of my being to maintain my composure, I blinked slowly. Sounding more like a psychiatrist than a teacher, I encouraged him to continue. “Go on.”

“That’s it!” He looked at me like I had grown antlers. “It wasn’t supposed to say my name. In front of everyone else in my house, including Luca, all it ever said was ‘*Ti amo*.’” His eyes widened to prove his point. “*Ti amo* sounds nothing like Dante. *Ti amo* my ass, that bear never loved

me. He *hated* me.” The last of his confession came with a sexy little pout, as he adorably mumbled, “No one believed me.”

“Aww, I believe you.”

His brown eyes softened, looking more like Puss in Boots than my sexy lover. “You do?”

“Yes. If you say it happened, then I believe you. And I promise I’ll always protect you from teddy bears.” I closed the distance and wrapped my arms around his torso.

“Thank you,” he said genuinely. “Now you. What are you afraid of?”

“Jellyfish.”

The corner of his cheek twitched, but he knew better than to laugh. “That’s a legit fear. I promise I’ll never allow a jellyfish to touch you. Is that why you freaked out on the beach with me?”

“Yes.”

He offered his hand and I took it in mine. “No more mentions of teddy bears or jellyfish. Deal?”

“Deal.” I pushed my glasses to the top of my head so I could stare into his eyes. Deciding to change the subject, although I would have loved to tease him about this for hours, I said, “Speaking of, Halloween is just around the corner, and we’re all going to Dispatch for their annual party. Last year, it was the guys versus the girls, but this year, since everyone is paired off...” My nerves suddenly spiked. What if he didn’t want to go as a couple? Then what would I do? Get a blow-up doll? Shit. My fingers began to fuss with the ribbon on the waistband of my pajama pants.

“Spit it out, Cassandra.”

After a very long exhale, one that made me dizzy, I blurted, “Would you want to go together? We can be whatever you want... maybe Mark Antony and Cleopatra, or Bonnie and Clyde?” When he remained silent, I offered, “Hot Teacher and Nerdy Student?”

“As much as I love the last suggestion, I’ll be out of town. I need to go to San Francisco for a custom shoot. I was actually going to ask you to come with me.”

The thought of going with him excited me, but it was impossible. “I wish I could, but I can’t. There’s way too much going on at school that week; plus, I need to give more notice for time off.”

“I can’t say that I’m not disappointed, but I understand.” He leaned close to nibble on my neck and then my ear. While there, he said, “Make sure you keep next weekend free. I’ll have plans for us.”

I mentally flipped through the calendar in my mind. “I can’t. My mom received a humanitarian award, and my dad is throwing her a party.” The kisses stopped as he looked at my face. Feeling the need to explain, I added, “I need to go to Connecticut. My brother is coming in for it. It’s kind of a big deal.” He nodded wordlessly, and I wondered what he was thinking. “Would you like to go with me?”

“Is this an invite of guilt?”

“No. I’d love for you to come. I just didn’t know if you’d want to.”

“Why? It’s your family.”

“Because they’re very different than I am. It could be a lot to take in.” I received a blank stare as a response. “Sometimes they can be pretentious snobs, Dante. I told you this. Except for my brother, who somehow turned out normal, I can only take small doses of my parents at a time.”

He cupped my cheek affectionately. “I would love to be there with you, but it’s your decision.”

“I’d like you to come.”

“Are you sure?”

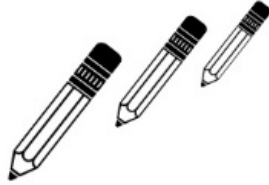
“Yes,” I said with conviction.

“Then I’ll come.” He moved his hand from my face to the back of my neck, tugging me close to kiss me long and hard. When he pulled away, he smiled devilishly. “Is it time for a break?”

“No, I just started. You said you were going to be a good boy, remember?”

“I’m always good, great even... remember?” He gave me that sexy wink that rendered me dumb. “If you finish up, I’ll show you just how great

I can be. And you can make good on your deal to allow me to sleep over on a Sunday.”



Between class parties and after-school parades, I'd been very busy over the week of Halloween. So much so, I almost felt bad admitting that I didn't have time to miss Dante. But sitting at home watching bad horror movies while my friends partied at Dispatch caused loneliness and longing for him to consume me.

The screen of my phone lit up with notifications. When I opened the app, pictures that Brae posted of the gang in their costumes filled my screen. They all looked like they were having a blast... well, all except Jude, who had a scowl plastered on his face. I couldn't help but smile when I saw Vanessa and Kyle hoisting the winner's trophy above their heads. My smile altered to a pout when I noticed Dante had already liked the pictures.

I pulled the blanket cocooning my legs up to my shoulders. One more day and he'd be home. How I wished I could have gone with him, but knowing I'd be once again lifting my no-Sunday sleepover ban gave me something to look forward to.

Just as I was about to flip the channel, my phone vibrated in my hand.

Are you awake?

Yes.

I responded immediately, excited he was thinking of me.

The photo I'd taken of him and saved as his contact picture appeared on my phone.

“Hi, Dante.”

“Hey, beautiful. What are you doing?”

“Watching horrible movies. What are you doing?”

“Missing you. I just saw the pictures Brae posted and noticed you weren’t in any of them. You really decided not to go?”

“It wouldn’t have been the same without you, and not just because of the costume contest. For some odd reason, I’ve become attached to you.”

“That’s understandable... I am irresistible.”

Rather than my usual sarcastic retort, I just agreed. “Yes, you are.”

“You sound so sad. How can I make you feel better?”

I snuggled deeper under my blanket and pressed my thighs together. “You can’t because you’re almost three thousand miles away. But just hearing your voice helps.”

“God, I miss you, Cassandra.”

“I miss you too.”

“I know we’ll be seeing each other tomorrow, but how about I try to make you feel better right now?”

“Are you standing outside my door?”

“I wish.” The call switched from voice to video, and his gorgeous face appeared. “Hey, you’re a sight for sore eyes. But seeing you makes me realize how badly I want you.”

“Please don’t say things like that. It’s bad enough that you consume my dreams for me only to wake up in an empty bed. By the way, I’m canceling my no-workday-sleepover rule... indefinitely. One stipulation, we need to stay at my apartment. I know it doesn’t hold a candle to yours, but I like being close to work.”

His face lit up as if he had just won the lottery. “Sounds good, and I know you were bummed about missing the party. Next year, I assure you that trophy will be ours.” An explosive smile that matched mine sent my pulse racing. It wasn’t winning that sparked my reaction, but the fact that Dante was thinking a year ahead.

We had never discussed the future. But hearing his words had my mind envisioning all types of scenarios. “I’d love that.”

“Good, now about making you feel better... prop your phone on something so I can see all of you.” I leaned my phone against a tissue box. “Now lower that blanket.”

A tingle shot to my lady parts. Without hesitation, I did as he commanded, revealing my pink spirit-week T-shirt with the school’s logo scrawled across my chest.

“That’s cute, but take it off.” Knowing I was braless underneath, I hesitated for a brief second before yanking it over my head. “Shit. Now take your hair down, Cassandra.”

The rubber band holding my ponytail was swiftly tugged off and cast aside. My eagerness was apparent. With the knowledge of how good he was at giving instructions, my inhibitions fell away. “What next?” I watched as he set his phone against something, and his hand disappeared into his sweats. “Your turn, Dante. Take off your shirt.”

He grinned with pride. “There’s my girl.”

A bittersweet desire surged through me at seeing his spectacular naked torso. My hands craved to touch him... every dip and valley of his abs. If only I could flick his piercing with my tongue, which I knew from experience would drive him wild.

“I need more, Dante.” With no hesitation, he stood to remove his sweats. His manhood proudly stood at attention, almost teasingly. But when he began stroking himself, my nipples hardened, and my clit pulsed.

“Show me that cunt I’ve missed. I want to see how wet you are.” Normally, I hated the “c” word, but just like when he had used it in the past, it turned me on. Maybe it was the man who said it, or the lust in his voice, but whatever the reason, I liked it.

Repositioning myself, I tentatively tucked my fingers inside the elastic band of my yoga pants, lifted my hips, and slid them down, taking my thong with them. I spread my legs and waited.

“Fuck,” he said with a growl. “I know I started this to make you feel better, but this is painful.” I nodded because, looking at him, I felt the same way. “Touch yourself, Cassandra. Just like I do when you come on my cock. Dip your finger inside until you find that spot I know is there.”

Phone sex was new to me, not to mention video-chat sex. His eyes darkened, his chest rose and fell with each breath, and the working of his hand on his erection accelerated. Gathering all the courage I had, while releasing any wariness, I lowered my hand and pushed a finger inside. The only other time I touched myself in this way was at his command. I think—no, I knew—I would probably do anything this man asked. Not because of his dominance whenever he did, but because it excited me more than anything ever had.

Unlike Dante, whose eyes fixated on my actions, I closed mine to imagine it was him inside of me. “That’s right, picture me, Cassandra. I’m right there with you, filling you. My cock is so hard right now and it’s all because of you. Add another finger and circle your clit with your thumb. I can almost feel how your pussy pulls me in like a magnet. Can you feel me?”

“I do,” I said with a nod, all while knowing my fingers were a poor substitute for the pleasure his body could bring me.

“Let me taste you. Lick your fingers, then continue to fuck yourself.” His steadfast and lustful eyes flared my desire to please him. Obliging, my tongue met my raised fingers and stroked them as if I had his dick in my mouth. “Jesus Christ, Cassandra. I’m going to come. Are you there? Get there... come with me.”

We both let out feral moans. The moment left us drained and only instigated the longing that being apart created. Rather than satisfying my loneliness, it made it worse. Reading my mind as he normally did, he said, “Fuck, Cassandra, I need more of you. Go to sleep, beautiful. I decided to catch the red-eye. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Thank God. I’ll be waiting. Have a safe trip.”

“Dream of me, Cassandra.”

“Always.”

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Chapter 22

Dante

The moment we drove past the Connecticut state line, I could practically feel her anxiety. I wasn't much use relaxing her, since my own nerves had spiked to epic proportions... and I wasn't the type to get nervous. But seeing her tense with each mile added to my unease, which I pushed aside for her.

The fall foliage made the tree-lined streets leading to Cassie's parents' house a picturesque landscape. Opposite the bland concrete jungle we had just left, taking this trip reminded me of locations I'd visited over the years and missed. But with each formal structure we passed, the pretension became obvious.

"It's the next left." Expecting to see a road once I made the turn, the iron gates on a palatial estate stopped us from going farther. "Please don't judge me," she said, half-joking, half-serious. Before I could ask how we were getting in, the gates slowly swung open. My raised brow prompted her to explain. "I have a sensor on my car."

"Ah... makes sense, because every mansion needs Batman technology." I threw her a wide smile and a wink.

"Don't make fun of me." The levity and sparkle in her eyes meant my presence might help her today.

"I'm not making fun of you. I'm making fun of them." At that comment, the winding road opened to a huge... plantation? I had no other way to describe the estate before me. "Damn."

"It's ridiculous." She pointed to where the brick pathway snaked around the house. "I'll show you my secret hiding place later. It became my refuge, and the only other man who knew about it was my brother."

I wiggled my eyebrows salaciously. "I can't wait." And then I remembered her brother was a cop. "Wait, your brother who carries a gun

for a living?”

She laughed for the first time since we left the city. “Mark is harmless. Just don’t get into a discussion over football.”

“He doesn’t like soccer?” Cassie’s eyes narrowed. “What?”

“American football. Just avoid all sports, and then you’re good.”

“Noted.”

I pulled the car up to the valet, refraining from looking at her. She beat me to the punch, and said, “So stupid.”

“Not really... less chance of fender benders. And we both know you’re a magnet for them. Good thing I drove,” I said before chuckling at her grimace. “Smile, beautiful. We’re together and everything will be fine.” Leaning over, I kissed her lips softly and hopped out of my side once the attendant opened her door. I met her at the edge of the cobblestone path, placing my hands on her waist. “Have I told you how stunning you look today?”

“Just today?” she teased.

“Every day. The way this blue dress illuminates your eyes...” I pressed another kiss to her lips and added, “But the way it skims over you...” A tiny shift of my hips into hers managed to convey the rest of my thoughts.

“Don’t work me up... yet.” Her expression turned serious as she stared into my eyes. “Dante, please don’t take whatever they may say or do personally. It has nothing to do with you.”

I moved my hands to rest on the curve of her ass. “Cassandra, don’t worry about me. Besides, I keep telling you I’m irresistible.”

“Yes, you have said that a time or two.” She smoothed her hands on the lapels of my suit jacket. “By the way, I feel the same way seeing you dressed so professionally. And knowing what’s under all this conservative attire...” Her palm slid over my piercing, and with a firm press she caused a jolt to travel straight through me. “Makes me want to ditch this shindig.”

“Hold that thought until later.” Hand in hand, we walked up the massive staircase leading to the impressive entrance. No sooner had she reached for the brass scrolled handle when one door swung open on its own

accord. I couldn't help looking up and around, wondering if we hit another sensor.

"Miss Cassie!" A petite older woman, donning a traditional maid's uniform, engulfed her in a crushing hug.

"Hello, Martha, how are you?"

"I'm great. Come, the festivities have started." Martha's spectacled eyes landed on my face. "Who is this handsome young man?"

Cassie regarded me with a smug, possessive smile I knew well. "This is Dante Benedetto. My boyfriend. Dante, this is Martha, my dear friend and favorite confidant while growing up."

"A pleasure to meet you." I offered Martha my hand, and once she accepted I brought hers to my lips.

"Oh, Lord," she said, fluffing her hair with her free hand. "Italian and gorgeous. I can't wait for you to meet everyone. Cassie, please let me do the honors."

"I just might, Martha," Cassie quipped, and then said to me, "No joke. This woman supplied many an alibi during my teen years."

Leaning in to Martha, I lowered my voice and said, "I'll have to hear all about the trouble my girl had gotten herself into."

"For the right price, I'll sing like a canary." Still holding my hand, she pumped it, sealing our deal.

"Martha! You traitor." And before Martha could respond, an older version of Cassie, dressed in an off-white conservative silk suit complete with pearls, strode right toward us.

"Cassandra, you're late." The clacking of her heels on the marble floor muffled her words. Assuming she would embrace her daughter first, she instead focused her attention on me. "You must be Dante. I'm Sandra Brooks." Her slender arm stretched toward me and I accepted the formal greeting. "Welcome to our home. I've heard so much about you."

My eyes cut down to Cassie. "I may have bragged a bit," she said with a shrug... and damn if that didn't spark a desire to throw her over my shoulder in pursuit of her secret hideout.

“Thank you, Mrs. Brooks. And congratulations on your award. That’s an amazing achievement.”

“You’re so kind. I had much help, but thank you.” She turned to her daughter, and my heart thumped against my chest bone. “You look lovely, Cassandra. I’m glad you could make it.”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world. I’m very proud of you, Mom.” Cassie’s mother beamed. My first thought was that her mother should be proud of her daughter, but something in the way she embraced Cassie told me she was.

“Come, many are eager to see you both.” We followed her mother into a great room sprawling across the back of the home. White-gloved servers milled about carrying silver trays laden with hors d’oeuvres and flutes of champagne. Cassie slipped her hand into the crook of my arm and brought me to an astute-looking man, whom she tapped on the shoulder.

A smile to rival the sun caused crinkles to form around the same cornflower-blue eyes as Cassie’s. “Sweetheart, you made it.” He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head.

“Hi, Dad.” Cassie released me and wrapped her arms around her father.

He peered over her shoulder and we locked eyes. All I could do was smile in response. Cassie let her arms drop and replaced her hand where it had been before. Rather than wait, I extended my right hand. “Hello, Dr. Brooks, it’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Dante, Cassandra’s boyfriend.”

Cassie’s beaming smile at my using her full name was met with her father’s shocked expression. “Please, call me Edward.”

Before Cassie could say a word, she was hoisted in the air and spun around in a circle. Her giggling made other party attendees turn to see what the commotion was. “Mark! Put me down!” She smacked his shoulder and then adjusted her dress. “Geez, you scared the hell out of me.”

“Sorry, sis. I couldn’t resist.”

“He’s awful.” A woman said, giving Cassie a hug.

“You loved him by choice, Jenna. I didn’t have one, seeing as how we have the same parents.”

“You must be Dante,” Mark said, carefully appraising me. “Do I need to give you the big-brother lecture?”

“Not necessary, but how ’bout them Broncos?” Cassie gasped and Jenna’s eyes squeezed closed as if she were in pain. “You live in Colorado, right?”

“Yes, but I’m a Patriots fan.”

“Oh... sorry.”

With a shake of her head, Cassie patted my chest. “Good job. Way to score points with my brother.”

“Don’t sweat it, Dante. You caught me on a good day.” He tapped his ribs. “I’m not carrying today.”

Cassie chided, “Seriously, Mark?”

“So no cuffs either?” I quipped, feigning disappointment that was meant for Cassie’s ears only, but loud enough for Jenna to laugh and Mark to grimace. “Sorry, that was a joke.”

“Yeah, a bad one.” At my worried expression, Mark’s hearty chuckle negated his stern words, prompting the rest of us to laugh along with him.

Watching the family dynamic unfold in front of my eyes made me wonder what Cassie had been worried about. Aside from the language barrier, our families would probably get along well. The thought of our parents meeting one day didn’t seem far-fetched. In fact, I looked forward to it.

I snagged two glasses of champagne off a passing waiter’s tray. Handing one to her, I lifted mine in a toast. “Thank you for bringing me today.” When I brushed the crest of her ear with my lips, a flurry of goosebumps covered her neck. “I can’t wait to see your secret hideaway. Where is it?”

“At the east end of our lawn between two rows of arborvitae shrubs. I spent many afternoons lying on a blanket reading romance novels I stole out of Martha’s room.”

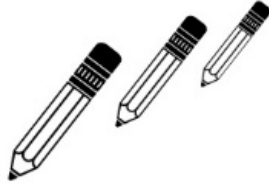
“How old were you when you began this covert operation?”

“Fifteen.” She blushed and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“That’s young, isn’t it?” Cassie shrugged. “When can I see this secret place of debauchery? I’d like to put those romance heroes to shame.”

“Is now too soon?”

“Lead the way.”



Cassie

After last weekend in Connecticut, although fun and much better than expected, I was happy to be back in my element. The normal Saturday crowd chatter and DJ-driven music resounded through Dispatch. I knew my feet were touching the wooden floor, but my cloud nine euphoria had me walking on air. Women appraised the man who had my hand clasped in his, but rather than let it bother me, I relished the fact that he was all mine... every delectable inch belonged to me.

Dante guided me through the room to where our friends were sitting. Brae flipped her hand in the air, waving at us.

“Hi,” I greeted everyone, smiling as if I didn’t have a care in the world, because I didn’t.

“Hey, lovebirds,” Vanessa said with a shit-eating grin. “You two are always the last to arrive. Why is that?”

All I could do was shake my head at my sex-crazed friend. It didn’t matter what I told her; she’d still conclude that we were rolling around between the sheets. In all actuality, we had been working on my Sunday chores so I wouldn’t be stressed out come tomorrow.

The fact that the three of us were all coupled off had me forgetting what it was like without the guys around. Even though Dante had been part

of the group for only a couple of months, it seemed like he had always been there.

“So,” Brae said with curiosity, “what happened at your parents’ house last weekend? Did you both have fun?”

“Yes, we did. Here I thought my parents would be giving Dante the third degree, but they didn’t. For the first time since I can remember, they actually treated me like the adult I am rather than the one they groomed me to be. And as far as this guy goes”—I nudged Dante with my shoulder—“he was a hit. Even my father liked him, which was a shock.”

“I told you they would love me... I’m irresistible, remember?”

“Well, at least you’re not dating a stripper. Although that could have livened up the party.”

My jaw dropped as I stared at Vanessa, while Luca, Jude, and Kyle started cough-laughing. *Did they all know?* When I glanced at Dante, he just shrugged. Maybe Luca told them, but Dante didn’t seem to care one way or another.

Conversation flowed effortlessly between all of us. When the waitress brought our cocktails, I noticed Brae was sipping a glass of water. “What’s wrong, Brae? Are you not feeling well?”

“I guess this is as good of a time as any to tell you all.” Jude exchanged a glance with his wife before wrapping his arm around her shoulder. “We just found out we’re expecting a baby.”

A chorus of congratulations erupted. Brae’s eyes welled as she continued to look at her husband adoringly. He bent and kissed her lips long and hard, not caring that we all watched. For a second, I thought his kiss would turn into a full-blown make-out session, but then Brae pushed him away with a nervous giggle.

Unfazed, he glanced around the table with a smug smirk. “And no one knows but our families, so keep it to yourselves... especially you, Cleary,” was Jude’s contribution to his wife’s announcement.

Kyle raised his hands. “What? Everyone I know is here. Don’t single me out. Luca could spill the beans at the office.”

“Don’t bring me into this,” Luca said with a glare before raising his glass. “Congratulations, and may you have a daughter to drive you insane. I’m buying your little one the biggest teddy bear I can find.” He glanced at Dante with a sinister grin, causing me to laugh. No one else knew why, and I wasn’t going to supply the information.

Dante just shook his head before muttering, “Asshole.” He then leaned into me and said, “You, I’ll get even with later.”

“You know...” I offered, deflecting Dante’s threat. “You could be having twins. Your grandmother is a twin, right, Brae?”

Poor Brae’s face paled at the thought. “Yes, but the whole *skipping a generation* theory is a myth.”

“Well, let’s not forget Soren has twin sisters,” Kyle piped in.

“It’s not up to the male,” Brae said, trying to negate the possibility again.

“Ah, but you forget I have super sperm,” Jude added with pride.

“Oh my God! You didn’t say that out loud.” Brae laughed at her husband, but the endearing look in her eyes meant she agreed with him.

Dante’s phone buzzed, and when his expression morphed from elation to concern, we all paused. “Sorry, it’s from overseas and not a number I recognize. Let me grab this. Please excuse me.”

As soon as Dante stepped away, the rapid-fire questions began. Everyone wanted to know about our relationship. Even Luca chimed in. “Cass, I’ve never seen my brother like this... so happy. It’s because of you; I’m sure of it.”

“Well, I feel the same way. It’s weird, you guys. I really like him. It feels right when we’re together. For the first time in my life, I feel like a true couple... that should make *you* happy, Brae.”

“It does, very much. Picture us in ten years, all married and with our kids in the Hamptons playing together on the beach.” Brae sighed and Vanessa choked. “Oh, Vanessa. Can you honestly say you don’t want a little Kyle or a mini-you someday?”

“Nope,” came from both of them in unison.

“I can.” That was true too. In the past, I knew I wanted to be a mother, but now that I had Dante, I could picture a little boy or girl perched on my lap as he snapped picture after picture while beaming with pride. “But we’re a long way from that nice imagery. You’re going to be a great mom, Brae.” Jude cleared his throat. “I have no doubt that you will be an incredible father. I’m thrilled for both of you.”

Luca laughed. “Wow, Cass. You just complimented Jude. You must be in a good mood.”

“I am, and you have your brother to thank for that.”

“Speak of the Devil,” Vanessa said, pointing behind me. “Looks like the call was good news.”

Dante returned with an elated look on his face.

“Everything okay?” Luca asked when it was obvious it was.

“Better than okay. Do you remember Matteo Romano? I worked as his apprentice for a while.” Luca nodded, and Dante turned his attention to me. “He’s the man I told you about. The one who runs a gallery.”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, he’s just presented me with the opportunity of a lifetime. One that I’ve dreamt of but never thought would happen.” For some reason my heart sank into the pit of my stomach. “He wants me to take over running his business. I’ll be traveling to different parts of the world creating stills for the gallery.” *And there was the reason.*

All eyes swung to me, but all I could see was the joy on Dante’s face. Tears threatened, and I knew if I let them fall, it would ruin Dante’s moment. Gathering my wits, I plastered a smile on my face. “That’s wonderful! Congratulations! Dispatch must be the place for great news. First, Desiree, then Brae, and now you.”

Luca turned to his brother. “When does this start? You just got here.”

God, I didn’t want to hear his response. All I could think was that this was over... that we were over.

Dante answered his brother but kept his eyes on me. “I still need to get the details, but enough about me. Here’s to Brae and Jude.”

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Chapter 23

Dante

I lied. All the details were laid out in an email Matteo sent after his call, but to voice them to Cassie in front of everyone didn't sit well with me. Explaining everything that the contract specified needed to be done in private.

The euphoria I felt when Matteo announced his decision to pass his legacy on to me slowly diminished with each second that ticked on the clock. So much so that by the time we pulled up to my building, all that happiness had morphed into doubt.

From the cab ride to the elevator, Cassie remained indifferent. My girl forgot that I could read her like a book. She put on an overly joyful face, yet it was clear she felt the opposite when the sparkle in her eyes disappeared.

Various scenarios of how to present this to her ran rampant in my head. When the elevator doors opened with a ding, I placed my hand on her back and guided her to my apartment. No sooner had I shut the door behind us and flicked on the lights than Cassie gasped.

"Do you like it?" She stood stock-still in awe of her image, which had replaced Charlene's on my wall.

"When did you do this?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

I took a moment to appreciate the beauty staring back at us. "A couple days ago. I wanted to surprise you."

She smiled. "Well, it worked." My first thought when I hung the picture was she would be flabbergasted yet have a lot to say. Instead, she remained reticent.

"Cassandra, I think we need to talk."

No argument came when I took her hand and led her to the sofa. I wondered if I hadn't kept my hold on her if she would have distanced herself physically... like she seemed to have already done emotionally. I

forced her to stay close, knowing it was a pathetic attempt to keep her with me. Maybe I believed she would subconsciously catalog our relationship to that point and use it to my advantage.

“You need to know, I was just as surprised as you when I received that phone call. Never in my wildest imagination did I think Matteo would be passing the reins to me. Granted, I hoped one day he would, but to have it happen now, at my age, is unheard of.”

“I’m thrilled for you. You’ve been working your whole life for this, and you did it. When will you have the details?”

“I got them via email before we left the bar.”

“Oh, and?”

“I would need to report to the gallery in Milan in two weeks. And then, right after the first of the year, I’ll be required to travel abroad for two years.”

My announcement siphoned the blood from her face, even though she tried to cover it up with a forced smile. “Then what?”

“I’ll return to Milan for the gallery’s opening.”

“What about your apartment?”

“This isn’t forever. I plan to come back one day.”

“One day.” If I wasn’t watching her mouth, I would have missed it. Suddenly, Cassie the cheerleader emerged out of nowhere. She gripped my hands and with a huge smile said, “This is amazing. I’m so happy and proud of you. Your dream, Dante... it’s coming true. What a fantastic opportunity for you. Your life is going to be fabulous.”

If she threw out one more colorful adjective I would scream. Not once did she utter the word “we” or “us.” Instead, she took herself out of the equation. Her peppy words contradicted her lackluster smile. With each moment that passed, I felt her pulling further away from me.

“Cassandra, I want you to come with me.” Her body went rigid, and an intense silence enveloped the room.

“Dante...”

“Think about it, and how great it would be together. You can travel the world...”

“And do what? See the sights by myself? Sit in a hotel room and wait for you to come back from a shoot?”

“But you’d be with me.” Her eyes widened, and I wasn’t sure if it was at my arrogance or the blasé way I said it.

“No, I wouldn’t really. I’m a teacher. My job and my life are here. I fought hard for all that I have—you know that. How can I just pack up and leave it all behind? Why would I do that?”

“For us.” Her eyes stared blankly at her picture behind me. Cupping her face, I brought her attention to mine. “I’m the happiest I’ve been in my entire life, and that’s because of you. Things are just getting started for us. We have our entire lives waiting to be lived, to see the world through each other’s eyes. I want to share my dream with you. You changed everything. Cassandra, I’m falling in love with you.” I paused and shook my head. “No, that’s wrong. I have fallen for you.”

Her petite hands wrapped around my wrists. My heart hammered in my chest, waiting for her to profess she felt the same. When she pulled my arms down, I worried that wasn’t the case. Tears filled her eyes, but the resigned look on her face scared the hell out of me.

“Don’t do this now.” Hearing her say that was no different than a slap to my face.

“Do what?” Again she clammed up. “Dammit, Cassie. Talk to me.”

She sucked in a breath and her eyes began to shimmer. “I need time. This came out of nowhere for me, Dante. You’ve been living with this possibility your whole life. When do you need to let them know?”

Fuck. It never, ever, occurred to me this would be an issue. How fucking dumb was I to assume the woman I had fallen for, who I thought was also falling for me, wouldn’t do this with me.

“Dante?”

“I already accepted the offer.”

Astonishment touched her pale face. “So all we have left is two weeks?”

A surge of anger came out of nowhere at her flippant statement. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what, Dante?” I watched her jump off the couch and stare down at me. “Did you truly believe I would drop everything to hop onto your dream? What happens to me if things don’t work out between us?” Before I could even say one word in response, she shook her head in resignation. “Please don’t say it’s not a possibility. It happened in your past, ironically for the same reason. Did you drop everything to go with Charlene to Paris?”

“She never asked.”

“Would you have?” My five-second pause gave her all the answer she needed. “Exactly,” she said quietly.

The three feet between us may as well have been a mile. Until now, I controlled my success, my destiny, my fate. Despair began to fester in the pit of my stomach. I’d never felt so helpless, yet resentful that someone else held my happiness in their hands. And I still had no confidence she felt the same about me. “Do you love me?”

“Yes, but...”

“No. You don’t get to do that. It’s a yes or no.”

“No, it’s not, Dante. I do love you, but it wasn’t too long ago we were each on separate paths. In a matter of hours, you’re asking me to change all my plans without looking back.”

“It’s called a leap of faith, Cassie.” The way I emphasized her nickname sounded like a hiss.

“Maybe. But for me it’s abandoning my life for yours.” She came to sit beside me again, taking my hand between hers. “It wouldn’t be fair for me to expect you to give this up, and clearly it didn’t even occur to you to do that. It’s also not fair for you to assume I’d be coming with you.”

“Cassandra.” I had no idea how to respond to her. Actually, I did. I wanted to demand she not throw away what we had. I wanted to insist she

allow me to live my dream and still keep her. Even as irrational as that sounded, I still wanted both. “Are you asking me to choose? Because I’ll choose you.”

“You can’t. I’m making the choice for you. You’re going, Dante. You have to, and I need you to. I cannot live with that, with the fear that someday you’ll resent me... and you will. Maybe not soon, but sure enough when you’re sick of photographing models, you’ll hate the fate you were forced to have because you chose me.”

“And you won’t come with me? Even knowing you love me and I love you, you’ll throw that away?”

“You’ve lived that lifestyle, place to place, hotel to hotel... the farthest I’ve gone was Connecticut to New York. And it took a lifetime to get here. Living in the city, doing what I love to do, away from all pretentiousness I grew up with, is *my* dream. Not only that, I saw marriage and kids in that scenario.”

“I want that too.”

“When? Five years from now? Until another phenomenal opportunity arises, as we both know it could. You’re crazy talented, Dante, and this could be the beginning of years and years of opportunities for you.”

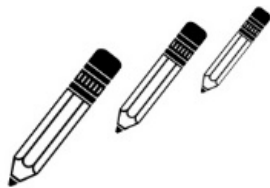
We stared at each other, each choking on our reality, feeling the weight of our situation stealing our breath... stealing the ability to speak. When long moments passed, I shook my head with a sigh. “So you think we should break up?”

“I don’t know.”

The tears that welled in her eyes may as well have been tiny daggers to my heart. Those I wiped away felt like acid on the pads of my thumbs. It took every ounce of willpower not to scream, “*You’re coming with me,*” knowing how selfish that request was.

“Dante, I need time,” she finally said. “A few hours ago we were in a happy relationship, and now we’re sitting on your sofa discussing ending it. All I want right now is to crawl into bed and have you hold me all night.”

“I want that too.” I stood, offering her my hand. I wanted to say I’d hold her forever, if she’d let me. How hypocritical, because that also meant I wanted her to give up everything for me.



Cassie

I knew he hadn’t slept much, because I also lay awake most of the night. Every so often, his lips would find my shoulder, and his arms would tighten around my waist. My own hands seemed glued to his arms, refusing to put an inch of space between us. We weren’t naked... it wasn’t sexual... it was committing every second of every minute we had left to memory.

Most of the night I tried to envision our lives if I decided to go. Of course, never having lived that way, I couldn’t fathom what day-to-day life would be like. For someone like me, the unknown, the lack of structure, could cause more stress than happiness. Wouldn’t that be the same as Dante giving up his opportunity to stay with me?

When you loved someone, you sacrificed. I got that, even never having been in love. That was the other problem. Who did the sacrificing?

Shit, I felt awful thinking that way. I did love him. The thought of living without him scared me to death. That alone should’ve had me packing a bag tonight. Yet the possibility of coming back in a few months, a year, because his feelings for me changed, or mine for him, scared me far worse.

Never have I been consumed with so much confusion. Even when my parents were on my ass over my decision to become a teacher, to remain in the city, were no-brainers as far as I was concerned.

I truly didn’t know what to do. And once he left in two weeks, it terrified me imagining him halfway across the world without me.

His body shifted, and his grip around me tightened. “You awake?”

“Yes.” I slowly spun in his arms to face him. Our eyes locked, and I couldn’t pull mine away from his. “It really isn’t fair, you know.” I brushed a lock of hair off his forehead. “Waking up looking as sexy as you do.”

He managed a weak smile before he suddenly buried his hand in my hair, pulling me to him. When his lips landed on mine, that same zing I felt when he’d done it the first time was still there. All my life I have searched for that, for the zing that so many described and were fortunate enough to find. Here I’d found it, and now I was possibly letting it go.

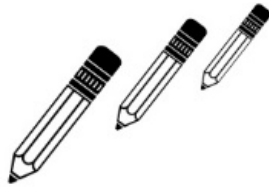
Would a long-distance relationship work? Would my feelings for him change if I didn’t have him with me every day? Would he feel the same and decide the loneliness wasn’t worth it? And how long would that take? A month? A year? The entire time he was gone?

“Come with me, Cassandra. Please.” Hope flickered in the depths of his brown eyes. “I know you need time, but I’m not giving up on us.”

I couldn’t bring myself to say, *I can’t*. So like the coward I was, I completely skirted the issue. “Are you hungry? I can make us breakfast.”

He let out a breath, knowing why I needed to change the subject. “Sure, is it okay if I shower first?”

“Take your time,” I replied, knowing why he needed that alone time away from me.



Slipping on the shirt he wore last night to Dispatch, I inhaled his scent deep into my lungs as I walked out of his bedroom. The first thing I saw was my face on his wall. That picture didn’t win him awards. The only explanation for me to be covering half his living room was his feelings for me. It confirmed he loved me, all while feeling like a knife to my heart.

As Dante showered and I fried bacon, my phone buzzed on the counter. Glancing down, I saw a message from Brae.

Where are you? We're at brunch.

Oh my God, I completely forgot about meeting them.

I'm sorry. Not going to make it. I'm at Dante's.

Is everything okay?

No, it isn't. I'll fill you in later.

Okay. Love you, Cass.

Love you too. And congrats again. You're going to be a great mom.

Thank you. So will you one day.

And there it was. I stared at my phone, paying no attention to the burning bacon. Dante reached around me, shut off the burner, and moved the pan off the heat. His arms circled me while he kissed the back of my head. "Trying to torch the place?"

"Sorry. Brae texted because I forgot about our brunch date."

"Do you want to go meet them?"

"No. But I think I should leave." I twisted in his hold, meeting him face-to-face. "Dante, standing in your apartment, acting as though nothing has changed, or will change, is killing me."

The tension in his hold went limp. "So you've made up your mind?"

"Dante," I said softly, holding his face. "You and I live in the real world. And as exciting as traveling the planet with you sounds, it's not something I can just jump into and do. Overthinking is my norm, sensibility

is my middle name, and throwing caution to the wind is not in my DNA.” The fight in him disappeared. How could he argue with my declaration?

“You have no idea how much I’ll miss you. But, Cassandra, my offer for you to join me will never expire.”

“I can’t.” I whispered the two words I couldn’t say earlier. “I’m going to miss you too. Please don’t think I won’t. But for the next two weeks, we’ll be on a perpetual merry-go-round, one we can’t get off. You go up, I go down, and we’ll keep spinning in the same circle.” I stared deep into his eyes, mine filling with tears. “The thought of you not being here in two weeks is too much for me to handle. I thought I was strong enough to power through and use this time we had left together to create memories, but all it’s going to do is cause agony. I’m so sorry, Dante.” The tears that threatened seeped from the corners of my eyes. “I feel like we’re avoiding the inevitable.”

Dante closed his eyes, pain etching the features of his gorgeous face. “I understand.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled him as close as I could, needing to feel every inch of him against every inch of me. His long, lean body felt boneless as he buried his face in my neck. The dampness against my shoulder, and knowing where it came from, did me in. I pushed away, and Dante’s red-rimmed eyes said all we wouldn’t.

That was it.

We were over.

Chapter 24

Dante

I opened the door to my brother, Sabrina, and her son, Mikey. “You’re late. What, did you hit traffic between your floor and mine?”

“No. We had an artwork emergency,” Sabrina said before kissing my cheek.

I moved aside to let them pass, Luca’s gaze holding mine as he did.

“Thith ith for you, Uncle Dante,” Mikey said, extending a folder, his toothless smile responsible for his lisp.

I held back my chuckle and smiled. “Oh, thanks, buddy.” Inside was a crayon drawing of what I guessed was Luca, Mikey, and me playing soccer. And off to the side was Mikey’s rendition of his mother smiling. “I love it, dude. Great picture.”

“Well, we didn’t get to play thoccer yet. Luca thaid we’ll play when I vithit Italy. Thith ith for you to remember when I come there thomeday.” Luca and I lost our battle to suppress a laugh at the same time, earning a scolding glare from Sabrina.

I bent down to put us at eye level. “Great idea. I can’t wait to show you I’m better than Luca.”

“Me too.”

“Sweetie, why don’t you go play with your cars so the grown-ups can talk.”

“Okay.” He scurried toward my living room, falling to his knees and dumping out the contents of his backpack.

“How do you not laugh all the time? That is the cutest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Luca chuckled all over again. “It’s very new. He lost the first one and then the second front tooth over the weekend. Cost me forty bucks.”

“What? When did the tooth fairy hit the lottery?”

“That’s his own fault,” Sabrina said with an exasperated sigh. “I said two bucks was plenty per tooth.” A pregnant pause reminded us of the real reason for their visit, dread hanging around us like a thick fog.

“So why tomorrow?” Luca asked, finally getting to the point.

“Why not?” I led them into my kitchen. “Wine?”

“Sure,” he said as Sabrina said, “Thank you.”

Sabrina sat at my island, accepting the glass of cabernet I offered as Luca stood behind her. His hands began rubbing her shoulders, almost absentmindedly. “Dante, what happened to you not leaving for two weeks?”

I passed my brother his glass before shrugging. “That was for Cassie.” Neither bothered to hide their confusion, prompting me to explain. “They wanted me immediately. The idiot in me assumed she’d be coming with me, and two weeks would be enough for her to notify work and pack up. We all know that’s not happening, so why bother prolonging the inevitable?”

“Dante, I don’t know what to say.”

“I know, Luca. Believe me, nothing you could say would change things. I thought I could have her and my dream job, and that wasn’t fair to assume.” Hating the pity I saw in Luca’s eyes, I averted my gaze into my glass instead. Like the solution to all my problems would reveal itself in the deep burgundy liquid, but it didn’t.

“It just seems...” He stopped and looked at Sabrina. “I’d never seen either of you as happy as you’ve been these past months.”

“Isn’t there a way you guys can make it work long distance? A few years will go by fast,” Sabrina offered hopefully.

“Could you live without Luca for a few years?” My question instantly caused her to backtrack with a slow swing of her head from side to side. “Right. And having her give everything up wasn’t any more practical. We both knew it had to end.” That actuality was what prompted my decision to book the first flight I could get to Milan. “Look, it didn’t matter if I left tomorrow or in two weeks. She’s not coming, it’s over, and being here longer than necessary is not helping the situation.”

No matter how many times I told myself this was the right thing to do, the finality of it still hurt. Waking to her picture on my wall, her scent on my sheets, and the memories of the time we spent together made each moment I stayed harder than the last.

“Have you spoken to her?” Sabrina asked, the same sadness in her expression as her boyfriend’s.

“Yes. We spoke about an hour ago.”

“So she knows you’re leaving tomorrow?” The crushing reminder of our second goodbye practically stole my breath.

“She does.” I took a few steps back to lean on the counter across from them. “Yesterday was torture, for both of us. It’s better this way.” The look of anguish on Cassie’s face after she decided to leave still haunted me. The crushing pain I felt in my chest still stole my breath.

“Well, we’ll see you next month,” Luca offered as a consolation.

“What are you talking about?”

They exchanged a loving glance before focusing on me. “Mikey doesn’t know yet,” he said just above a whisper. “I surprised Sabrina with a Christmas trip to Milan.”

“He also surprised me with his plan to get married. My parents and brother will be joining us.”

“That’s fantastic,” I said too loudly, and then offered a whispered apology. “Congratulations. Ma and Pop will be over the moon.”

“Yeah, please don’t tell them. Like Mikey, we weren’t planning to until like a day or two before. They’re no better than a six-year-old.”

“Ma is going to kill you.”

“She’ll get over it. Also, the gang doesn’t know. We didn’t want to screw around with everyone’s holiday so last minute.”

“Last minute is an understatement. How did you pull this off?”

“It wasn’t easy.” Luca shook his head, but the grin he sported canceled the frustration. “I’m handling everything on my end, Sabrina will have her

dress, and I confided in Gianna, who is helping as much as possible. We have it covered. Except for one thing.”

“Rings?”

“Nope. I need a best man.”

“You do, huh? Good thing I’ll be in Milan. Convenient and all. You’re welcome.”

He grinned while flipping me the finger. “If I had another brother…”

“Screw you.” Luca laughed at me as I joined in. “And your maid of honor?” I asked my future sister-in-law.

Once again, she exchanged a glance with Luca. “I was going to ask Cassie, but now my mom’s going to do it.”

Things keep getting better and better. “I look forward to meeting your family and standing up for you,” I said, pushing aside my fucking sorrow.

“What time is your flight tomorrow? I can take you.”

“Seven, I think. Thanks, but I’d rather cab it.”

Luca nodded. “I get it.”

I walked to my desk and grabbed the sealed envelope with *Cassandra* printed on the front. Walking back into the kitchen, I handed it to Luca. “Do me a favor and give this to her.” As I packed my camera equipment and extra flash drives, the disc I made for Cassie containing all the pictures I’d taken of her sat in my drawer. The plan was to look at them together one day, but since that was no longer possible, I wrote a quick note, stuck it in an envelope along with the disc, and sealed it.

“You know, you have time to give it to her yourself.” Luca stared back at me before accepting the manila package. When I didn’t respond, he assured me she would receive it. “Look, I know I said over and over I was Switzerland, but if you need my help, I’m here for you.”

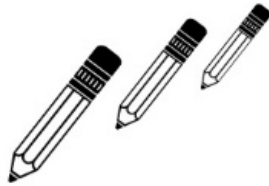
“Thanks. But there’s really nothing you can do.”

“Okay. Even though I’ll be seeing you soon, I’m going to miss you. Having you here has been great. It’s been a long time since we’ve lived in the same city, let alone the same building.”

Luca stood, and I wrapped my arms around him. “I’ll miss you too, little brother.”

Sabrina dabbed her eyes with a napkin. “This is awful. I hate goodbyes.”

My brother dropped me like a hot potato and replaced me with Sabrina. I envied everything about their relationship. Leave it to me to find a woman I could have that with, only to lose her. What I thought had been love with Charlene didn’t hold a candle to the feelings I had for Cassie. She mentioned the irony of it all and she was right. The only difference was, back then my heart had been broken... yesterday my heart shattered.



Cassie

If my cab driver didn’t step on it, I would miss him. “Sir, can you please hurry? I need to get to JFK.”

“Lady, I’m not Moses who can part traffic like the Red Sea. I’m going as fast as I can.”

Resigned, I slammed my back into the seat. Thinking of every movie I’ve seen, I offered, “There’s an extra fifty in it for you if you get me there faster.”

“Lady. That won’t cover the ticket I’d get. Make it three hundred and you have a deal.”

“Never mind, just do your best.”

My ribs acted like a cage for my pounding heart. I was sure one would crack at any moment. But when I saw the sign for our exit, the thumping worsened. The grip I had on my credit card practically caused it to melt. No sooner did the cab come to a stop than I quickly scanned my card in the reader, gave a nice tip, and hustled out.

Running in the terminal, I needed to find the right ticket counter, since I wouldn’t be able to get past security. The only hope I had to see him was

to position my body between the kiosks for his airline and the ticket agents. Like pinballs, my eyes bounced from door to door as I waited for him to walk through one of them.

I glanced at my phone, knowing time wasn't on my side. Maybe I should have texted him, or even called him, but all I could think was that he wouldn't want to see me. No, I told myself. This was better.

I faced door number one, thinking that would be where he would enter. The more time that passed, the more I thought I'd missed him.

"Cassandra?" That voice I longed to hear rumbled behind me.

I jumped before spinning around to see Dante, sexy as ever, wearing the black leather jacket I loved. God, how I missed him already. "Hi."

"What are you doing here?" He glanced down, looking for my luggage.

"I needed to see you one last time." The corners of his mouth turned down, making me think this wasn't the best idea. "Saying goodbye over the phone didn't seem like enough."

He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. I was definitely screwing this up. "Cassandra, it was hard enough on Sunday and then again on the phone last night. You wanted me to come to terms with your decision, but this isn't helping, because I haven't."

Passengers waiting for the kiosk I blocked glared at me. He took me by the elbow and steered me away from the impatient crowd.

"You're right, this was a bad idea. Maybe I'm being selfish, but I need to ask for one thing before you go."

"What?"

"Will you kiss me one last time?" Desperation filled me with nausea as my eyes brimmed with tears. What the hell was I doing? "Please, Dante?" Despite the misery written all over his face, he nodded at my request.

Cupping my cheeks, he leaned down and brought his lips to mine. It wasn't passionate or even reminiscent of the ones we shared before; it was a goodbye. I fisted the lapels of his jacket, refusing to let go, willing him to

deepen the kiss, wordlessly begging him to give me what I needed... if only for that moment.

The tears that streamed down my face seeped into my mouth, leaving a taste of loss—a loss I could have prevented. He broke our connection and rested his forehead against mine. “I need to go, Cassandra.” His thumbs wiped away my tears, only for more to come. “Please, don’t cry.”

“Have a safe trip. I love you, Dante.”

“Take care of yourself.”

Not hearing him say he loved me brought about physical pain. Maybe that was what he needed to let go of me, so I didn’t say anything. Instead, I just waited for him to leave. But rather than walk away like I thought he would, he let go of his bag and pulled me into his chest. His cologne, the smell of the leather, and everything that made Dante who he was assaulted my senses.

Just like before, he cupped my cheeks, but this time when he brought his lips to mine, our kiss held all the passion I’d grown accustomed to. Our tongues searched for every crevice of each other’s mouths. It didn’t matter that we were in a busy terminal, or that people could be staring. All that mattered at that moment was that the man I loved with all my heart gave me what I asked for.

When we finally broke apart, his eyes bordered with tears. “I’ll never forget you, Cassandra. I’ll always love you.” He gripped the handle of his carry-on and slung the strap of his camera bag over his shoulder. “Smile, beautiful.”

Hearing those words reminded me of our time together. I swallowed the despair in my throat. It felt like ice had replaced the blood in my veins. With every step he took away from me, the desire to chase after him grew. Watching him hand his ticket to the agent at security was bad enough, but when he glanced back and smiled before disappearing, I broke down like I never had before.

Why was I doing this to myself... to us?

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Chapter 25

Cassie

60,458 minutes.

That was how much time had passed since my lips touched Dante's. If there were auditions being held for the next apocalyptic movie, I'd get the leading role. I was in a constant trance. Memories of him haunted me in every corner of every room, every second of every hour.

The weeks from mid-November to Christmas Eve went by in a complete blur. I skipped watching inflatable characters floating down Broadway, a favorite Thanksgiving ritual I attended each year since moving to New York. There was no evidence that the holidays were upon me. No tree, no decorations, and no one would receive any gifts this year. I'd make it up to them... eventually.

Weeks ago, when Luca gave me the envelope that Dante left for me, it felt like a cruel joke. Except for the picture I'd taken and saved as his contact photo on my phone, that was the only image I had of him. In my drawer sat a disc containing dozens and dozens of pictures of me that he had taken. The day I allowed myself to scroll through them, it wasn't the provocative shots of me I saw; all I remembered was him behind the camera. The way he'd move around the studio effortlessly snapping shot after shot, making me feel as if I were the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Then there was the blue sticky note with three little words that held so much promise. Yet, at the same time, reading "*I love you*" scrawled in his messy handwriting acted as a broken vow. What good were those words if they didn't keep people together? There was a reason those words weren't used casually. Once voiced, they held so much power. Whether they became productive or destructive depended on the people behind them.

With every minute that passed, it became harder and harder to rationalize why I sat in New York with him across the ocean. My apartment

door became a portal to interventions from my friends and family to make sure I was still existing—I wasn't.

Of course, I expected Brae and Vanessa to constantly check in, especially because Brae loved the holidays and wanted everyone to be singing “Jingle Bells.” But my parents’ impromptu visit shocked me, not nearly as much as their opinion that maybe I should pack a bag. Mark put in his two cents and encouraged me to follow my heart.

Despite all their words, I remained sitting on my couch, bundled underneath my favorite blanket, watching sappy holiday movies. Did they all need to have a happy ending? Why did they make it look so easy? The irony that I clutched my grandmother’s pillow, her needlepoint stitches reminding me to *Be Happy* when I was anything but, wasn’t lost on me.

The sound of my phone ringing brought about a burst of optimism. There wasn’t one time that I didn’t hope to see the picture of Dante pop up on the screen, but that hadn’t happened. Yes, I could’ve called him, but it was too difficult. Maybe that was why he hadn’t called me.

Instead, Desiree’s name appeared. I had avoided returning any of her previous calls in fear that she would side with me. She was the rational one in the group; being an attorney earned her that right. I could predict her validation that I did the right thing. And to be honest, it should’ve been something that I *wanted* to hear, but for some reason, I didn’t. Did that make me a martyr, crazy, or both?

I slid the bar to connect our call.

Mustering up the perkier voice I could, I said, “Hi, Des.”

“Don’t ‘Hi, Des’ me. It’s about time you answered. I’ve been worried sick about you.”

“I’m sorry. I planned on calling.” *When, I didn’t know.*

“You sound like shit. Brae filled me in on what was going on. You’re lucky you answered, or I was hopping on the next flight out of Heathrow.”

“How’s London? Meet any royalty yet?”

“No, and this isn’t a social call. What the hell are you doing, Cass?”

“Right now? I’m sitting on my couch.” There was no doubt my ass made a permanent indent in the cushion that had become my place of solace.

“Maybe I should have come there to knock some sense into you. Talk to me, Cassie. Our last conversation, the two of you were inseparable. Did you fall in love with him?”

“I did.”

“Then how the hell could you of all people let the love of your life go?”

“That’s exactly why. How could I not? It was the sensible thing to do. *You* of all people should understand that. Following him around the world is an insane way to live. And preventing him from following his dreams didn’t sit well with me. I’d never be the one to do that. I would be living each day wondering if he resented me. How would you have felt if we stopped you from going to London? You left for the same reason.”

“Right... but the point is I *left*. I gave up stability, left my girls, and threw all caution to the wind. There wasn’t a guarantee that the client I moved halfway across the world for wouldn’t end up firing me or that I’d make partner in my firm. Those first few weeks in London, all by myself while you were all living normal lives, scared the shit out of me. But you know what?”

“What?” My voice cracked, thinking of Des all alone.

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Taking chances is part of life... you know that. You’re not from the city, but I remember you telling us moving from Connecticut was the best decision you made. So please explain why you didn’t go with the man you love.”

“That’s why I didn’t go. I worked hard getting to where I am. Being a teacher is as much a part of me as my right arm. It’s who I am, Des.” *God, I sounded selfish.*

“Okay, so teach.” Her words had the same effect as if Des reached a hand through the phone and smacked me on the back of the head. “I’m sure there are schools in Europe. Take the time and travel the world. If memory serves, you’ve always wanted to do that. Now the opportunity is staring you

in the face, and you turned it down? Once Dante settles in Milan, you can teach those little Italian kids how to speak English. You know, pardon me for saying this, but for someone so smart, you're stupid."

"I love you too, Des."

"I do love you, and that's why I'm telling you this. Don't be dumb, Cass."

"But my class. It's the middle of the school year."

"They'll be just fine, and you know that. What's the real reason? Don't bullshit me either, because I'm a lawyer and bullshitting is my forté."

I let a few seconds pass before replying. "What if it doesn't work out? What if he decides he doesn't love me anymore? Then what?"

"Then you come home."

"It's not as simple as that. I don't know if my heart would heal. It would hurt too much if that happened."

"You mean like the pain you're feeling now? You're hurting yourself to avoid the possibility of hurting yourself in the future. Does that even make sense? Think about it, Cass. You could be with the man you love and live a happy life. Or you can wonder for the rest of your life if you made a mistake. Go there and find out for yourself." She let the silence stretch, and then said, "The defense rests."

For the first time in the conversation, I smiled. "Shut up, you're such a dork. I hate when you're right."

"You must hate me a lot." We both laughed, knowing that was the furthest thing from the truth. "Answer one last question and then I *will* shut up."

"Okay."

"Do you love him more than anything?"

"Yes."

"Then I think you know what to do."

A powerful rush of relief filled me. That realization made me dizzy, and just like that, I went from feeling misery to joy over my new

objectivity. “I love you, Des.”

“I love you too. Merry Christmas, my sweet friend,” she said before ending the call and giving me the best gift imaginable.

After our conversation, I felt the dead weight that had been sitting on my ribcage suffocating me lift. I looked around my apartment and wondered how long it would take me to pack.



Dante

“I do.”

Standing next my brother, in the church we grew up in, as he said those words to Sabrina felt like acid on my wound. I was elated for both of them, but the selfish prick in me envied him. Both of my parents dabbed their eyes watching their middle child take a wife.

In all the times I went to mass as a kid, I never once envisioned myself standing in this cobblestone church in front of the large altar, exchanging vows. Marriage was one sacrament I never really thought about... until a fiery blue-eyed blonde entered my world. Now even that was gone.

The priest asked for the rings, and Mikey bounced off the pew and offered the white satin pillow with extended arms. “I have them.” Sabrina and Luca smiled before accepting Mikey’s offering. Rather than return to his seat next to his grandfather, he stood between his mom and now stepfather.

After the words *I now pronounce you husband and wife* were spoken, Mikey wrapped an arm around each of their hips, forcing my brother to kiss his bride chastely. I laughed, knowing Cassie also would have. It was as if I could hear that melodic sound echoing in the old chapel, and it rendered me silent.

When Luca turned to me, I offered my congratulations with a hug and kissed Sabrina on both cheeks, welcoming her to the family. The happiness rolled off of them in waves. With every congratulatory kiss our families

extended to the couple, the incense-infused air became stifling. It forced the need to tap my brother on the shoulder and let him know I was stepping outside.

The cold crisp night greeted me, and I was half-tempted to forego the transportation that Luca arranged back to our parents' house. Before I set off on foot, Gianna appeared, looking stunning in her cranberry dress.

"Dove vai? Ah, scusi. I forget Luca wants us to talk English." I chuckled at my sister's dedication to trying. "Where you going?"

"I was going to walk home."

She shivered as the cold breeze blew around us. I took off my suit jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"No, it's too cold. Mama will kill you."

"It's not that far. In New York, I walk all the time."

"In Milan, you listen to Mama." Her pretty cognac eyes assessed my face. "You no look happy, Dante. You miss Cassie?"

I furrowed my brows and stared at her. "What do you know about Cassie?"

"Mama and Luca were talking about her. You love her, yes?"

"Yeah, I love her." My confession caused pure elation to light up her beautiful face. "What did they say about her?"

"They wished you were together." The few chestnut curls framing her face swayed in the wind, and she pulled my jacket tighter around her body. *"Pero* Mama like you being home again. Me too. I miss you when you not here."

I kissed my sister on her forehead. "I missed you too." The rest of our family exited the chapel, making my decision to walk home futile.

The freezing temperatures hastened our departure as we all loaded into the cars and headed home, where the party would begin. I put on my happy face and played the best-man role to the best of my ability.

After the festivities, Luca and Sabrina planned to escape for a quick honeymoon in Venice. Before they left, my brother pulled me aside and

reminded me he was just a phone call away. Not that I would call him, but nonetheless, I appreciated him acknowledging there may be a need for one.



Scheduled to meet with Matteo bright and early, once awake I saw no point in waiting and headed to the gallery. When I walked in, my mentor was already sitting in the back office, espresso in hand, glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. With a loupe pressed against his right lens, his gray-haired head hovered over a sheet of small proofs as he surveyed them.

“You know, if you had a computer, that would be much easier.”

Matteo looked up and smiled. “My way is better. Sit.” He waved his hand to the chair in front of his desk. “How was the wedding?”

“Good. Nice.” My drab reply prompted him to study me as if I were a portrait hanging on the wall.

“This brings me to why I wanted to meet with you.”

“My brother’s wedding?”

“No, your attitude. When we spoke, your enthusiasm was palpable. Now you sit here like you no want to do this anymore. Did you change your mind?” The phone on his desk began ringing, yet he didn’t even flinch. I watched, amused, as he lifted the handset only to slam it back down. “So?”

“You know this is all I’ve ever wanted since meeting you. Maybe even before...”

“But...”

Awful regrets assailed me. “I left someone behind.”

“Yeah? Is she pretty?”

I closed my eyes, feeling the ache in my heart remembering her. “No, she’s beautiful.”

“So why she not here?”

Looking at the older man in front of me, I said the words I came to accept. “Leaving everything behind for two years was too hard for her. I’m used to this life—living hotel to hotel. She’s a schoolteacher in New York City.”

“Dante, I gave up the opportunity to have a wife and family for this. Yes, I’m successful and love what I do, but who do I have to share it with? You?” He smiled and shrugged. “You accepted so fast, it even surprised me. You should have taken the time to talk to her. I know you’ve always been confident, but forgive me, you were stupid.”

“Gee, thanks.” He was right... I was stupid. Because the cocky prick I was assumed she’d jump at the opportunity to travel the world with me. It took a petite blonde to knock a chip the size of a boulder off my shoulder.

“What I’m saying is, my proposal isn’t set in stone. I still want you to take over, but I make the rules here. I love you like a son and want you to be happy. Tell me what you need from me to do that?” My slow blinking caused his brow to crease with more wrinkles. “Speak.”

“I don’t even know where to begin.” Rubbing my temples with the pads of my fingers only aggravated my impending headache. “What if I change things and she still doesn’t want to come? Then I put you through all that trouble for nothing.”

“It’s not trouble.” He set down the small magnifying glass, removed his glasses, and paused a moment. “Let’s do this. You tell me what you think will work. If she says no, then we keep the original plan.” He lifted his hands in the air. “This is yours now, Dante. You no good to me like this. What are you going to take pictures of? Funerals? Go get your girl.”

“Now? But what about...”

“I’m still the boss. Leave. Take the two weeks you were supposed to before you got here. All I ask is you come back with the fervor I know you possess toward this business.”

“I don’t know if I can promise that if she still refuses.”

“Then I guess you have a few decisions to make.”

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Chapter 26

Cassie

My neat-as-a-pin apartment now looked like a box factory. Bubble Wrap, scissors, and the items needed to store one's life were scattered about. Once I slapped a strip of packing tape on the final cardboard container, a breath whooshed out of me. For the past few days my life had been a whirlwind, from calling my boss to saying goodbye to my friends, packing up my apartment to arranging movers to get it all to my parents' house.

For an anal-retentive person like me, deciding what to bring was complete torture. How did one prepare for a life of travel? This shit was hard. The piles of take, leave, donate had changed so many times in just one day, I finally threw my favorite clothes in a large suitcase and zipped it up.

In twenty-four hours, I'd be heading to the airport. Tomorrow, I'd be in Dante's arms, wishing him a happy New Year in person and starting my new life. If I could have scheduled a flight for today, I would have. Considering it was a holiday week, I was lucky to get one at all. The fact he had no idea I was on my way should have caused my nerves to spike, but excitement trumped that feeling.

With Luca and Sabrina in Italy and Vanessa and Kyle in Canada, Brae planned to ring in the New Year at home relaxing with Jude. She hated that I was home alone, insisting I should join them. Because of my flight the next day, I declined. Besides, it was hard enough saying goodbye to them during our last brunch, and the realization that I'd be saying goodbye to Luca over the phone saddened me. We'd become such good friends, and even through my issues with Dante, he remained impartial and steadfast.

With my hands on my hips, I perused my space to ensure I hadn't missed anything. All I had left unpacked were toiletries and tomorrow's clothes, which hung in my closet. I ran through my mental checklist for the tenth time, made sure my passport was still in my purse, and double-checked my flight time.

There was only one more chore I needed to do before the mail was picked up. Even though Des was right, and my class would be fine, each one of those smiling faces stole a piece of my heart. I may have only had them for a few months, but my attachment to them was no less than to all the students I had taught before. Melancholy hit full force as I sat at my desk to write them a letter. It was imperative to mention each one individually, as well as their unique personality traits, which I would never forget. Tears blurred the words pouring out of me, and once done, I sealed it with love.

Just as I grabbed my keys to head downstairs to my mailbox, my phone buzzed.

Are you home?

Seeing the text was from Dante, my pulse spiked. I didn't want to engage in conversation for fear I'd let my surprise slip, but ignoring him wasn't an option.

Yes.

Open your door.

I was too startled by his text to respond. Three light taps on my door sounded, and even then I continued to stare, frozen in a stunned tableau.

“Cassandra, open the damn door or I'm breaking it down,” he bellowed from my hallway.

Leaving the keys behind, my feet finally carried me closer to the door, where I pressed my palms against the wood, afraid to believe he was really here. “Dante? Is that really you?” Remembering I had a peephole, I rolled onto the balls of my feet and peered through the small circle. My breath caught in my throat when his eye locked on mine.

“Twist the knob, beautiful, and see for yourself. I’m giving you until the count of three, then I’m busting in. One…”

My fingers couldn’t manipulate the locks fast enough. But once they did, and I pulled the barrier between us open, I catapulted right into his arms and wrapped my legs around his waist. He caught me with a chuckle before he buried his face in my neck and inhaled.

Not wanting to let go, I tightened my hold on him. His arms mimicked mine, pulling me close to his body, not leaving a sliver of space between us. I felt a bottomless contentment being in his arms.

Even though I knew I’d be seeing him tomorrow, it didn’t come close to what I felt at that very moment. This man... this glorious man... was meant to be in my life.

Without further hesitation, he pinned me up against the wall in my hallway and locked our lips together in a violent kiss. Our tongues tangled like long-lost dance partners. My heels anchored him to me, creating the friction between my legs that I desperately needed.

Large hands gripped my ass while he used my body as shamelessly as I used his. “God, I’ve missed you,” he hissed through gritted teeth. He held my gaze, taking the time to study me. “I need to be inside you, now.”

“Bedroom,” I uttered, panting. He set me down and grabbed two suitcases I hadn’t noticed were there. Crestfallen at seeing them, I asked, “You’re back? You gave up the job?” Panic replaced the euphoria I felt just a few brief seconds ago.

“I have a lot to tell you.” He moved past me, wheeling his luggage behind him and stopping in his tracks when he saw the boxes stacked up against my wall. “Where are you going?”

“To Italy. I leave tomorrow.”

My statement was received with a blank stare before he asked, “What?”

I closed the door, took his hand in mine, and led him to my sofa. “You first. What is going on?”

He dragged his thumb over his bottom lip, a move that always sparked a desire to molest him. “Every time you do that, it’s an instant aphrodisiac for me.”

“Is that so? I’ll be sure to do it more often.”

“Then I can’t be held responsible for how I react. Anyway, continue.”

“Well, Matteo said I can renegotiate the contract. Even though I love what I do, since meeting you, it doesn’t hold the same place in my heart. Matteo saw that, and when I finally came clean to him, we talked it over. There was only one conclusion, and that was to rework the terms and hope it would be the best solution for both you and me. That’s why I’m here, to talk it over. But first, tell me why you were coming to Italy.”

“Because I decided you were more important to me than anything else. These past few weeks have been hell on Earth. I finally realized the reasons for me staying didn’t matter if we weren’t together. So I took a leave of absence, called my landlord, and was due to be on a flight tomorrow.”

He glanced down and noticed the black and yellow book, *Italian for Dummies*, sitting on my coffee table. It had been my nighttime read of late. Not waiting for him to ask, I let him in on my secret. “I thought it would be beneficial,” I said with a quick shrug.

“Cassandra.” I guessed confusion was what caused his hand to rake through his hair, which I knew to be as soft as spun silk. And then his brows rose in amazement. “You were coming to me?”

“Yes.”

“But you didn’t know about the revisions to my obligation.”

“No.”

“I can’t believe you did all of that for me,” he said, revealing his surprise with an incredulous grin. In one swift move, he lifted me onto his lap. I knew I had missed him, but being able to touch him again, feel his arms around me, his desire for me, stirred not just want... but also a wonderful sense of peace.

My fingertips danced over the scruff on his jaw, trailing up and over his face, recommitting it to memory. “Dante, I’d do anything for you.”

“And I you.” A sensuous light passed between us. He felt it too, and when he softly touched his lips to mine a shudder moved through me. “Which is why I’m proposing this... what if I only had to travel a year before opening the gallery in Milan? Then after a short stay, I’m going to suggest to Matteo he open a satellite gallery in New York. What do you think?”

“I think, *yes, especially since* I was prepared to accept the original terms. When do we leave? Can we look to see if there’s a seat on my flight tomorrow?”

The vibration of his deep chuckle against my body was a reminder of what I’d deprived myself of. If I could, I’d mold myself around him like a monkey on a tree—and never let go. “We have some time, and I have plans for us.”

“I’m sure you do.” I positioned myself on my knees to straddle his hips.

“That’s next, but first...” His body shifted, allowing his hand to reach into his coat pocket. Feeling momentarily rebuffed at the sight of the black velvet box, my ass fell to his thighs with a thump. An intensity I had never seen before revealed itself in his mocha eyes. “Marry me, Cassandra.”

“What?”

That devilish smirk I adored spread over his edible lips. He opened the box, exposing a brilliant round diamond resting on top of two platinum, diamond-encrusted infinity bands. It was the most gorgeous ring I’d ever seen, even more so because he offered it to me.

“Cassandra, I know we’ve only known each other a few months, and we started out with lust, but being without you for these past few weeks solidified the fact I need you. While I stood beside my brother as he recited his vows to Sabrina...”

“Wait... what?”

“Oh, right. You don’t know, but Luca and Sabrina got married on Christmas Eve in Milan.”

“I can’t believe he did that without telling me! I’m going to kill him. He...”

Dante gripped my face and waited until he had my attention again. “Sweetheart, please focus.”

Instantly, my scowl morphed into a radiant smile. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He then adorably cleared his throat and began again. “I love you, and I know you love me. Why prolong the inevitable? Be my wife. Share this life with me. This might seem irrational to some, but this is us. We’ve never been rational. We now both know desire always trumps logic. What do you say, beautiful? Will you be my wife?”

“Yes,” I said with a hard nod. I’ll marry you today, tomorrow, or as soon as we can get a license. Just say when.”

He slid the ring onto my finger. “You don’t want a big wedding or the white dress?”

“No, I just want you. I don’t care where it is or what I’ll wear. I’d marry you naked.”

“Be careful what you offer, Cassandra.” One brow lifted in challenge before he added, “And your parents? Your friends? They’ll be very upset with us.”

“I don’t care.” I kissed him long and hard, and declared again, “I’ll marry you anytime, anywhere, but preferably soon.”

“Well, I do have the perfect place in mind.”

“Yeah? Where?”

“You’ll see... and you’ll need clothes. But for now...” His nimble fingers flicked open the buttons on my cardigan. “Naked is fine with me.”



Dante

Kneeling between my knees, Cassie dragged her thumb across her lips, collecting remnants of my orgasm before popping her thumb into her mouth. “You’re right,” I admitted with a nod. “That move is an instant aphrodisiac... one that makes me want to do filthy things to you.”

“Told you so.” A wicked smile lifted the corners of her full lips as she crawled up my body, framing my thighs with hers. The new position nestled her warm pussy over my cock, slowly bringing it back to life after the draining blowjob she’d given me. “But be specific,” she said, seductively rocking her hips from side to side. “Tell me what kind of filthy things.”

I placed my hands on her waist, and her squeal as I flipped us turned into a giggle. “I’d rather show you,” I said, taking a long swipe over her hardened nipple with my tongue. The sexiest purr rumbled through her bare chest, egging me on to suck her nipple into my mouth.

She arched her back, force-feeding more of her breast for my tongue to lavish. Her legs fell open, bringing my abs to rest against her pussy, spurring my mouth to travel down her body. I mapped her skin, marking her along the way, reminding her she was mine. With each bite, she mewled while raking her nails over my back. After each assault, I soothed her tender flesh with a kiss. Repeating the pattern—bite, kiss, bite, kiss—I ended the last sequence on her clit.

“Dante...” she pleaded, her voice hoarse with desire. “Please, I need you.”

My eyes met hers as I slowly moved up her body. “I’m not going to fuck you, Cassandra.”

“Why?” The pain my teasing caused was evident in her expression. “Stop taunting me.”

Confusion now marred her brow as I slid my head from side to side. “I’m not taunting you, baby. I’m making love to you.” On my announcement, I buried my cock deep inside her. An instant tidal wave of delirium surged through me, no different than the first time we did this. Actually, the difference was I loved her, and she was about to be my wife. In just two days, this gorgeous woman would truly be mine.

“I plan to do this every day for the rest of my life, Cassandra.”

“You won’t get a complaint from me.” She lifted her hips to meet mine, mimicking my favorite dance, but better.

With each thrust, her channel constricted tighter around my cock. Our mouths fused, abetting our rapture. “Get there,” I demanded.

“You first.” Like the kinky girl I craved, she stared me in the eye as her teeth scored my bottom lip. And fuck if that didn’t have me coming like a porn star.

I squeezed a hand between us, pinching her swollen clit as my retaliation. Before I was even done, her pussy contracted around me and milked every drop I had to give. “Jesus Christ.”

“I know.” She pushed my hair away from my forehead with a contented smile. “And we get to do this every day, forever... maybe twice a day.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Up for it?” With our bodies still connected, she clenched her Kegel muscle, eliciting my growl. “Can we install a swing in your bedroom?”

“I’m always *up* for it. And it’s our bedroom now. I’ll have one installed as soon as we get back to New York.”

“Until then, we’ll need to rely on toys and blindfolds while traveling, though. Oh, and Dante... next it’s my turn to use the handcuffs.”

“Goddamn, I created a monster,” I teased, kissing the tip of her nose.

“You created a woman who is madly in love with you.” Her lips pressed against mine, and just as another wave of carnal desire shot through me, she broke our kiss. A sly expression narrowed her eyes, a look I knew well. “Now tell me where we’re getting married,” she said, batting her lashes.

“Nice try... but no.”

Chapter 27

Cassie

This is bullshit. I'm coming up there.

No, you're not.

This man was driving me nuts. Yet I couldn't help but chuckle with every text Dante had sent since I had sequestered him in Luca's apartment last night.

Yesterday was filled with wedding preparations—license, witnesses who weren't our friends, a dress, and wedding-night lingerie. During my mini shopping trip, he secretly disappeared, claiming he had a few tasks to take care of on his own.

He couldn't wait to get back to his apartment and fuck me... his words, not mine. That was when I told him to get lost, and he subsequently *lost* his mind.

You're breaking our daily sex resolution, **he argued.**

No, I'm not.

Are we having sex right now?

No, but we will later, and we did yesterday morning. So, technically, no rules have been broken.

Three dancing dots appeared, disappeared, and then reappeared.

This is bullshit.

My laugh was instant.

I waited a full minute for that? My fiancé is so eloquent.

I'll show you eloquent.

More dots, and then an image of his dick appeared.

Eloquent enough?

You're ridiculous. I'll be seeing you in an hour. Let me get dressed and as instructed, I'll be waiting for you.

I love you, Cassandra.

I love you too. See you soon. Xoxo

I had no idea what he planned for today, except that our ceremony would be before the crack of dawn. Most people would pick sunset as a backdrop, but not Dante. For some reason, we wouldn't see the sunrise before we said *I do*. When I asked why, all he said was, "*You'll see.*"

So there I was at five in the morning, showered and putting on the little white dress I bought over new lingerie that would make him lose his mind. Exactly one hour later—not a minute before or after—Dante was in the living room calling out for me.

He strolled toward me, his eyes perusing every inch of my body. “You look beautiful,” he exclaimed with intense pleasure.

“Thank you. So do you.” And that wasn’t a lie. He looked jaw-dropping in his dark suit, his crisp white shirt open at the collar to reveal that sexy patch of toned skin. But it was his seductive smirk, hot scruff, and just-fucked hair that he knew I loved. Instantly, I wanted to be late to my own wedding.

“You do realize, I’m seeing you on our wedding day. So your reason to confine me to my brother’s apartment was futile.” He wrapped his arms around my waist, tugging my body to his. “I have something for you.”

“Does it involve us getting naked?”

“Such a dirty mind. I should bend you over the couch and take what you denied us last night. But we’ll save that for later. For now, I have this for you.”

He moved one hand off my ass and into his jacket pocket. Handing me a rectangular wrapped box, he said, “Happy Wedding Day.”

“Wait, I have something for you too.” Before taking his gift, I scurried into the bedroom and retrieved the one I bought for him.

We swapped boxes, and like two kids on Christmas morning tore open the wrapping. When I flipped the velvet hinged top, I couldn’t contain my gasp. “Dante.” With trembling fingers, I gently touched it, completely tongue-tied at what to say.

“Do you like it?” he asked, searching my face.

“It’s beautiful.” *Beautiful* seemed too ordinary a word to describe the diamond-encrusted watch.

“Turn it over.” I did as he asked and read the inscription on the back out loud. “Our love is timeless.” Below those poignant words was today’s date. His hand was instantly on my cheek to catch the first tear, his other taking the watch out of the box. The contentment in his deep-brown eyes was palpable as he fastened it to my wrist. Turning it over, he then placed a kiss where the watch met my skin. “I picked it up in Milan when I got your ring but got it engraved yesterday.”

“I love it.” I couldn’t stop staring at it, until I remembered my pathetic present still in his hand. On instinct, I attempted to snatch the gift from his grasp, but he raised his arm well above my reach.

“What are you doing?”

“Mine sucks.” My bottom lip jutted out. “I thought it was a good idea when I saw it yesterday. Normally, when I give a gift, I try to make it personal, but I couldn’t because I ran out of time. And this, it’s really not even complete, since I need to wait until after today...”

“Cassandra, breathe for God’s sake.” Ignoring my rambling, he lifted the cardboard lid off the box, revealing a silver frame complete with a photo of the models that it came with.

“That’s for our wedding picture. I wanted to have it engraved but didn’t have time. And since you don’t have any pictures of yourself, I thought this would be perfect. We can take it with us wherever we go. Those people...” I pointed to the couple under the glass. “I have no idea who they are. But even though they have gray hair, that could be us one day.”

A wide grin grew across his face, and he shook his head. “God, I love you.” He chastely kissed my lips. “This is perfect. I can’t wait to fill it with our first wedding portrait. In fact, technically it is our wedding day. Come...” Dante laced our fingers and led me to his studio. Adjusting the camera on the tripod so it faced the chair, he pushed a button and swiftly sat while pulling me on to his lap.

“Smile, beautiful.”

A bright flash made me blink, and I prayed my eyes were open. When we stood, he clicked a few buttons on his laptop, a printer came to life in the corner, and, before I knew it, in his hand was our first wedding picture. He immediately replaced the one in the frame with ours. “Done. Now can we go?”

“Where are we going again?” Not knowing where we would be exchanging our vows drove me nuts.

“Nice try. Do you have everything you need?”

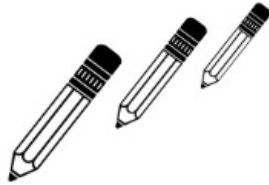
I snagged my purse off the couch. “Yes.”

He reached into his suit-jacket pocket and pulled out a white satin scarf. “Sorry, but when we get downstairs, you’ll need to wear this over your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Is our entire marriage going to be like this? Please, indulge me.”

“Fine.”



I was absolutely clueless. Yes, I knew we were in a luxury sedan, I knew our driver’s name was Harry, and I knew we were running a bit late when I heard Dante ask him to step on it. During the ride, my husband-to-be tortured me with all the things he would have done if I had allowed him to sleep with me last night. *The bastard.*

It felt like an hour later when the car finally stopped and Dante said, “Ready to see where we are?”

At my nod, he untied the white silk scarf and removed it from around my head. It took a few seconds for me to get my bearings, but once I did, I realized we were in the parking lot where we met.

Since it was hours before Kyle’s lab opened, it dawned on me why we were there so early. “Oh my God, I love this. It’s perfect!”

“Really? I came up with it on a whim, and I know you deserve a long, rose-petal-covered aisle with your friends and family watching us exchange our vows, but...”

“Dante.” I held his face in both my hands and waited until he focused on me. “I don’t care where I become your wife. I only care that I’ll be yours. I don’t want to wait. I don’t need any of the pomp and circumstance. And since we planned this whole thing in a matter of two days, you couldn’t have picked a more perfect place.”

The relief he felt came in the form of a huge exhalation of pent-up breath. I pressed my lips to his just before he led me out of the car.

“Ready to marry me?” I looked around, wondering who would be performing the ceremony. Dante pointed over my shoulder, and when I turned, there stood an older gentleman holding a book and smiling at us. Beside him was the cutie pie whom Kyle had parking cars the night of Vanessa’s birthday party.

“Hi,” I said with a friendly wave. His returning smile mimicked the one he gave me the night Dante and I met.

“Congratulations, Cassie,” he said, handing me a nosegay of white lilies. “I’m Tyler, your witness today... kind of like I was the night you hit his car.”

“Wait a minute... whose side are you on, Tyler?”

My witness never had a chance to respond because Dante said, “Okay, stop flirting.” He leaned closer and kissed my cheek. “Let’s get married.”

Hand in hand, we walked toward the officiant, and our witnesses, Tyler and Harry, stood behind us. The opening words I’d heard so many times were recited as Dante and I stared into each other’s eyes. Today, those words were for me, for us, and it seemed surreal. Yet, at the same time, it felt like my whole life had prepared me for this moment.

Unlike my present to him, when we reached the point when vows needed to be exchanged, I was prepared. Dante and I faced each other, my hand still tightly held by his. “Dante, all my life I’ve been a rule-follower. I’ve done things in the right order, and took my time making life-altering decisions. Every one made was methodical, thought through, and carefully planned. And then you crashed into my world... literally. That night...” Tears welled in my eyes as I thought back to how my life was before meeting him. “You changed everything. Opposite of all I knew, and although you were infuriating, I think what was most frustrating was the attraction that came out of nowhere. As you know, I didn’t handle it well.”

“I keep telling you, I’m irresistible.” His nonchalant shrug forced me to glare, which caused a chuckle to rumble through him.

“Anyway... no matter how hard I tried to fight it, you wore me down and I thank God every day that you did... that you saw something in me that I never saw in myself. You, Dante, gave me a gift only you could give. Thank you for giving me your heart. I promise to cherish you, support you, and be with you through whatever life brings us. I promise when we have children, I will not allow them to have teddy bears.” I couldn’t help but laugh at the shudder that ran through him. “You’re the love of my life, and I’m so lucky that you want to share yours with me.”

Dante methodically ran his thumb across both of my cheeks, wiping away my tears. And my heart swelled when he repeated the process on his face using the back of his hand.

“Cassandra, the first time I saw you, I knew it wouldn’t be the last. The passion in your eyes, in spite of your vibrator dress, lit my insides on fire.”

Gasping, I whispered, “They were pencils.”

“Yes, dear,” he said with a wink. “Not only are you the most beautiful woman I’ve ever had the privilege to lay my eyes on, but you’re smart, talented, and one of the kindest people I know. You astound me every time we’re together. Whether you’re grading papers, reading a trashy romance novel, or fighting seaweed, you manage to carve out another niche in my heart. I’ve never known a love like ours, nor did I think it would be possible. But you, Cassandra... you make everything possible. I promise our lives will never be boring. I promise to protect you from jellyfish and anything else that scares you. I promise to never break our *having-sex-every-day* resolution.” The officiant cleared his throat while Harry and Tyler laughed. Little did they know Dante wasn’t kidding. “I promise no matter where we are, where we go, or who we are with, you will always be the most important thing in my life. I will never take you for granted, and I will cherish you forever. Never will a day pass when I won’t tell you how much you mean to me. I love you, Cassandra... always.”

We exchanged rings and the officiant said, “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now...” The poor man wasn’t able to finish before Dante’s mouth crushed mine in a searing kiss.



Dante

My kinky girl had a request as we drove home from our ceremony. Apparently, she needed to fulfill her own little fantasy. Naturally, I agreed, because doing anything she asked was a no-brainer.

Once home, she enlightened me on what it was she wanted. Before we started the photo shoot / striptease I'd be starring in, Cassie asked that I play one of the songs I used to strip to on the speaker in the corner. Amused at her game, I found "Hot for Teacher" on one of my playlists, smiling at the sexy gasp that escaped when she heard it. It wasn't the best song to strip to, but it helped effectively prove my point.

That was until she peeled that sexy white dress off her fucking hot body and stood staring at me in nothing but heels and see-through scraps of lace... tables turned, the joke was now on me... yet again.

Even hearing her words wasn't easy when all the blood in my body rushed toward my cock, leaving a dull thumping between my ears.

"Take off your jacket," she said, her voice husky from lust.

I allowed the music to manipulate my moves as I used to years ago. With slow gyrations, I did as she asked, tossing my black suit jacket onto the chaise nearby. "Now what, Mrs. Benedetto?"

Seeing my diamond ring glinting on her slim finger as she held the camera to her face made it difficult to follow through with my promise to behave. "Shirt next, but slowly." One by one, my fingers released the buttons from their confines, the only sound coming from the clicking of each shot she took. Once my shirt hung open, she quickly said, "Take it off."

"Yes, ma'am." My dress shirt soon found its place beside my discarded jacket.

"Run your thumb over your bottom lip." Staring right at the camera, giving her a look that read the minute this charade was over I'd be fucking

her hard, I obeyed my wife and gave her what she asked for.

Meanwhile, my cock screamed to be let out. I had no idea if she knew how challenging this reversal of roles was for me. Besides the obvious of needing to be the one holding the camera, waiting for her next instruction as she stood a few feet away in that sexy-as-fuck lingerie drove me insane.

The way her dark-pink nipples practically pushed through the fabric, and how it molded over her smooth pussy, made it hard to focus. Not to mention, that fucking garter that hugged her hips and held up sheer stockings, of which I couldn't wait to drag off each leg with my teeth.

“Dante.”

My eyes cut up to her face, only then noticing she held the camera near one hip as her hand fisted on the other. “Sorry, what did you say?”

“Unbutton and unzip your pants. Show me your boxer briefs.” *Now we're talking.* Again, I followed her command, leaving the black wool fabric to hang open and reveal the top of my shaft.

“Sorry, I'm not wearing boxer briefs.” I couldn't see her eyes, but the way her mouth hung open before her teeth clamped on that full plump lip gave me the satisfaction that my photographer wasn't as composed as she let on to be. “Should I take my pants off?” She gave me a small nod just as her throat worked a swallow. Hooking my thumbs between the fabric and my skin, with one hard shove they fell and pooled around my ankles.

Needing to move this along, I continued to stun my wife by rolling my hips, running my hands over my abs, and fondling my piercing. I wasn't sure if the reason I no longer heard clicking was because her breathing had become so audible, or if she had stopped taking pictures. Either way, I was done.

“Cassandra,” I said as I gripped my cock and began pumping. “Your time is up. Put the camera down and get over here.”

“Fine. But first one more picture.” She smirked before lifting the camera to her eye.

“Okay, what do you want me to do?”

‘Just one thing... Smile, beautiful.’

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Epilogue

Dante

“Are you ready, Mrs. Benedetto?” I’d never tire of saying her new title. The fact that I was responsible for it made it all the better. And watching her beam up at me, with a sparkle in her baby blues, gave me joy.

“More than ready, Mr. Benedetto.”

Hand in hand, we walked into our Saturday night hangout. Our friends didn’t know anything—not that we were together or that we were in New York, and most of all that we were married.

For the past few days, as we remained sequestered in our apartment, my wife was ready to combust. All she wanted to do was call her friends, but instead I insisted she call her family. Mine, on the other hand, would know soon enough when we arrived in Milan.

We weren’t at all surprised at her parents’ reaction. Besides shock, they were understandably upset Cassie wouldn’t have the wedding they always dreamed of. But hearing my girl tell them that *I* had fulfilled *her* dream seemed to appease them for now. Our compromise was that they’d throw us a party for closest friends and family once my contract was up and we returned to the States.

But tonight was all about breaking the news to our friends.

Walking into Dispatch, Cassie spotted Luca and Sabrina ahead of us. Camouflaged by the crowd, we stood a few feet behind them, not wanting to take away from their announcement as they greeted our friends.

Squeals echoed over the noisy bar, having us assume the cat was out of the bag regarding their nuptials. From where we stood, a round of hugs and kisses of congratulations rained down on them. Brae wiped tears of joy from her eyes, as she held Sabrina’s hand, admiring her new ring.

“Our turn, beautiful.”

In only a few steps, we reached the table and were welcomed with silent stares. “Surprise!” Cassie said with a wave of her left hand.

Sabrina twisted at the sound of Cassie’s voice. “Oh my God! You’re together?”

Brae followed with, “You’re in New York?”

Luca cocked his head to the side. “What happened to the job?”

Kyle and Jude smirked and remained silent.

But when Vanessa pointed at Cassie’s hand and exclaimed, “What the fuck is on your finger?” another wave of silence swarmed around us. “Not you too?”

“My brother wasn’t the only one to take a wife. It’s my pleasure to introduce you to Mrs. *Dante* Benedetto.”

Brae’s hand fisted at her hip. “I can’t believe you!” She pointed to Cassie before doing the same to Luca. “And you.”

Jude shook his head. “The fuck! I had to deal with irate cocks and barn animals...”

Kyle interjected. “I loved that barn. Nessa, remember fucking on the haystack?”

She rubbed her backside. “I remember hay in places it shouldn’t have been.”

“Hey...” Jude snapped his fingers to get our attention. “My point is..., I would have gladly taken Brae to a remote place and married her without any of you clowns around.”

“And miss my fabulous toast?” Kyle nudged Jude with his shoulder. “Plus, Brae would have been sad, and we know how well you handle that.”

“This is true.” Jude leaned over and kissed his wife on the lips. “I’d do anything to make you happy, Sparky.”

“Thank you. And I for you,” she said in response. “But if you recall, I did make up for the fact we had a farmhouse wedding on our honeymoon.”

“Hmm... did you?” he asked teasingly. “I may need a reminder.”

Once the Sorens were done reflecting on their nuptials, Kyle ordered a round of champagne for the table and sparkling water for Brae, who insisted on hearing all the details. Luca shared everything that happened in Milan, and then I picked up where he left off. The only difference was our story included our reunion. The fact that we got married in the parking lot where our worlds collided... literally... brought about more sighs from the women.

“Vanessa, before I forget, I owe you a photoshoot.” Glancing at Kyle, I added, “You can join in as well.”

My suggestion had Vanessa smiling from ear to ear. “Ooh, like a sexy boudoir shoot?”

“Not a chance,” Kyle spit out. “Dante isn’t seeing us in our underwear.”

Rather than turn this into a debate, I shrugged. “I’ll leave it up to the both of you. Just call me when you decide, and we’ll set something up for when I get back.”

Brae, the romantic, smirked at Vanessa and Kyle. “You know, it could be an engagement portrait. You two are the only ones left. And...” She glared at them before spouting, “you better not go off and elope. We need a big bash... Kyle can afford it.”

“Technically,” Vanessa said with sarcasm, “Desiree isn’t married either.”

“Did I hear my name?” All heads flipped around and stared at the woman I assumed by her comment was Desiree.

“Holy shit!” Cassie exclaimed, jumping out of her chair and almost knocking over her glass of bubbly. “What are you doing here?” She threw her arms around her brunette friend, not realizing a line had formed behind her to do the same.

It took a full thirty minutes for the girls to all calm down. When Desiree was introduced to Sabrina and me, she said, “I feel like I know you both already.”

Knowing about her last phone conversation with my wife, I thanked her for helping Cassie realize we needed to be together.

Tonight turned out to be a night full of surprises. And with this new extended family that I was now part of, I knew there would many, many more surprises to come.

The End

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Acknowledgments

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A & J

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About A.M. Madden & Joanne Schwehm

A.M. Madden

A.M. Madden is a *USA Today* bestselling author, as well as 2016 eLit gold medalist for Best Romance Ebook and 2016 IPPY Award silver medalist for Best Romance Ebook.

A.M. is a wife, a mother, an avid reader of romance novels, and now an author.

“It’s all about the HEA.”

A.M. Madden is the author of the popular Back-Up series, as well as several other contemporary romances. She is also a published author with Loveswept/Random House.

Her debut novel was *Back-Up*, the first in The Back-Up series. In *Back-Up*, A.M.’s main character, Jack Lair, caused readers to swoon. They call themselves #LairLovers and have been faithful supporters to Jack, as well as to the rest of his band, Devil’s Lair.

A.M. truly believes that true love knows no bounds. In her books, she aspires to create fun, sexy, realistic romances that will stay with you after the last page has been turned. She strives to create characters the reader can relate to and feel as if they know personally.

A self-proclaimed hopeless romantic, she loves getting lost in a good book. She also uses every free moment of her time writing, while spending quality time with her three handsome men. A.M. is a Gemini and an Italian Jersey girl, but despite her Zodiac sign, nationality, or home state, she is very easygoing. She loves the beach, loves to laugh, and loves the idea of love.

A.M. Madden, Independent Romance Author.

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Joanne is a bestselling independent romance author and has written several contemporary romance novels. She strives to create relatable characters that readers will laugh and fall in love with... and maybe shed an occasional tear.

Above all else, she's a mother and wife and loves spending time with her family. She enjoys meeting new people, traveling, reading, relaxing on a beach, and shopping.

Joanne kept her writing private until the day she decided to publish *Unexpected Chance* in 2013. Waking up one morning to the voices of Alex Logan and Aubrey Ryan changed everything!

When she's not writing or devouring a great book, Joanne is an avid sports fan, especially when it comes to the New York Yankees and Dallas Cowboys. She also enjoys playing and watching golf.

Joanne loves everything about romance—she attributes this to her Italian upbringing. She believes everyone should have romance in their lives and hopes her books bring joy and happiness to readers. Joanne looks forward to sharing more love stories in her future novels.

A message from Joanne:

When that unexpected chance comes, take it. You never know what you could be missing. xoxo

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