



**Best Revenge**

Amber Scott

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## Chapter One

Elton knew this day would come, and of all days, why not this one? He'd barely walked through the door when the sharp knock forced him to re-zip his pants before they could come off for a blissful evening alone in socks and boxers. All day he'd thought of the cold beer, nearly hearing it humming inside the fridge, but he knew that knock. It wouldn't wait.

"Where is he?" Bianca Slattery's voice was firm and icy.

"He's not here," Elton said and leaned on the doorframe. His blood grew hot at the sight of her. Not good.

Bianca swung her glossy brown hair from her face. She narrowed her eyes and walked under the archway his arm made against the doorframe. He shut his eyes against the ache her floral scent created deep in his groin.

"I told you, he's not here." Elton watched her walk in, walk around the room. God, he loved the way she walked. It was a sway, like her hips led her instead of her feet. Elton shook his head before thoughts of her hips went any farther in the wrong direction.

"He's with someone," she said over her shoulder. But no pain hung in her words. Her perfect profile peeked from behind her sheath of hair. She stopped at the kitchen island and Elton could swear he saw her hand tremble when she laid it on the granite. But, it wouldn't be the first time his eyes wanted to see something that just wasn't there.

He did not want to be in the middle of this again. Jackson might be his best friend, but he was the planet's worst boyfriend. It wasn't the first time Bianca stood in his doorway looking far too good for his tired senses with the same question, or the same answer.

"Well, if he is, they aren't here," he said, not meaning to sound so harsh. He didn't want to make it worse for her; he just didn't want to deal with this mess again. He didn't trust himself alone with her, looking heartbroken.

It made him want to make her feel better in a bad way.

"He said he was with you," she said. "That you were working late on a proposal." Her voice sounded flat but her eyes were stormy when they pinned him.

"Well, he's not." No tears this time? No repeated questions looking for answers she, or he, would never find? Elton closed the door. All of Jackson's girls got to this point sooner or later. Why not her too? He was honestly surprised she'd taken six months repeatedly knowing and forgiving his friend for all his misdeeds.

Elton had a rough enough day without being this close to her, and he hung on to that excuse when he walked toward Bianca and prepared to make her leave. He ignored his body's response to her.

She swung around to face him fully as he approached. The scent of roses wafted on the breeze her hair created, and he nearly got hard from it. It had been too long since he'd been with a woman, and now just the scent of her was going to get him into trouble.

He didn't know how Jackson could ever think about another woman after seeing this one. Her skin was like cream, her eyes like hot honey. Elton shoved his hands into his pockets and forced his gaze onto the stainless steel refrigerator doors caging the now silent beer. He pictured himself drinking it in front of the game, alone. It helped. His

body relaxed, his erection eased.

She shook her head and crossed her arms. She must have come straight from work because she still wore tight black slacks and a scoop necked black shirt, her typical salon style. He wished she'd worn jeans and an oversized t-shirt instead. The clingy black material showed every line of her body and drew his eyes. He stepped closer. His thighs tingled and his prick roused again to her proximity. He stepped back.

She needed to leave before he did something stupid. She needed to leave while he could still think straight.

"I feel numb," she said. She turned away.

The view of her perfect, heart-shaped, well-endowed ass was no help. He envisioned it for the hundredth time bare, bent over the kitchen island. He'd grip those curvy hips with both hands and bring her down onto his stiff—.

He had to get her out of here.

The day's stress wore him out more than usual today and seemed to leave him more vulnerable to her. If only Jackson *was* working on a proposal. Starting a business could tighten the nerves of anyone he guessed, but then not everyone had this to come home to.

Jackson did, could, but chose instead to cheat. Elton didn't get it. No one deserved to be betrayed but Bianca somehow did even less. But it was not his business, and nobody was perfect.

"I'm not angry. I'm not sad. Not even hurt," she said, lowering one eyebrow in that way she had when she was thinking, then looked away. "It's over. Really and truly over."

Elton's gut flipped. He ignored it. She'd never said that before. But that was immaterial. She was still off limits, with Jackson or not. Untouchable.

"Well, Bianca. He's not here for you to tell him and I don't expect him anytime soon." More like at all—for the night.

She turned around. "So you've said." Her eyes flashed to his, making him shift his weight. "I can take a hint, Elton." She tilted her head and searched his face for something he couldn't name. "Do you want me to leave?"

It could only be his mind wanting to hear the question like he did. For a crazy moment, he swore she wanted to stay. Elton averted his eyes and nodded. Her cleavage peeking out of her blouse burned in his mind. If he looked at her any longer, he'd be hard and unable to disguise it in these damned loose boxers.

"I'm not sure why I came anyway. I knew he wasn't here. I guess I just wanted to say goodbye to you."

Elton looked up. He wouldn't ask why she'd said that. He knew they'd become close in the months since Jackson's last blunder, too close for any best friend's and off limits girlfriend to be. And asking her why would only make him want to keep her there more than he already did.

When she looked away, he was partly torn, partly relieved.

"Can I just use the bathroom?"

Elton half shrugged. But his heart beat faster.

She swayed past him. Roses. The door clicked shut. Elton closed his eyes and groaned. The regretful part of him itched to follow her, to stop her, to hold her. But, there wasn't any way around it. She was Jackson's girl. And when you've been friends for fifteen years, the code of brotherhood doesn't forgive girlfriend stealing, ex or not.

"Just make her leave," he said to no one.

Elton went to the fridge. With a hiss, he took out a beer, opened the cold import and drank it halfway down. Thinking back on it later, he blamed the alcohol.

He belched so satisfyingly loud he missed the bathroom door opening behind him.

\*

Bianca took a deep breath, drying her hands on a towel. Was she really going to do this? Fantasizing was one thing, acting a whole other. Yes, Jackson deserved it even if he'd never really find out. She wanted the piece of revenge seducing Elton offered. She wanted to leave knowing Jackson didn't get the best of her. Was he worth this?

An image of Jackson promising and begging again and again flashed in her mind. Liar. That was all Jackson was. But, it didn't signify anymore. She was through with him.

And far more than satisfying her anger, Bianca wanted to know what Elton Novey tasted like. Needed to know, really. And there was no longer a reason not to find out.

Bianca ran her fingers through her hair, nodded squarely at her reflection and took off her blouse. She could do this. She *would* do this. Her pants came next. If she could get naked for leering strangers four nights a week for two long years, she could for this man. But, it had been a while since anybody saw her body, and she actually cared what this man thought about what he'd see. She grimaced at her reflection. The yoga was paying off but still owed her some serious money.

Not every curve of her was soft and squishy; some were toned. Bianca removed her bra and panties, and blushed when she felt moisture between her thighs. Already, anticipation made its way from her belly to her groin.

The possibility of rejection had entered her mind, but quickly left when she had seen Elton at the apartment door. His undershirt snuggled contoured, hard muscle. Stubble shadowed his square jaw line; the muscle there had twitched. And the fire in Elton's eyes had quelled all her final fears.

He was worth the risk even if Jackson wasn't. Just one taste. Then she'd leave and never turn back, except to relish a very good memory. Not for the first time she wondered why it hadn't been Elton that night she'd met Jackson. Why not him? But, she couldn't change the past, being swept away by Jackson's easy charm and gorgeous smile.

After this, she would be able to look back without regret or shame. She could look back and savor a naughty little secret. A fantasy fulfilled.

Bianca turned in the mirror, fluffed her hair, posed several times, sucking in and arching, and then tentatively—painstakingly slowly—opened the door. She kept that image of him in her mind, those fiery eyes. He wanted her, too. She felt it. Now, all she had to do was make him act on it.

Elton stood with his back to her. The heat between her thighs throbbed again. With her first bold step there was no looking back. Her pulse quickened as she tiptoed up to him. She was about to feel every inch of him, best friend or not. It was her last, maybe only, chance.

She was ready, and each step closer got her bolder, the promise of her fantasy nearing reality's edge.

\*

She'd taken off her shoes and the first Elton sensed of her was the damn rose scent. His body almost instantly recognized what was happening long before his mind would accept it. He froze everywhere except one—his sudden, full erection. The blood rushed down, enhancing the pounding heartbeat in his throat.

He swallowed.

He flinched when her hand slid down his back and around his waist. He didn't breathe or move when Bianca pressed her body, unmistakably naked, against his. Her heat penetrated the fabric of his t-shirt. He nearly gasped as her hands glided down and caressed from his pecs to his waist.

She touched each muscle ridge appreciatively. He was glad to have the washboard line, reward for all those sit-ups after a night of her crying on his shoulder and all the other nights she snuck into his thoughts. His body pulsed. His blood rushed.

His breathing grew shallow as his temperature rose. Elton closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, determined not to groan in agonized pleasure no matter how many times he'd imagined her doing just exactly this. He tried hard to remember Jackson and what something like this would do to him, to them.

Not much, a sneaky voice inside said. No more than he'd done to her.

"Bianca," he said, pleading her to stop but her name was like aged whiskey and just tasted good in his mouth.

"Shhh," she said and pressed her cheek to him. "Don't speak."

Her nose touched his neck. She breathed in. She turned him around. He opened his eyes and looked at her. Her eyes reflected her desire. The power it gave him felt heady.

She wanted him. He couldn't help wonder—for how long? Days? Months? Had she spent sleepless nights fighting, wanting what seemed impossible to have?

Bianca pulled his undershirt up. He tugged it off. She pressed her glorious body to his. The skin on skin contact was almost too much. So soft, warm. Female. She stepped back and took his hand. He let her lead him to his bedroom. Visions of their bodies tearing apart his neatly made bed warred with his conscience.

He couldn't do this. Jackson might come home and even if he didn't...

But her body was divine, better than he'd imagined. Pink nipples, deep curves, firm high perfection. She even wore pink toenail polish, and he wanted to lick every toe then run his tongue up her leg, to the back of her knee, to the hollow of her inner thigh, to...

He had to stop her, or maybe she'd stop herself. But he followed her pull. Maybe she was just mad, wanted revenge and they'd come to their senses. Bianca closed his door and turned the lock.

His mind raced to find something reasonable to say that might sever the drag between their bodies. His mind emptied of everything except her. One touch. One taste. It didn't seem like too much to want.

Bianca stepped forward and pulled his hand to her mouth. Her eyes locked with his, she slipped one finger into her mouth and sucked. He'd never felt anything like it, or seen it, for that matter. Her tongue was warm and soft, the sucking a sensual massage. Her teeth grazed the tip. He flinched from the unexpected pleasure.

She pulled his finger out and let it make a wet popping sound. The cool air made him want to be back inside. He wanted to feel that mouth elsewhere, everywhere.

Bianca smiled, coyly tilted her head. She leaned against the door, her back arched, her legs demurely closed. Her eyes were heavy lidded. Not a shred of doubt shone in them. She knew what she was doing. Her choice was made, might have been before she walked in the door. Now, it was his turn to choose.

His body and his conscience argued for power. He didn't want to face the consequences of betraying Jackson. But, more so, he didn't want to never know what

he'd been missing. He needed to know her. So much it choked his throat and made him plant his legs, unmoving.

Bianca slowly opened his belt, staring at him all the while, waiting for him to stop her. He should, he knew. But, he didn't say a word.

The click of his pants unzipping echoed in his ears. The clank of his belt dropping to the floor in the loops of his pants sounded no alarm. He had already mentally shut it off.

Jackson shouldn't be home until late into the night. He rarely brought a conquest home. But, it wouldn't be unheard of to see him roll in sober and alone by seven-thirty.

Bianca stroked his chest. There was something in her eyes beyond the confidence and heat. Could it be hope? The same scared hope he wouldn't break the spell surrounding them?

Elton stepped out of his pants and kicked them out of the way. His erection strained for freedom against the boxers. He tore off his socks and nearly lost his balance. He laughed, feeling silly but not embarrassed. She laughed too, shyly covering her mouth, and it broke a barrier in him.

It hit him. He might not ever see her again, her smile, those dimples, those perfect lips. He'd never have a chance for this beyond this very moment with her. If he stopped her, and he knew he could, should, they could never go back. The chance would be gone.

With Jackson out of her life, she'd never look back, would want to keep him in the past and that meant Elton went there with him.

She must have seen the emotion in his expression because he'd barely regained his footing before she kissed him. Her mouth met his desperately. Her hands clutched his neck, her body pressed warm skin to his. He felt it too—a pleading from deep inside—and matched her kisses like he could devour her whole.

She tugged his boxers down. They caught on his erection and he fumbled to free it. She got there first and grabbed his cock. A throaty moan escaped her and reverberated into him. He breathed in her voice, her breath. His body jerked in her small hand. He could die in this heaven.

Bianca's hand stroked him. He cupped her small, pert breasts. Hard nipples met his exploring fingers and he massaged them in a circular motion. She moaned again. Knowing he made her tremble, hoping she felt the same way he did, Elton feared he'd lose all control. He promptly scooped her into his arms, tore back the sheet and laid her down.

She sank back, pulling him as though she couldn't let go. He returned his mouth to hers, trying to savor the taste, the soft velvety feel of her before all thought left him. From toes to nose, she lay against him, softly clinging. He breathed in her scent.

Her hands trailed tickling pleasure to his hips, teasing, gripping. She positioned herself beneath him, wet and ready to accept him. She smelled like sex. Elton groaned and pulled back. He didn't want it to be over yet. He didn't want to rush.

Bianca whimpered. "Please, Elton." She pressed herself, damp hot satin, against the tip of him. "Don't stop. Please."

Stop? He was beyond stopping. It was ending he couldn't have yet.

Elton dropped his head. He kissed her with all he had, all he ever wondered and felt about her, then slowly entered her swollen heat. She was sweet agony, slick and tight, and drew him in. He angled his hips to put pressure on her hardened clit as he withdrew and thrust.

Inward, upward, out. Bianca matched his driving hips with enthusiasm. Her nails dug into his skin. Finally, she was his. Really his.

He breathed as hard and fast and abandoned as she did, losing himself in the delicious sin. Elton fought to memorize her every inch, each second, so it would last. He needed it to last. His body tightened, ready to pour into her.

Elton stilled. He was determined she would climax before him. He licked her neck and gently sucked her. He let his teeth scrape down her skin.

"Bianca," he said and it felt like a plea. "God, Bianca, you feel so good."

She moaned and writhed on his shaft, against his body. He stroked and fought to follow her lead while he watched her face, her eyes shut, lips moist, for the pleasure to wash over it.

"You're so hot, so wet, I could die."

\*

Bianca opened her eyes in surprise at the shockwaves riding through her, radiating out and rippling. Her mind emptied of all thought beyond concentrating on the intense feeling. She sank into the fathoms of it. He smelled so good and felt so unbelievably wonderful. Finally he was real, and better than any fantasy.

She rode and clung to him as she came in tight gripping quakes, her pussy hugging and releasing him. She cried out loud with sheer mindless pleasure and he buried deep into her. As her waves of climax faded to afterglow, Elton tensed.

Bianca looked up. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head, but not to say no. "Did you hear that?"

Her stomach clutched. Hear what? She didn't want to know.

The sounds of the room seemed to bang like drums as they strained to listen.

It was Jackson. It had to be. If he found them... It wasn't supposed to happen that way. Elton was her little secret, for Jackson to never find out. They were friends. She didn't want or expect to end that. Ever.

"Elton?" Jackson called. Keys jangled. A hard knock sounded on the door.

She stared into Elton's wide eyes. He kept very still and, astonishingly, Bianca felt a throb deep inside of her pussy. Dear God, she was getting turned on. The door handle jiggled. Elton shut his eyes. The muscle in his jaw twitched.

Bianca's body shuddered again. She could cum. Of all things, she could actually orgasm within seconds. Again. And, worse, she wanted to. She arched her eyebrows and held her breath.

Elton opened his eyes. Surprise shone in them but he didn't look away.

All she had to do was wriggle, tilt, press a bit, and ooohhhh, dear lord! A shockwave pulsed through her pussy, another sweet spiral followed in quick succession. And she couldn't stop, didn't want to and dared him with her eyes to be mad.

"He's probably passed out," Jackson's voice muffled outside the door. "Oh well, some other time."

"Okay," a distinctively feminine voice said.

Another wave coursed through Bianca. She let out her held breath in a soft hiss of bliss.

Elton smiled curiously and stroked out of her, then in again and came undone, throbbing into her. Deep satisfaction took seat inside of Bianca as she watched the haze of orgasm cloud his eyes and soften his face.



\*

Elton collapsed, trying to balance as much of his weight on his elbows and off of her as he could. He couldn't believe how good she felt, or how complete he became.

He couldn't believe Jackson hadn't found them. As if in answer, he heard the front door close and the bolt turn into place.

As the last shudders of pleasure left him, he rolled to her side and wrapped his arms around her. Sweat dampened her hair and cheeks. Their breathing quieted.

The hush of rain dripping on the roof and windows enveloped them. He didn't speak for fear of ruining the perfection of it.

He didn't know when she would leave and knew she wouldn't stay. He didn't want her to. So, he lay with her in his arms for one time, kissing her shoulder, etching her into his mind. Regret would soon come pounding, but for now, he had heaven.

## Chapter Two

Bianca threw her keys on the counter and ran for the phone. The machine picked up before she could find the cordless that always seemed to be missing from the base.

"Hey, Bianca, it's me," Jackson said to her relic aged answering machine. "Listen, I'm up to my eyeballs with this deal so I won't make dinner either. I tried your cell but it went straight to voicemail." He paused. "I know how you get, so, don't worry. I'll call you when I can. Love you."

"Yeah right," Bianca said and plopped onto her deep loveseat. "Liar. Cheat." Well, liar at least made her feel better. Cheat, well, that one she might have to change.

With a squeaky meow, Jasper greeted her from his favorite windowsill. He rose and stretched in an arc of black and white fur before meeting her on the loveseat. She scratched him behind his ears, still dazed.

Her whole body felt so loose and so thoroughly sexed. Even on the soft cushions, sitting down reminded her of what had just transpired. Sexed. It was the best word to describe the full, fleshy feeling Elton left her with. Mmmm. Elton.

"I fucked Elton," she said to Jasper in a whisper, needing to say the words out loud. Still, they felt unreal, almost unnatural.

Jasper purred and kneaded the pillow, completely oblivious of her distraction.

"Did you hear me, cat? I fucked Elton." Saying "fucked" the second time felt better. Dirtier, but cleaner, too. It was such a descriptive word.

She couldn't very well call what she'd done lovemaking, or scrumping, or screwing. It had been too fierce for those words, too strong and wild. Fucked was better. Hotter. It encompassed the heat and desperation they'd kissed and pressed and rutted with.

She never guessed underneath the easy-going façade lay so much passion. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She had hoped.

A tremor rippled through her as she remembered.

"I fucked Elton," she said again, softly into the quiet room. Elton, who had been there for her; Elton, who Jackson loved like a brother. It was too late to look back now.

Jasper squeaked.

The city lights blurred through rain on her window. Her mind mirrored the view. Bright and blurry. She had known what she intended when she went over to that apartment. She always thought she wasn't the vengeful type. Even six months of Jackson getting and blowing chance after chance didn't make her vengeful.

Jackson hadn't originated the idea of revenge. Elton had, with one too many hugs. A few too many of those boyishly lopsided "aw shucks" kind of smiles. And Jackson's frequent disappearing acts made it easy for her to seek out Elton's company. They were almost friends.

But, then, seducing Elton became just about all she could think of. She'd catch herself so deep in thought about it that she'd have to ask a client to repeat the style description more than once. It wasn't just unprofessional it was embarrassing. She had a schoolgirl level crush on her boyfriend's buddy.

She'd planned out so many different scenarios—in lingerie, getting him drunk, playing a truth or dare and daring him, strip teasing for him—that the one she finally

chose when she walked in the door seemed rather tame.

After weeks of wondering what on earth she was still doing with Jackson, after hearing her best friend, Carrie, sound like a broken record player for even longer, why now? Why not just leave? Why go see Elton at all?

Valentine's Day. It had been the first time Bianca saw Elton as more than Jackson's partner in crime, as more than the nice guy who dried her tears. Bianca came to their condo early to lay out chocolates and a card for Jackson as a surprise. She was beginning to believe he might be serious about changing this time. And she knew personally how much everyone deserved a second chance.

And she'd get to say hi to Elton, maybe have a beer before she left.

Elton had answered in nothing but a white towel wrapped around his waist. Well, that and a sheen of dripping, beading, water. The towel exposed the dent of his hip muscles, the smooth line of stomach muscle. His wet hair dripped onto his face and the idea of licking one of the drips off of his stubbly chin swam into her head and never went away. She'd lost her breath. She'd lost her mind.

The awkward silence followed by him catching her lick her lips, staring—gawking really—had only made her blush worse. She'd mumbled something lame about Valentine's Day. With his loopy smile, he'd told her he didn't have one and suddenly she had to bolt.

She'd seen him as a man, virile and sexy that Friday, and now she'd found out how much of one he really was. Telling herself it was secret revenge, that it would never come out and never really hurt Jackson, was no more than a flimsy excuse to act on her growing attraction to Elton.

She knew it. And did not feel bad about it either. How could she after feeling him on her, in her, discovering such intense pleasure actually existed?

She'd left work early, showered and changed into work clothes so he wouldn't suspect. And in case Jackson for once wasn't lying. On the drive there, she'd rationalized all over the place about why she should and why she shouldn't, and even partly hoped Elton wouldn't be home. But he was.

The ringing phone jolted Bianca from her thoughts and back to the rain on the window. She found the receiver next to her, under the pillow Jasper massaged. She read the caller ID. It was Carrie. Thank goodness. Carrie was the one person on this earth who did not judge her, who loved her for all her flaws and mistakes. Hell, she was one of the few who even knew which ones Bianca could claim.

Bianca pressed the talk button feeling like a sixteen-year-old about to tell someone she'd finally gone all the way. Excitement skipped down her belly.

"Hello, gorgeous," Carrie said. "Have I got some dirt for you. You are never going to believe this, Bee. Never. But, go ahead and guess."

Bianca smiled hugely. She hugged a pillow to her chest and chewed her thumb. "What?" She couldn't help enjoying her secret a moment longer.

"Bee," Carrie said impatiently. "You have to guess."

"Okay," she said, unable to contain the giggle in her throat. "Um, Bethany won a date with Josh Hartnett."

Bethany, their neighboring stylist at the salon, liked to invent date stories which always starred Josh Hartnett. Bianca had a soft spot for the woman who couldn't be much older than she was but seemed lonely. No, not lonely precisely, isolated maybe. Even

though Bethany didn't date much, her stories of Josh painted a picture perfect guy.

"No," Carrie said. "Although, she will love that one. Try again."

"Give me a hint," Bianca said, softly banging her knees together.

"I fired Stella Grabs-A-Lot today," Carrie sang over the line, emphasizing each word with severe enunciation

"No." She didn't believe it. Stella was Bianca's opposite chair neighbor and she swore the woman helped herself to every single product Bianca owned. Technically she wasn't the stylist's boss, just the landlord. Each of them had their own private stock kept locked up individually. She could never prove it, but just knew it the week Stella got hired, when Bianca began going through her tubes of color in record time.

"Yes!" Carrie's voice was appropriately dramatic. Bianca could imagine her bobbing her head, her wide eyes even wider. "I caught her with her hands in your cookie jar. Well, so to speak. Wait a minute. Sounds a little like I was saying your Hoo-Ha, didn't it? Well, you know what I mean, your cupboard."

Bianca laughed a little too loudly.

"Are you drunk?" Carrie said.

"No. Why?" Shit.

"Because, I'm funny, but I'm not that funny."

Bianca covered her mouth with her hand, but couldn't stop the giggle. It was like bubbles were bursting in her belly and floating out on every laugh.

"Alright. Spill it." Carrie's tone was only partly playful. They knew each other too well. Two years of dancing, planning and school together did that to friends, she supposed.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Carrie," Bianca said, trying to sound believable.

"Bianca Slattery, you little slut, spill it!"

Bianca took a deep breath. She almost didn't want to tell Carrie. Not because she would judge her. Carrie did not judge. Not anyone. It was one of the best parts about her and too few seemed to notice it. And Carrie had long ago declared it her mission to rid Bianca of Jackson by any means necessary that didn't put her in prison.

"I'm just tired, I guess," Bianca said. She tried to yawn but it didn't work. She was too awake, too alive from feeling Elton. "And yes that was funny. From now on I'm calling it my cookie jar. Hey, it can be our code word in front of clients." She was impressed with how evenly she managed to speak and ignored the little voice in her head asking why she wasn't telling Carrie about Elton. "So, tell me every detail. I want to feel like I was right there."

Carrie obliged, and fifteen minutes later, they hung up. Bianca would have utterly failed a pop quiz on the story she just heard though. Her mind kept wandering back into Elton Novey's pants. His skin. His cock. She still couldn't believe how amazing the sex was. She and Jackson only got a few romps in before the cheating streak when she'd ended all sex with him. In comparison, it was average at best. Jackson's dick was average, his kiss was average, his technique was definitely below average. She wondered if that was why Jackson cheated. Could it be he just wanted more? Why not just be single then? Why lie? It was as though he liked it that way.

Bianca yawned finally after sitting in the silence for who knew how long, just thinking. It was late. She drew herself her nightly hot bath. She stepped into the warm

water as the tub filled, laid her head into the air pillow and sighed.

Elton Novey.

The water thundered into the basin. His spicy scent was still on her skin, stronger when she got wet. Bianca's nipples hardened, tingled. The air filled with steam. She reached her foot under the stream of water to test its temperature and feel the twisting pressure run between her toes.

She didn't need to do it. Elton had more than satisfied the lust that had built up in her. But, thinking about him made her want to. Carefully, she slid downward, stretching her legs up the tiled wall. The water depth barely reached her ears and she laid in it, spreading her legs underneath the torrential pour.

Bianca gasped. The water pressure acted as a swirling, vibrating dick licking her lips and opening. She gyrated in slow little circles so the liquid filled her up, roared into her then out to nudge her clitoris. The fluid flicked in and out, around in wild but constant strokes.

Elton's mouth, his tongue licking her lips filled her mind. She twisted her nipples, imagining his wonderfully soft touch on them instead. Her breathing grew hard and she let herself freely moan and writhe as her orgasm inched closer.

Elton, God, yes. Those arms, those shoulders. Those eyes burning for her as he slid up. In. Out.

She climbed the peaks of pleasure, wishing it were him driving deep into her, his stiff cock sliding in and out, rocking her to climax. In a burst, Bianca cried out as her body shuddered under the water's touch. Pulse after pulse of sweet pleasure washed through her body, leaving it limp and panting.

Catching her breath and sliding back, Bianca felt satisfied but not in the same way. Before, her bath would get her through any dry spell, not to mention a few wet ones. For the first time, a man was better. Elton was better.

Bianca took a deep, shaky breath. Her one time only experiment at Jackson's game looked like it might become much more if she let it. With a twinge of guilt, Bianca found herself plotting the next time she could get Elton naked.

### Chapter Three

“What is with you today?”

Elton’s gaze snapped from the coffee shop window. It was the fourth time in as many hours Jackson had to get his attention. He’d been daydreaming all day long like a teen in geometry class. Soon, Jackson would be throwing paper wads at his head. Literally.

“Long week, I guess,” Elton said and adjusted his laptop screen.

“You need a social life, my man,” Jackson said. “A little tail would do you wonders.”

“Yeah,” he said and nearly choked on his latte. “I guess so.”

“What about Bianca’s friend Carrie. Have you met her yet?”

“No.” Elton meant no thanks not no I haven’t met her.

“She’s hot,” Jackson said, nodding. “She looks like a porn star. You know huge tits, bleach blonde, tan.”

Elton remembered although not in those terms. His answer was definitely, no. And would have been even if Bianca hadn’t lain naked in his bed all last night. The image of her nude body under him, glistening with their sweat, her lips open in a moan sent tingles up his thighs. Elton rubbed his legs. A hard-on was about to follow if he didn’t get his mind focused on work.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jackson was saying. “I’ll set the whole thing up.”

Elton scowled at his screen trying to recall what Jackson meant but his mind on Bianca clouded everything up.

“Set what up?” he asked, knowing better than to trust Jackson to set anything up, including business. Well sometimes including business. Most times, he had to admit his friend’s charm did wonders for the online magazine’s startup. Most times.

If Jackson brought another article up on how to build a stripper pole in one’s bedroom again though, Elton might have to swing. Classy, sporty, stylish, the image Elton wanted for his baby, did not include beefcake centerfolds or strippers. Alcohol ads? Fine. Pabst Blue Ribbon ads? No, thanks.

“See what I mean?” Jackson said. “Man, you’re gone. You may as well take the day off. When was the last time you had a Saturday off anyway?”

Elton scowled deeper and rubbed his forehead. Bianca’s mouth speaking his name lingered there. He shook his head.

“I can’t honestly say,” Elton said. It was true and not just because of his wandering dirty mind.

Since they started the Internet magazine a year ago, he’d been at it seven days a week. He’d even worked on New Year’s Eve, a personal low point in his book, but necessary. They would soon be a true author-paying magazine, if they could land just one more solid advertising client, that is. A jewelry ad, maybe. Then the few holidays sacrificed now would make for far better ones in the future. Besides, he didn’t have anything else to do. As Jackson pointed out, he didn’t have much of a social life.

“Exactly,” Jackson said, clapped his shoulder and put his own laptop into a designer briefcase. “You’re going to burn out if you keep it up, my friend. Seriously, go do

something, anything. Because you're not being productive like this and I doubt you will be."

Elton closed his laptop and leaned back in the vinyl chair. The stretch felt good and with a nod and wave, Jackson left him there. The lunch crowd would be milling into the Internet coffee lounge soon. Maybe Jackson was right. Maybe it was useless to try to work like this.

He was supposed to be able to make his own hours, or at least that was one of the reasons he used to start this gig. Be his own boss. Make his own hours.

All he could think about was her. And sadly, he didn't feel a bit of guilt over it. Seeing Jackson this morning should have triggered intense remorse. Enough to make him squirm in his seat, itching to confess and beg forgiveness. He felt just the opposite. When they met this morning to touch base and compare progress notes, he'd somehow felt better. It didn't make any sense, and that bothered Elton about as much as sleeping with Bianca should have.

Bianca. He shifted in his seat to help hide his growing erection. Even her name was sexy. It suited her. Elton stared out the tall window at the scattered pedestrians. What was Bianca doing at that very moment?

\* \* \* \*

"Another cancellation?" Carrie said, folding the piece of foil over her client's hair. "How convenient for you."

Bianca rolled her eyes. She knew Carrie was only teasing her, that she wasn't at all jealous. If anything, she sympathized. Saturday was one of the busiest days in the salon and three color cancellations meant she'd done only two walk-ins and not much else. Saturdays paid the rent on this place and it felt more like a Tuesday morning—leisurely—and for some odd reason, it wasn't sending her into a panic.

Carrie neither. Although, Carrie was probably the more laid back of the two of them. She let stress roll right off her back, just like the proverbial duck. Even on their worst nights at the club, when she couldn't pay a guy to give him a lap dance, Carrie didn't worry. Bianca wished she could be so sure of herself.

Instead of panicking today though, Bianca sat in the swivel chair behind the hostess's desk, manning the phones while the girl picked up lunch. Every one of the eight chairs in the place was filled, except hers. Even Bethany had had a good run of it and she usually was the one with the bad luck.

Flipping through the magazine, Bianca didn't read a thing, let alone see a single picture. Her mind was on Elton. She wanted him wet, like on Valentine's Day. She wanted to lick the water off his smooth tanned skin. She wanted to explore him with her hands and mouth unlike before when they were too rushed by need. And uninterrupted this time, although it had turned her on, like masturbating when someone might walk in.

Her clit sprang to life. Her pussy moistened. Jeeze.

Bianca ran a hand over her forehead, through her hair. She needed to see him again. What scheme could she come up with to see him again? Maybe tonight. Maybe she could pull a Jackson move and say she was working late. There'd only been a handful of times she'd worked past eight-thirty though. Only emergency help-I've-dyed-my-hair-pink kind of crises ever kept her late. Maybe, though, if she...

"Hello? Earth to Bianca?"

Bianca looked up at Bethany, her cheeks stinging. Bethany's gaze narrowed suspiciously on her. Thankfully, they weren't good enough friends for Bethany to voice the questions clear in her eyes. Not that Bianca hadn't tried, but her coworker seemed too shy, too private to make friends with yet. Carrie was though and Bianca needed to be more careful. She didn't know exactly why but she couldn't tell Carrie about Elton yet. She hadn't even dealt with dumping Jackson, or told Carrie as much. She should. Carrie would be proud of her.

"Are you going to answer that?" Bethany's eyebrows arched above her suspicious eyes.

Bianca gave her a serene look and picked up.

"Cutting Edge Salon," Bianca answered, smiling at Bethany. Private or not, she didn't want to make an enemy of Bethany.

"Bianca, is that you? It's Elton."

Bianca's whole body pulsed with heat. Carrie approached the desk as well and snatched Bianca's magazine away. Her client was ready to pay.

"Can you hold please?" she said, swallowing her heartbeat.

"Uh, yeah, sure," he said.

Bianca didn't know what else to do. Until she broke up with Jackson, he was a dirty little secret, her awful infidelity, and Carrie was standing right in front of her.

Bianca pressed the red button to hold the call and helped Carrie's client. But, once the girl paid and left with double kisses and a hug from "the best", Carrie just stood there, thumbing through the stupid magazine. At least Bethany hadn't stayed.

"So Shane and I are having our first ever dinner party next Friday night and you are invited, of course. And I was thinking maybe your sister would like to come, but she's single, right? I was going to keep it to couples only, but since no one we know seems to have a serious significant other, and since *you* won't have to come with anybody...what do you think?"

Bianca didn't miss the not so subtle reminder of what Carrie thought of Jackson but all she could think about was of Elton, waiting. "I'll have to think about it. Why a dinner party?"

"I don't know. I guess it just sounds sophisticated. Really it's just an excuse to show everyone the house and drink wine. Shane is really into it though. You should see him—he's got invitations picked out and a theme—are you going to get that?" Carrie said, when the phone began beeping insistently.

She hadn't forgotten about the call. How could she when he'd been lodged in her mind all night and day? Bianca didn't know what to say to him. But if she didn't pick up, Carrie might. Carrie would grill her if any heterosexual male other than Jackson called for her. Few hetero men ever called for a colorist appointment and Elton couldn't sound gay if his life depended on it. There would be a full interrogation.

"Thank you for holding." Bianca held her breath. Would he realize she had an audience or just think she was being cold?

"Hi."

God, he sounded hot. Why had she never noticed the low huskiness to his voice?

"Ca—can I help you?" She wanted to sigh and twirl her hair, spin her chair in circles.

Carrie glanced at her, showed her a picture in the magazine of some lead singer



straddling a chair. She didn't seem to sense Bianca's nervousness. A thankful first.

"Is this a bad time?" Elton asked. "I mean, I can call your cell if it's better. I don't want to get you into trouble."

"No," she said too quickly. Carrie would answer that too, helpful as she liked to be. "And I own the place so there'd be no trouble. I can't discipline myself," she said low.

"No, but I could help. Sounds like fun." Elton said, his voice dropping to a deep intimate growl. Excitement zipped down her belly and twirled between her legs. She saw herself bent over his leather sofa, getting spanked then caressed in turn. Jeeze.

"Is it one of those reps? Tell them we're not interested," Carrie said. "Tell them we have a rep."

Bianca shook her head and held up a finger. "Would you like to make an appointment?" she said, a touch meaningfully. Carrie moved back to her chair to await her next appointment and Bianca sagged in her chair.

"Yes, actually," Elton said. He paused. "I don't really know how to do all this. I, uh, I was wondering if you were free today? But, obviously you're working so—."

"Yes," she cut off. They could go to her apartment. "What time?"

"How's now?"

Now? Could she really go now? "Perfect. I'll put you in," she said.

Carrie was mouthing "no" from her chair and pointing to her watch. "Not me, I have a client coming now."

Bianca nodded.

"Half an hour?" she asked as quietly as possible, tucking a tress behind her ear.

"Where?" Elton asked.

"Do you remember where I live?" She could almost hear him breathing.

"Yeah," he whispered back to her, teasingly.

"Okay." She swallowed against a giggle rising in her throat.

"Okay," he said. "I'll see you in half an hour. Should I bring some wine or something?"

Bianca coughed. "No. I have some."

"Okay," he said.

"Okay." She could hear his smile. "Bye."

"Bye."

She hung up and bit her lips to stop the girlish smile threatening her cheeks. She spun the chair around. Bethany stood at the counter with a far too knowing expression and Bianca's soaring happiness halted mid-flight.

"I just wanted to tell you I can take an appointment if they need one today," Bethany said, half-heartedly. "I'm open until three."

Bianca nodded, forcing her features to stay smooth despite the fire in her cheeks.

"They needed it for tomorrow." How much had Bethany heard?

"I'm not coming in on a Sunday, Bee," Carrie called over the magazine. "You can work weekends as much as you like but I'm not."

"Don't worry, Carrie," Bethany replied, walking back to her station. "Bianca's going to take him." Her tone was unmistakably knowing.

Bianca refused to look up and risk acknowledging the double meaning. How did Bethany know it was a man on the phone? Crap. She was not practiced at this sort of thing. Aside from her two-year stint at exotic dancing, she'd never been sneaky. Well,

once in high school, but she'd been caught faster than she could say 90210.

Walking out now would only make things look worse. But, seeing Elton one last time, kissing his mouth, touching his body, was worth the risk. After all, it was only Bethany. What could she say even if she *did* have someone to listen to it? I heard Bianca on the phone with a man and now she's leaving work early after three cancellations? Carrie would only be intrigued and maybe force a confession, but she wouldn't stop her.

"Do you remember who's teaching Monday's class, Bee?"

"Huh?" What class? Oh yeah, the product class, the one about business planning. Carrie had found it for them, part of their ongoing pursuit of success. "Um, no." She hadn't even thought about the class. Or about work.

"Bring a notebook so we can go straight there, all right?" Carrie said, looking intently for a nod over her magazine.

What would she do without Carrie? "Sure. We'll see each other before then though."

"Yes, but you know me. I like to be prepared and I don't want anything to get in the way of making that class. What with the time slot and limited seating, plus it won't come along again for months. I've heard really good things about it."

So had Bianca. "Don't worry. We won't miss it."

Bianca grabbed her things as casually as possible, ignoring her shaky hands. She announced her departure, dismissed Carrie's pleas to stay and just missed the hostess on her way back in with lunch. When she saw Michelle coming, arms full of food sacks and drinks, she hurried the other way, feeling Bethany's dubious expression long after she got to her car.

Guilt. It started to nag at her just a little. She should have told Carrie about last night. She shouldn't be skulking around, missing work, missing out on money to pay the lease.

It all became irrelevant compared to the need to feel Elton against her, inside of her, one more time. She deserved it.

Bianca reached her apartment in record time. For once, the elevator was working and took her nonstop to the seventh floor. Jasper stretched and yawned—all the cat did was sleep it seemed—as she bolted through the door, tossed her keys on the counter, and scrambled to straighten up her messy place. For once she cursed the luxury of undressing the second she walked in and leaving her clothes anywhere she wanted.

Bianca looked at the clock. Ten minutes and he'd be here. She hauled an armload of black clothes into her small laundry closet and shoved the door closed. She straightened the bed's covers and sheets and tossed her totally unsexy stuffed bear under it. She raced to the bathroom, brushed her teeth, mussed up her hair and changed, all in ten minutes flat.

As she spit a foamy mouthful into the sink, an image formed in her head: Elton's face if she answered the door in nothing but black stiletto heels. But, then, she realized, she'd already sort of done as much last night. She searched her memory for anything she owned that might be a hot substitute for bare skin and high heels. Anything clean, lacy...

She went to her bureau and rummaged through the top drawer. She had five more minutes at most. But, nothing seemed suitable. She hadn't shopped for lingerie in so long. Then she thought of a towel. She could say she was about to shower and ask him to join her, let it slip off of her as she walked him into the bathroom... Yes! Her body surged at the thought of them clinging to each other in hot, steaming water. She could lick the drips from his chin.

With one last glance in the mirror, Bianca went to the kitchen to pull out a good bottle of wine. He knocked. She almost dropped the bottle. With a clang, she set down the Merlot and corkscrew, wiped her hands on her jeans and took a deep breath. So much for the towel. Maybe next time, oh—wait—there wasn't going to be a next time.

She should have looked in the peephole first.

## Chapter Four

It was Jackson standing outside her door. And he had flowers. Not just a couple of roses, either. Nope, not Jackson. He held a bouquet so enormous it hid most of his face and shoulders. Not enough for her to mistake who he was though, or why he was here.

Thankfully, he mistook her open mouth and hand to heart as delight over the riot of violet and pink. Too bad this wasn't her first similar bouquet and another person hadn't delivered them. That would be delightful.

"Beautiful flowers for my beautiful flower," Jackson said cheekily and handed them to her, sloshing water from the vase onto her bare toes as he walked in.

"What are these for?" Bianca said. Not that she really wanted to know or couldn't guess. The words just came out while her mind shot into panic. Fast. Elton could show up any second. He could be on the elevator right then, pressing her floor, smiling that smile of his.

"Forgive me, Bianca," Jackson said. "I've been working too much. I've neglected you. Neglected us. Last night, I should have been here with you." His hands cupped over his heart.

Bianca's heart skipped. Last night. All she could think about was Elton rocking into her body, bringing her the most amazing orgasm she ever had and all because Jackson lied and cheated again. And now he might screw up her chance to experience Elton again, or worse, run into him. The last thing she wanted was to harm his friendship with Elton. She knew how much they'd been through thanks to Elton recounting the stories after she asked him how they could be so different and be so close between Kleenex's.

Her stomach tightened. She could almost thank Jackson for what he did last night, for what it made her do. But, he had to leave. She set the vase down, ignoring the clumsy clatter of glass against countertop.

"Jackson, you need to go," she said with a huff and threw her hands up. "I'm... I'm too angry to deal with you right now." Bianca fumbled with her words. It wasn't the time or place to handle this break up and she'd settle for an exit—for now. "The flowers are lovely, really, but I ... I need time to ... to think. You lied about working last night. I know you lied, so, please just go."

Jackson frowned, looking away like a kicked puppy. But she knew that look. It could melt a glacier if he wanted it to. He shoved his hands into his pockets and said nothing. Bianca's heart slammed in her chest. She wouldn't give in. He was a liar. She had no reason to feel bad. Well, not at least as far as he knew. She held the door open, gesturing outward.

Wordlessly, Jackson finally nodded and left.

Bianca could hardly believe her luck. For once, he didn't argue, or lie or try to explain. He pressed the elevator button and turned back around, ready to say something but Bianca put her hand up, silencing him.

"I'll call you," she said and watched the double doors close on his pitiful, all too familiar, countenance. She would call him. At some point. And she would end it pleasantly and civilly. At some point. Soon.

She closed up her little home wondering what she should do with the slightly gaudy

flowers, and what Elton would think of them. They were too big to hide and too obvious to lie about whom they were from. And why lie to him anyway?

“Jasper, remind me to look in the peephole when I’m expecting afternoon sex with my almost ex-boyfriend’s best friend, will you?”

Jasper blinked and squeaked a meow. Some help he was. But then, he loved her no matter what, warts and all.

Ten minutes later, she thought Elton would never get there. She should have been grateful for the extra time to calm down, to prepare, but it only made her anxious. Maybe he’d run into Jackson in the garage. Or, maybe he’d seen Jackson coming up with flowers and changed his mind.

Or maybe he just changed his mind about it, about her. No. He’d come.

Jeeze. She’d almost answered in a towel of all things. At least Jackson wouldn’t be back. He always gave her time to calm down when he screwed up. So, if she wanted to now, she could still...

Quickly, Bianca ran to her bathroom and stripped. Elton knocked right as she donned her fluffiest white towel, the last of the set, the one she couldn’t bear to use yet and ruin. She peeked to make sure it was him, took a steadying breath and opened the door as coolly as possible considering her hammering pulse.

“You’re late,” she said and leaned against the doorframe.

His eyes widened, seemed to drink her appearance in. His pupils dilated in a flash, making his gray eyes look wolfish. The same rush from seeing him returned, filling her senses up.

“You’re incredible,” he said and looked as awestruck and breathless as he sounded.

Uh, she could eat him up. One look like that and she felt more beautiful, more powerful than ever. A girl could get used to it. Her body nearly vibrated with anticipation, itching for his touch. Her thighs grew achy, her core got wet.

He looked so incorrigible in his simple khakis and white button up shirt, she couldn’t resist grabbing and pulling him in by his yellow tie. “Come in,” she said, and met little resistance.

His eyes flashed again and he followed her through the threshold.

“Nice flowers,” he said. “I pictured you as more of a daisy kind of girl, though. Or sunflowers.” His voice betrayed the difficulty he had speaking the casual words.

Bianca smiled but didn’t tell him how right he was. He already knew her too well. She didn’t need this to become something she couldn’t walk away from.

“It’s so hot out, I thought I’d take a cool shower,” she said and lowered her lashes.

She didn’t have to say more. Elton loosened his tie, yanked it off and unbuttoned his shirt. She led him to her bathroom, her favorite room, stifling a giddy giggle. The tub was deep and wide and plants hung in each corner creating a spa-like, exotic feel she adored.

Bianca turned on the water, letting her cheeks peek out from her towel as she bent over. Elton audibly inhaled at the sight. Part of her wanted to squirm, to laugh. But, most of her was so aroused she only flushed with warmth.

When the water ran right between hot and cold, Bianca turned around. She felt a small moment of awkwardness over the intimacy of it. If he felt it too, it didn’t show.

Elton stood ready in all his glory, his erection pointing skyward. His eyes were cloudy and heavy-lidded with want. Painstakingly slowly, Bianca pulled the towel open, swallowing back the flutter in her throat, and let the cotton fall to the tiled floor. She ran

her hands through her hair and tossed it, letting the tresses fall in waves about her shoulders and breasts.

The three-foot gap between them felt like a river. She could feel the current of attraction pull him in yet she couldn't move. Elton's eyes roved over her every dip and curve, immobilizing her. All awkwardness was forgotten under his molten gaze as well as her own as she took in the Adonis-like vision of manhood before her.

His cock visibly jerked as his gaze fell to the apex of her thighs. He looked so appreciative of the bare landscape and it made her impossibly wetter. How could one man do this to her without a single touch? How could the memory of last night be enough to awaken her so thoroughly?

Male muscle and smooth skin sculpted Elton's every line, drawing her gaze downward as well. The gods blessed him with a perfectly shaped and sized tool of pleasure. And he knew how to use it.

He made her feel like a goddess ready to be worshipped as he stood there, allowing a silence to engulf them. They had one last time to devour each other. This time they would do it slowly. They could explore every inch. She saw his intentions, felt them.

As though reading her mind, Elton stepped closer and knelt before her. He looked up as if for permission. Bianca parted her legs and reached for his face. He licked her belly, sending ripples of sensation downward as she ran her fingers through his hair. He sucked her skin and cupped her ass, pulling her hips forward like fruit ready to be gulped.

When his tongue reached the topmost part of her clitoris and licked softly down, shockwaves of pleasure ran down her legs. Bianca reached for the wall to steady herself. Her pussy swelled further in ready, creaming expectancy. She wanted to push him down and ride his stiff cock right there on the floor. But, the water showering down behind her kept her focused on the fantasy.

Gently, she pulled his face from her slit. He stood but didn't speak. She stepped into the shower, holding his hand.

The water was perfect. Little chills trickled down her skin as she stepped into it, pulling him with her. Wet, they touched and pressed. Slowly. The water ran over them, between them. His skin's heat contrasted deliciously with the cool water. Her nipples tightened, rubbing against his chest. Hard against soft. Hot against cool.

Bianca pulled him closer and closed her eyes, licking the dripping water from his chin. She could taste her juices on him and moaned softly. His rough stubble and salty skin was better than she ever imagined. And all the while he waited, following her lead, eager to please. God, what took her so long to get to this, to him? Her resolve broke. Hungrily, she kissed his mouth, suckling in his soft lips, tasting his tongue on hers.

Elton's hands laced into her hair, a low groan escaping his lips as he returned each kiss. He matched her fever with his own. Desperately, she kissed and touched and stroked his back, his steely buttocks, his waist, reveling in every kiss and caress he gave back until her need became too much.

His cock lay against her belly, demanding, throbbing, teasing.

"Bianca," Elton groaned, a wonderfully pained sound. "I need you. I'm sorry, I just can't wait any longer. Where?"

Whimpering, Bianca turned off the water, ripped open the curtain and led him to her bed. She couldn't wait either. Their wet bodies tumbled into the sheets, shivering but not from the cool air.

Bianca grasped his cock, impressed again by its size. It was large, hard perfection. She explored it with both hands as Elton cupped her breasts and ran his tongue over her collarbone. She opened her legs and pressed her need against his waist. Her orgasm loomed already. But, she wanted to wait, to hold out until she was ready to beg. And Elton deserved a tit for his tongue tat.

Quickly, she scooted down to take him into her mouth, gently pushing him down as she slid down his body. God, he even tasted good there. Clean, male. She traced the tip with her tongue, stroking his length and cupping his tightening balls.

Elton's hips rose. He gripped each side of his pillow. He looked so sexy—his jaw clenched but mouth parted to bare his clenched teeth, eyes watching her, and it was intoxicating. She wanted him to feel pleasure so intense that he never forgot her, that he would compare all others to her memory and they'd be left wanting.

Bianca suckled his soft tip and rolled her tongue in a wave against it. The salty taste of pre-cum told her she was doing exactly what she'd set out to—blow his mind.

"Stop," Elton whispered, pulling her upward. "You have to stop or you're going to make me cum."

She almost didn't. Making him cum, tasting it, was tempting. But, this wasn't the time for showing off. As much as she'd enjoy his shock as she nursed an orgasm from his big cock, she wanted to fuck him more. She wanted to feel her pussy clench around him in spasm after sweet spasm, falling into oblivion, to memorize the entire experience.

"I need you inside of me," she said and climbed on top of his hips.

Elton groaned like an animal and it made her body throb. "God, yes," he said, bringing his mouth to a taut nipple.

With soft twirls, he tantalized each breast sending tingles down Bianca's belly, coiling her need tighter. Her body ached for him to fill her up. Her pussy was slick with want. She slid against his erection. God, his cock was so hard. It felt so good. She could cum just like that. But, not yet.

His mouth moved to her earlobe as she positioned his tip at her opening. His hot breath shivered against her neck in the most delicious way. She drove her hips in small circles, teasing his body the way his mouth teased hers. Deliberately, she glided down onto him, impaling her slippery heat. Her orgasm already threatened, the crescent ready to crash around them. It was all she could do to stop from grinding against him and chasing down the exquisite release.

She almost couldn't hold on any longer.

Bianca's mouth watered, dripping onto Elton's shoulder as she rode his cock up and down, her clit throbbing with each press against his pelvis. Slow at first and then faster with each stroke, she rode him. Each thrust sent her nearer to the edge. In, then out and back again.

Elton gripped her hips and drove upward to reach her innermost depths. His eyes watched her, heavy lidded. His mouth parted, his arms flexed. She could see it in his face. She was making him crazy.

The realization broke her will to wait. Her body's sheer need took over and she sank into abandon. Elton's fingers raked into her hair as her back arched into the first wave of orgasm swept outward then spiraled back. She cried out, falling into the thousand starbursts of perfect, exquisite pleasure.

\*

Elton watched, entranced by Bianca's bee-stung lips, wet and swollen, as each throaty moan escaped her. He'd never experienced such intense gratification from a woman before. She was like watching live porn. Better. He wondered if she had any idea how utterly sexy she was with her titties bouncing like that, her wet hair tangling around her face as her body erupted.

Her pussy convulsed around his prick and it was more than he could withstand. He couldn't hold out any longer—wasn't sure how he did at all. His legs twitched and his hips bucked while he rammed every last inch of muscle into her. Cum rocketed through him, out of him, pouring into her.

His deep groan felt as primal as his body did then. It came from deep in his belly as he shot into Bianca's pulsating walls. He felt like a tribesman after a lion hunt. He felt like a man. And suddenly, as the last shudders shook his body, he knew better than anything he'd known before—he wanted her for his own. To keep.

\*

Spent, breathless and laying on Elton's chest, the only thought Bianca could manage repeated itself in cyclical patterns. What in the hell have I done? What have I done? Again.

She didn't want to hear the answer.



## Chapter Five

Elton returned from her kitchen with a tall glass of ice water. He'd left to get it without even asking if she was thirsty. She didn't know if any of her lovers had ever offered, let alone assumed such a courteous thing. Of course, she might not ever have needed it before.

Sitting up, Bianca focused on consuming the icy cool water sending cold sparks of hydration through her chest. Yes, she was thirsty and she liked it far better than the desperate hunger he'd just satisfied. The thirst she could handle, with or without him or anyone else. The thirst was easy to fix. The hunger was a whole other story. What the hell had she done? Her stomach tightened around the water.

He needed to leave.

She could feel an unfamiliar shiver begin nagging at her neck and shoulders. Her stomach cinched up another notch.

Panic.

Panic like when you have a dream where you show up naked to work. Panic like your parents just found your first hickey. Panic like you might be lost in a bad neighborhood and it was getting dark.

Bianca set the water down after offering the last of it to him. He shook his head. He was too quiet. And the intensity in his eyes wasn't helping the situation either.

"So," she said uncomfortably.

"So," he said back but his sounded like a contented sigh compared to hers.

Bianca face flashed hotly. A new kind of sweat sheened her neck.

"I don't mean to be abrupt, Elton, but," she said. "I, uh, have to kick you out."

The faint smile on his lips stiffened into more of a set jaw than a grin. His eyes steeled. She hated it. She didn't want to be cruel. She wanted to be alone. She needed to have an emergency what-the-fucking-hell-have-you-done-now-Bianca meeting with herself and he wasn't invited.

But, she couldn't tell him as much. So she just half shrugged and smiled.

Elton nodded—only once—then dressed in record efficiency. His movements weren't angry but he kept his back to her and the hardness didn't soften. It was like hardened blankness. Like an empty chalkboard. Bianca wished she could change everything and turn it back. She didn't want to know how this felt, to see how he hid hurt.

Why couldn't he be like all the others? Any of her handful of past lovers would have been happy to be free to catch a beer with the boys or some other equally male bonding thing. Then she could just call him up when she'd sorted all the muddle out in her head.

Elton walked out of her room like it was a boardroom, straight-spined but weary shouldered. His shoulders were broad and strong. They'd looked so good holding his weight over her naked body. Bianca shook herself. She couldn't believe such a thought could pop up at a time like this. They'd just finished for Hell's sake.

Tying her kimono robe closed, Bianca followed Elton.

The bushel of violet explosions caught his attention. Something flickered across the blackboard, but it was gone before she could identify it.

He looked at her for a long moment. Bianca didn't know what to say. Apparently,

neither did he because with one tender kiss on her cheek, he went, silent as the space he left her in.

Bianca stared at the closed door. Her panic cooled and gave way to an awful heaviness deep in her chest. Jasper squeak-meowed and leapt to the counter. Before she could scold him, he rubbed his face into the thick bouquet and, in slow motion, it fell to the small length of tile meant for barstools she had never bought. The crash of glass sounded like a Jewish wedding rite—definite but muffled under all those stems.

Bianca fell helplessly to her knees and swiped away a single tear. Of all the things she was going to do from this point forward, crying was not one of them and certainly not over the ruination of Jackson's flowers. She'd bitten off more than she could chew, clearly. She never imagined Elton Novey was so dangerously wonderful under all his patient quiet. But, she would not cry when she had no reason to.

The phone rang. She let it.

Jasper peeked around the corner, blinking apologetically.

The machine picked up.

Whoever it was hung up. Bianca let herself think it was a wrong number and did not check the caller ID. She stood up, got a towel and a garbage bag, and disposed of Jasper's kill as humanely as humanly possible.

What had she done?

\* \* \* \*

Elton stretched his legs a little, trying to ease the soreness from his upper thighs. The memory of Bianca's moaning mouth flashed in his head. She had worked the muscles and now they missed her.

The light changed to green and he accelerated onto the freeway, merging smoothly into afternoon traffic.

He didn't know what to do next, but he had to do something. There was no arguing. He wanted her. For more than the long-awaited fling she hit him with last night. More than today. He was going to make her his, and in order to do so, he needed to figure out what to do about Jackson.

The flowers didn't bother him. They'd inspired him. He was going to find a way to win her and win Jackson at the same time. He was determined to get his best friend's approval, his blessing, and had no doubt he'd already gotten the girl. She just didn't know it yet.

Elton flipped open his cell phone and dialed Jackson. He answered on the second ring, a little out of breath.

"Hey, man, what's up?"

"Nothing much," Elton said. "I was thinking. Let's grab a bite. It's been too long and I've got something I need to bounce off your head." Elton was impressed with how casual he managed to sound.

"Where are you?" Jackson said.

"On my way home. How about Mike's Grill?"

"Uh, now? Um, okay, sure." Elton could almost hear Jackson fidget. "Meet you there?"

There was something in Jackson's voice that tipped Elton off. He'd bet money Jackson was sweating up their new leather sofa with his latest flavor. It wasn't just his

breathing either. It was his ‘oh shit’ tone and stammering.

He cared less. If anything, it made Elton more certain about what he was going to do. Fifteen years wasn’t something he wanted to turn his back on and if he did this right, he wouldn’t have to. But, she was probably worth it even if he failed.

Not that he would fail.

\* \* \* \*

“You need to get over here.” Bianca paced another four steps in front of her sofa. “Now.”

“What is it?” Carrie asked. “What happened?”

“I can’t tell you until you get here.”

“Well, Bee, come on,” Carrie said, sounding under-impressed. “The salon still has clients coming in. I still have clients coming in.” She lowered her voice. “Bethany is the only other stylist here. I will not leave her alone.”

Bianca rolled her eyes. Carrie didn’t trust Bethany. Not for any nameable reason, though she’d sure tried to figure out why. Either way it wasn’t worth the argument.

“How much longer?” Bianca said, fighting to keep the irritation out of her voice. Pissing Carrie off was the last thing she wanted to do. But, she wasn’t sure she could wait. And she couldn’t call anyone else. Not her sister, not her mom and definitely not Tammy, her only other girlfriend. Tammy didn’t know about her two-year stint taking clothes off for money. Tammy didn’t know a lot of things and might not understand such a predicament.

“Hold on, let me look,” Carrie said. “Okay, maybe an hour if there’s no walk-ins. But, we’ll be closing two hours early and we vowed that we would never ever close shop early. Ever.”

Bianca wasn’t about to tell her yet though. “Yes, well, you’ll understand when you get here. Just hurry up.” This wasn’t the kind of thing she could do over the phone.

“Okay, but I don’t see what in the world could possibly—.” Carrie stopped, gasping. “Are you pregnant?”

Carrie was terrible at whispering.

“God no. One hour.” Bianca hung up the phone on Carrie’s unfinished plea.

One hour. She scanned the small apartment for a distraction. She’d make it. She didn’t have another choice. Well, that wasn’t entirely accurate. She did have a choice but calling Elton would be the worst possible thing to do right now.

Jasper eyed her warily but didn’t move when she sat next to him and picked up a magazine. The latest celebrity pregnancy rumor stared at her from the front page. A divorce rumor waited its turn in the top area. It wasn’t going to get a turn. Neither could tear her mind away from one man.

Bianca tossed the magazine down and chewed her thumbnail. She looked at the phone in her hand. She wanted to call. She had no inkling what she’d say. She had no doubt what he would though. He’d come over. The look on his face still worried away in the back of her brain, waiting to be dealt with. This is not what she expected when she went knocking for revenge last night. Today’s romp was meant as a little self-indulgence, some well deserved dessert. Not as a second date.

His look said much more than just desserts though. That look told her “stop now before it’s too late.” If she called, it would become too late.

Bianca picked up her half finished novel, her normal Friday night date—jilted for hot sex—and opened to the saved page. Not even her favorite author's latest blood curdler did the job. She set it down and looked at the clock. She looked at the phone. Telling Carrie would be better, would make it better. It would curb the urge to call him. It had to. And Carrie would know exactly what to say to get her back to her senses and on to ending it with Jackson. And with Elton.

No more Elton.

She should have kissed him one more time. Just to remember his mouth. He was a good kisser, full lipped, soft. He didn't lizard tongue her like some guys, darting in and out like her mouth was a scary cave. Elton kept his tongue relaxed, reaching it in only to taste and explore, even during the hottest moment.

No. No more kisses. Unless...

Bianca pressed the talk button on the phone and dialed three numbers. He had nice breath too, sort of milky and clean. Two more numbers. A small yearning formed between her thighs. One more number. What would he say? What would *she* say? Her mouth dried up, she stopped. She hung up.

"What am I thinking?" she said aloud. "I've lost my mind."

The phone rang in her hand, startling her. The caller ID read "unknown number". Her finger moved to the talk button. Was it him? With a deep breath she answered as cucumber cool as possible with her heart thumping up her throat.

"Hello?"

No one spoke.

The line clicked. Her heart's beating fell face first into her stomach, a puddle of disappointment. Had he hung up, second thoughts, regrets forming? Was Jackson walking in the door and he had to?

The knock on her door came just as she began to dial again. Just in time to rescue her from herself. Bianca sprinted to it and let Carrie in, her savior.

"Spill it," Carrie said after plowing through the door, tossing her bag in the armchair and punching her fists to her hips. "And this better be juicy because I'm broke."

Bianca resisted hugging her friend tightly, thanking her like a beggar, and kissing her right on the mouth.

"I slept with Elton," Bianca blurted out. Her hands were wrestling with each other mid air as she watched for Carrie's reaction.

"You what?" Carrie said, skeptically.

"Slept with Elton." It was easier the second time.

Carrie shook her head. Did she not understand?

"Had sex with him," Bianca said. "I fucked Elton," she whispered, carefully annunciating each word, not sure she could say them again without a terrible thrill falling over her.

Carrie's jaw closed and her lips curled into a devious grin. She nodded slowly at first then faster. Within seconds she was clapping her hands and stomping her feet. Clearly, she approved.

"Bee," Carrie said. "You little tramp! This is great. And may I say it's about time?" She plopped unceremoniously into the armchair, shoving her bag to the floor, its contents nearly spilling. "I knew you were up to something today. So, tell me everything, and I mean down to the he kissed me here, twisted this nipple there, everything."

Bianca beamed and sat on the sofa. She didn't know where to begin. And she didn't know how much she wanted to tell. Strangely, she felt covetous of her details, like saying them aloud might spoil them. Not good. Telling Carrie was supposed to ground her, not send her higher into Lala Land.

"Okay," Bianca said, the panic from earlier surfacing. "But, first, we have a problem. Well, I have a problem."

"Which is?" Carrie asked, chin dipping impatiently, hands addressing the empty room.

"It was by far the best sex I have ever had." There she said it. Well, part of it.

"And that's a problem how again?" Carrie furrowed her brow.

"Seriously," Bianca said, and pressed her lips sternly. "The best. The kind you read about. Porn kind of sex, except without all the useless pounding."

"And voice over orgasms," Carrie quipped.

"Yes, and that. Oh, Carrie. I think I'm still in shock over it." Bianca tapped her forehead as she stared at her ceiling. The urge to call him still sat in the corner of her befuddled brain, waiting, wishing her guest would hurry up and get out.

"Okay," Carrie said. "So, again, what's the problem?"

"I want more." Bianca winced and met her friend's eyes.

Carrie looked at her like a lunatic gone off her medication or something. "Bianca. How is this a bad thing? You haven't had sex in months with a boyfriend who regularly lies to you, not to mention cheats."

"I didn't even fake it," Bianca whispered, still trying to relate the impact.

"And you're a lucky bitch and I hate you and again, how is this a problem?"

"Because I can't just start dating him. I mean, I did it to get back at Jackson, well partly, but not for him to actually find out about it."

"You're losing me," Carrie said.

"I went over there last night and undressed in the bathroom and just went for it. Jackson was out cheating on me again, and I'd been having all these stupid fantasies about Elton, and since I'd never see either of them again, I thought, do it. Do it now or regret it forever. So I did."

"How is it revenge if he never knows? And why are you still wasting any of your energy worrying about that scum anyway? I swear, sometimes I just don't get it, Bianca. You're smart, beautiful, where did you hide your self-esteem? Why don't you worry about you for once?"

Bianca should have known Carrie would say it all again. She'd been telling Bianca for too long how Jackson needed to feel the blunt edge of his own sword.

"It was for me, not for him," Bianca said in her own defense. "I don't even care anymore about Jackson or his cheating. You were right. I've wasted my time on him. But, being with Elton was more like a way to get something back that he'd taken, you know? Sleeping with Elton felt like Jackson couldn't shit on me anymore."

"But what's the use if he doesn't know? What if he only knew it happened, but not with who," Carrie said softly.

Bianca didn't see why it was so important to Carrie if Jackson found out.

"Because it seems more cruel for him not to know at all?" She hugged a pillow to her chest. This was why she needed Carrie, to give it to her straight. She needed to face the facts and get out of Lala-land where by some magical possibility she and Elton would

end up together happily ever after. She knew it was impossible, she did, but hearing it, seeing it shoved in front of her face in the way only Carrie could do, would bring her back down to earth.

"I guess so," Carrie said finally. "And don't get me wrong, I like the thought of him walking around with skid marks down his back and not knowing it. But, we both know it's not your style. You don't keep secrets, Bianca. It's not in you."

"That's not true. Nobody knows about stripping," she said.

"I know. Your sister knows," Carrie pointed out, not so gently. "Jackson knows."

"Okay," Bianca said, throwing up her hands. "So, I can't keep secrets from most people. Still, I'm keeping this one."

"Good luck," Carrie said, an edge to her voice.

"We'll be broken up," Bianca said, still feeling defensive. But who was she trying to convince? "I won't have the chance to tell him."

"Okay."

One word and Bianca suddenly felt herself again. Among all the people in her life, she valued Carrie the most. She was her sounding board. And she didn't sound convinced.

"And as you just pointed out, Jackson knows my dirty little secret. If I do tell him about Elton, he'll tell everyone about my past," Bianca said, then the truth behind her words sunk in. The same thudding in her belly from when Elton puppy-eyed her, kicked back to life. She hadn't thought of that. It never even occurred to her. If Jackson found out, what would he do?

"What?" Carrie sat forward. "You look sick, Bee, what is it?"

"Jackson. What if he tells people, Carrie? What if...what if my mother finds out?" A sweat broke across her neck.

"He won't. Like you said, he doesn't know and if Elton won't tell him and you won't say anything, then I'm sure he won't—."

"I have to call him."

"No. Don't. You don't have to talk to him at all. You were right. I was just being devil's advocate is all." Carrie rushed to sit next to her.

"Elton," Bianca said. "I need to call Elton. Carrie you should have seen the way he looked at me. I've never had someone look at me the way he did. He looked like...like... he was in love."

"Oh. But how sweet," Carrie said and thankfully didn't ask her what the problem with *that* was. "He's so serious, you know, almost stuffy."

"He isn't stuffy," Bianca said. "And it isn't sweet. It's dangerous." A man in love was willing to risk things. Big things like friendship. Bianca stood, picked up the phone and dialed Elton's cell number. It went straight to voicemail. She hung up and dialed the home number. It rang. Four times. Seven. No answer.

She hung up.

The panic roiled around in her guts, making her neck hot. Bianca put her hair in a bun and sat back down.

## Chapter Six

Elton looked at his watch. Again. He shouldn't be surprised Jackson was late. The man lived on his own schedule. It had been years since it bothered him, not since college when they missed the first half hour of some movie premier he'd been looking forward to. Elton had wanted to punch him that day, he was so angry. Today, he didn't want to punch Jackson but the blatant disregard got under Elton's skin nonetheless.

He'd give Jackson five more minutes. Then Elton would leave. He'd just better not walk in on Jackson bending some girl over the sofa.

He finished his glass of beer, stared blankly at the suds sliding down the interior. Some friend. If Jackson hadn't been there for him when he'd needed a friend most: during his father's sudden death, through the heartbreak over his college sweetheart—the girl Elton promised to one day marry—well, Jackson's ways would be easier to be insulted over. He couldn't very well fault the guy for putting a female first. Not anymore.

Fifteen minutes later, Elton stepped out of the restaurant. The sun was setting and a chill breezed by, penetrating his shirt. He didn't want to go home. Not because of Jackson. He just didn't want to be home. Sitting around, working, waiting. More than a hundred things he should do lined up for their turn in his mind but his mind wasn't on work right now. It was on her. It was on how he could win her.

Elton got in his car and backed out. Pulling onto the street, he glimpsed a car like Jackson's pulling in the opposite entrance. He could turn around. He could call him. He didn't. Pressing the gas, he smiled as the restaurant shrank in the rearview mirror, the sign lighting up: OPEN.

His phone battery had died right after hanging up with Jackson, more than an hour ago now. He didn't plug it in. He wondered if she'd called. He doubted it. He didn't want to check yet when the answer might be the wrong one. Her face spoke a thousand words as he had walked out her door. None of them were *stay*.

\* \* \* \*

Bianca pressed talk and dialed Elton's cell. She put the phone to her ear.

"Hello? Bianca? Hello?"

"Cynthia?" Bianca said. This wasn't Elton's number. There was no way in hell her sister would be answering Elton's phone. They'd never even met. At least they better not have. "Where are you?"

"I'm on my way right now," Cynthia said fast, the distinct speed of a back pedal which her younger sister had down to an art. "I got caught up at work so I'll be like ten minutes late. I talked to Mom already so, just letting you know."

Bianca slapped her forehead. Dinner. She'd forgotten completely. Her mother's birthday dinner was tonight and she didn't even have a card to give her or something decent to wear.

"Carrie," Bianca said when she hung up. "I'm so sorry. I have to kick you out."

"All right, but this conversation is not over. I didn't even get to give you my don't be ashamed of who you are speech," Carrie said in mock sternness. They both knew the one,

by heart. “And I only thought that telling him would finally help you walk away, but don’t worry, I’m shutting up. Not another word about him or Elton until you say so.” She zipped her lips and threw away an invisible key.

Bianca half laughed. Carrie was a believer in honesty without excuses. She liked to say Bianca should give her family a chance. They might not freak out as badly as she thought if they knew about her past. It was sweet of her to say so, but Carrie was not a member of her family. She’d never know the kind of icy disdain her mother could lay on a person, let alone a daughter.

Carrie had a fiancé who loved her madly, warts and all, parents who were proud she wasn’t in prison or on drugs or both. No impossible standards there. Only kindness, support, and plenty of other warts to compare.

“We didn’t even get to talk about you,” Bianca said guiltily. “Or about the dinner party. How’s your mom?”

“The same. Don’t worry about all that. Nothing in my world right now is nearly so exciting as illicit sex and torrid affairs.” Carrie shrugged dramatically. “Just call me later, okay?”

A hug and a kiss and Carrie was gone.

Thank God. Because Bianca was the responsible sister, the one who didn’t miss holidays or Mother’s Days or birthdays. She was the one with the thoughtful, perfect gift, the perfect card for that person, warming their heart and making them laugh. Well it was her goal anyway—to make her mother shine with laughter and love. And she had no excuse. None she could actually use. Somehow, she didn’t imagine her mother understanding how avenging herself a la amazing sex was a reasonable distraction. Stephanie Slattery was not one to ever say, “Oh, don’t worry about a gift. Just being here with you girls is gift enough.”

Bianca put her hair in a quick twist, shoved two chopsticks in it, tugged, aligned and sprayed it stiff. She dug deep in the back of her walk-in closet and yanked a dress of its hanger, the little black dress she saved for emergency use only would have to do. She’d barely pulled on the second matching shoe when she heard Cynthia knock. Her door got more attention today than in the last seven months. It made her like her quiet apartment, no knocks and all, a little more. She wished for one quick second she could stay in her retreat all night rather than face her mother.

“Come in,” she called. “I just have to grab one thing.” She unlocked and turned the knob for her sister, then swung back to the kitchen and opened her wine cupboard. Didn’t she have a nice Merlot or Cabernet somewhere?

A low, kissy whistle stopped her dead. Her heart jumped up.

“You look incredible.”

His voice sent a jolt through her. “Elton.” His name was like chocolate. She shut the cabinet, bottle in hand. He smiled at her and cocked his head sideways. It gave him steamy bedroom eyes and they were wandering all over her. “What are you doing here?”

“Knock, knock. Hey, Bianca. You ready because I’m double park—” Cynthia walked in like she lived there and paused only upon seeing Elton standing in the typically empty living room. She faced Bianca partly smiling, all curious.

“Hey, Cynthia. I was just getting Mom’s gift together.” She’d almost called her Cyn, like she usually did. But, Cyn sounded like sin and she didn’t want Elton to hear it that way.



“Oh, thank God you got one,” Cynthia said. “All I got was a stupid card at the gas station. Hi.” Each word came out a little perkier than the last, her gaze stuck on Elton.

“Elton, I’d like you to meet my sister, Cynthia. Cynthia, this is.”

“Jackson’s friend Elton?” Cynthia interrupted.

“The one and only,” Elton said and extended his hand.

“He’s told me so much about you.” Cynthia batted her lowered lashes and twirled a length of hair. “So, we finally meet. Did he send you here or something, I mean, you know, for tomorrow?” Textbook flirting. And right in front of her! Then Bianca remembered Cynthia wouldn’t know Bianca had dibs on Jackson’s friend or anyone else.

Not that she wanted dibs.

Elton narrowed his eyes and looked at Bianca, clearly confused. Bianca shrugged and turned away to hide the hot anger suddenly flushing up her cheeks. What was Cynthia talking about? When did she and Jackson talk about anything, let alone about Elton? Why would she think he was here to meet her?

“What’s tomorrow?” Elton asked after an agonizingly long pause.

Bianca couldn’t turn around to see their faces and she didn’t want to. She dug into a low drawer for gift-wrap and ribbon. A blank card with a fluffy kitten in black and white on the cover fell out as she removed the embossed silver wrap leftover from New Year’s. It would have to do. The plain brown paper straw ribbon fit surprisingly well and in less than a minute, Bianca had saved her birthday-forgetting-ass with an expensive looking and thoughtful seeming gift.

“Ooohhhh. It looks perfect.” Cynthia dragged her eyes from Elton. “Can it be from both of us?”

Weren’t they all? Bianca nodded stiff-necked and kept her eyes on the door. It wasn’t the gift that had her gritting her teeth though, it was the way her sister was tilting her face up at Elton, biting her lip like a little sex kitten ready to play pounce. And had Cynthia just moved her finger from her lips like they shared some little secret while she had her back to them? Or was she losing it?

“I didn’t realize you two were on your way out. Explains the dress though, I guess,” Elton said and scratched the back of his head before smoothing his hair and shoving his hands inside his pockets.

But, he didn’t move to leave. In fact, he seemed rooted in place. Like he wanted to be alone with her.

“We’re late,” Bianca said pointedly to Cynthia who finally tore her eyes off Elton and came back to reality.

“Oh, yeah, shit,” Cynthia said. “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.” She winked at him.

Bianca felt like she might pop. For the first time in her life, she wanted to slap her little sister right across the face. It was worse than finding her with Barbie’s head in the toilet, worse than discovering her new lipstick used as crayon, worse than being ratted on the only time she’d ever smoked. Bianca was truly seeing red, as in a red handprint fantasy, in her mind’s eye, across Cynthia’s creamy little cheek.

Wordlessly, Bianca opened the door. Both strolled out. Cynthia gawked at him, he eyeballed her, and Bianca jabbed the elevator button for down. Her mind screamed, “What in the hell is tomorrow?” Her mouth remained in a gritty line as they all stepped into the elevator.

“You’re tall,” Cynthia purred. “How tall are you?”

“Six one,” he said.

“Mmmmm. I’m only five four. You can’t tell with these heels. Well and next to her. She’s tall. How tall are you, Bianca?”

How was five eight tall enough to say it so emphatically? Taaalll. Egh. Bianca could only tighten her smile and keep her eyes on the elevator doors.

“How old are you again?” Cynthia asked, disregarding her question being left ignored.

“Thirty two.” Elton’s voice held a touch of amusement.

At least he sounded a tad bit uncomfortable. She refused to look and make sure, staring at the falling numbers above the doors instead. She didn’t need to look to see him, sense him there. He even smelled close.

The image of the car suddenly halting, Elton pressing the alarm button, shot into her head. Cynthia disappeared. He’d press the button then press his hips against her from behind. He’d pull aside her long hair and trail a fingertip from her ear to her back, following the tickling path with his tongue.

Bianca’s pussy pulsed and wetted. She swallowed. The elevator felt muggy and hot. Hot enough to take her clothes off, turn to him and press his prick into the apex of her thighs, to rub against her clit.

Bianca couldn’t help looking over at him. The intensity in his eyes shook her back to reality. That and her sister’s high-pitched, “Do you need an invitation, Bianca?”

“Huh?” The doors were open. “Oh.” She stepped out into the cool evening air. Her skirt shimmied in the breeze, lowering his smoldering stare to her thighs.

Cynthia lingered behind. Bianca gave him one last hot, wistful look, intending to make him know exactly what was on her mind and who of the two women wanted his attention. He matched it then quickly looked to the ground. He shook Cynthia’s hand and said very polite, unflirtatious goodbyes.

In the car, Cynthia beamed. “Bianca, I absolutely love your boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend?” she gasped. She pointed her thumb behind her. “He’s not—.”

“Can you believe Jackson waited this long to set us up, though? I mean, why hold out. You two have been dating for like a year or something. To think, a year, and we just finally met.” Cynthia sighed. She laid her head back against the headrest. “I think he liked me.”

## Chapter Seven

“Set who up?” The feeling of red returned, revving faster than the car’s engine as she pulled onto the street. “You? With Elton?” What had Jackson done now?

“You don’t have to say it like that. I am your sister.”

“I know—I didn’t mean to sound like anything,” Bianca stammered. “I just didn’t realize, that’s all.”

“So, you’ll help me find something to wear?” Cynthia asked.

Bianca didn’t want to know. “For what?” She had to know.

“For our first date. Tomorrow,” Cynthia said barely containing a girlish squeal.

Bianca’s hand left the steering wheel of its own volition.

\* \* \* \*

Elton kept his distance and though it was his first time tailing a car, he felt good about being unnoticed. A goofy grin fixed itself on his face when he saw Bianca reach across and punch her sister in the arm. She was jealous, he knew it, and the fact reassured him beyond reason. Reassurance had been exactly what he’d been looking for when he entered her apartment, not to mention another fix.

Following her was crazy, borderline stalker behavior, but he needed to talk to her and he had nothing else to do besides go back to his empty condo. Bianca’s car pulled into a popular sushi restaurant and parked under a line of tall palms strung with lights. Elton flipped on his blinker to follow when his phone rang.

It was her.

“Hello?” he said.

“Elton,” Bianca said. “Why are you following me?”

He could see her still in the car, her sister standing outside of it, rubbing her arm as though she’d just been punched. “We need to talk,” he said. It was partly true.

“No. I’m having dinner with my mother. Now is not a good time and, besides, we have nothing to talk about. To anyone. Don’t tell Jackson.” She hung up.

But, she wasn’t mad. Her voice carried an undercurrent of excitement.

He pulled in and parked. The image of the way she’d looked at him over her shoulder, lips parted, wet, in the elevator hung in his head. It was a come here and touch me kind of look. He nearly got hard just thinking about it. In that elevator, in that dress, he promised himself he’d have her again. And, if he didn’t screw it up, tonight.

Elton parked and shifted his growing erection, resisting the urge to stroke its hard length right then and there. He wanted her, he’d wait. In ten or so minutes, he’d call again. He’d ask her to come out, to dare her to. Maybe it was a test of sorts, to see how much she’d risk again, if she would at all. If there was hope. Ten minutes.

He couldn’t believe Jackson set him up with her sister. On one hand, it was hilarious and ironic. On the other hand, he didn’t need Jackson’s help with his love or sex life. Obviously, Jackson had no idea the reason Elton remained celibate these past few months had little to do with working too much and a lot to do with his girlfriend. Why such a thing bothered him, he couldn’t say.

If Bianca wasn't on Elton's mind, she had seemed to be on his couch, hanging out with him while Jackson was warming another couch somewhere. And now, she was in his bed. The thought brought him back full circle to a raging hard on. He looked at the time.

Seven minutes. Good enough.

He dialed.

No answer.

He called back.

"Elton," Bianca answered in a fierce whisper. "What in the hell are you doing? The last two people I need finding out about us are sitting in a booth waiting for me to order."

"I want you." Badly.

"You can't have me. Stop calling."

"I'm in the parking lot, in the back corner. The street lamp is burned out. It's completely dark."

"No." She didn't sound resolved. A trill quivered in her voice, of what? Excitement?

"That look you gave me in the elevator... Bianca, I need you. I need to feel myself inside of you again."

She inhaled. The sound sent warmth down his belly. But she didn't speak for what felt like minutes but couldn't have spanned more than a few seconds.

"Give me five minutes," she said

Elton flipped his phone closed and would have called out a triumphant, "Yes!" if he were anywhere else. His cock throbbed in anticipation.

He adjusted his seat back as far as it would go and cleared out the stacks of files from the passenger seat, ignoring his sweaty palms.

\* \* \* \*

This was such an incredibly bad idea. Bianca calculated how much time she had before Cynthia, or her mother, came out looking for her. But her mother would send Cynthia, not come herself. And only after they—she—checked the ladies room. Ten minutes, probably less. Her core tingled and warmed with each step toward the car. Her whole body buzzed with the recklessness of what she was about to do. She loved it.

Elton climbed out and opened her door as she strutted her best hip swinging siren walk toward him. She eased wordlessly into the seat, sliding her legs in so her skirt hiked up her thighs. How could she have forgotten in such a short lapse of time how hot he was, how hot *this* was? Elton's gaze latched onto her exposed flesh and he rushed the door closed. Bianca got her panties off before Elton's door shut, and was ready to ravage him.

His mouth met hers hungrily. His hands' soft caress contradicted the urgency in his kiss.

God, but he tasted so good. His stubble scratched, his soft lips pressed and she wanted his prick deep inside her. Elton swiftly unbuckled and dropped his pants as Bianca climbed over the center console. Their tight fit made the position all the better, increasing the friction.

His freed tip slid down from clit to portal, making a wet sound.

Elton groaned and a thrill rushed through her. Her power over him intoxicated her. He intoxicated her. Both were so delicious, so dangerous.

She slid her swollen walls slowly down onto his stiffness, adjusting to his size. He

was so hard it almost hurt, but in a good, satisfying way, like really sweet chocolate after tart wine.

Elton gripped her hips. His arms shook ever so slightly and Bianca knew it was from trying to control his coursing passion. It may as well have been a storm because the outside world disappeared as pleasure rained down around her as she gave in to impulse.

Bianca knew she had little time but time suspended. She wanted to make every perfect stroke last, letting her orgasm build rather than coming with the first few thrusts. She lifted her hips upward, squeezing her pussy around his prick. What little wiggle room she had, she maximized using small circles and tilting plunges.

Elton breathed hard on her neck, sending shivers over her skin, then sucked in loudly as she coaxed his climax out. She was critically close herself.

He stopped her. "I don't want to cum yet."

She smiled. "You don't have a choice, baby. I want to feel you cumming in my pussy. She's hungry for it. Feed her, baby, feed her your big cock."

Elton's eyes glazed over. She could see his resistance crumble under her words. And it made her own break as well. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back. Her pussy swallowed him up as she exploded into shockwaves of bliss, climbing and collapsing in pulsing shudders. Over and again, she rocked her hips with each wave, calling out his name in ecstasy. "Elton, oh yes Elton."

Elton lunged his hips up, burying his cock as deep as it would go and burst hot cum into her pussy. She could feel it. His prick's extra largeness upon orgasm made Bianca cry out in surprise.

Bianca fell against him, breathing hard, feeling wondrously satisfied. One more minute, she told herself, and she'd go back in. She hadn't a clue where she'd say she'd been or why it took her so long. Or even how long she'd been gone. At that moment, she didn't care. How could she with the world laying in hazy pieces around them? She felt no hurry for the shards to connect back together.

A small knock on the window slammed Bianca back to reality. Elton tensed in unison with her. She pulled back and searched his face for what to do. The steamy windows hid who it was. He shrugged. Quickly, she climbed over to the passenger seat. Each scrambled to dress. Bianca prayed it was a stranger, the manager coming out to scold them, even a cop would be better than...

Elton rolled down his fogged window. Her sister.

Cynthia bent down and gave Bianca a look of utter betrayal.

Bianca did her best to act normal. She could see it wasn't working but didn't see any other option. Cynthia slowly shook her head, mumbled something ugly and stalked away from the window without a single glance at Elton. Bianca pulled her panties on and went after her sister, Elton forgotten.

"Cynthia, wait," Bianca called. She caught up to her sister and grabbed her arm. "Wait, it's not what you think."

Cynthia ripped her arm back and snorted. "Bullshit. It is exactly what I think. Or did you not just have sex with Jackson's best friend? What are you doing, Bianca? How stupid are you?"

She followed Cynthia and tried again to stop her. "Very. Very stupid." She grabbed Cynthia's shoulders and met her eyes soberly. "But, you can't think I meant to hurt you."

"Mother's waiting," Cynthia said icily.

“Shit. Okay. Let’s go in before she comes out.” She dared one glance back. His car was gone.

“Whatever this is, Bianca, and you will explain it or lose your only sister,” Cynthia reached up and fussed with Bianca’s hair. “Just, don’t screw it up with Jackson. Not now.”

Bianca was too relieved over the calm in Cynthia’s eyes to wonder what she meant by her last remark or about where Elton had, thankfully, disappeared to.

\* \* \* \*

To make up for leaving early Saturday, Bianca called Bethany in and opened up early. Not only did she deserve the extra work as punishment, she could keep busy and avoid the ditch she kept digging deeper and deeper for herself. Bethany didn’t mind. She was a great worker and though not always friendly, never catty.

“So, how’s Josh doing,” Bianca asked as they readied the salon for business. She loved the Josh Hartnett stories Bethany could make up on the spot.

“Oh, you know. He’s a typical man.” Bethany finished sweeping a pile of hair trimmings. “You know the type. Peter Pan will never grow up. Ever. No matter how much you love him.” She spoke and took out her equipment casually, but her voice sounded defeated.

“What happened?” Bianca asked and for the first time thought Bethany might really have someone in her life.

“Well, after some amazing sex, the kind you wished someone could witness not for the fetish but just to show off? Just to verify it as true?”

Bianca laughed. She knew exactly what kind the not so petite, not so natural blonde referred to. The Elton kind. Bianca scolded herself for thinking about him. “Yeah? And?” She swallowed against the urge to sigh.

“So, after that kind of sex you would think he’d be happy, a little cocky even, right? I mean, I was.”

Bianca nodded, counting her Velcro rollers. This was more than Bethany had ever shared and Bianca felt like they might have a shot at becoming friends yet. She really hoped so. Bethany seemed like she could use a good friend for some reason.

“Not Josh,” Bethany said. “Nope. He gets all mopey and starts talking about how his life isn’t in order, and asks how can we still see each other when he has all this stuff to take care of.” She paused and looked up. “I’m second to this other stuff. Maybe even third.”

“Unbelievable.” Bianca suddenly felt like she was prying and wanted to move to another, safer topic. But she couldn’t think of a single one.

“Then one of his boys calls and he suddenly has to rush me out the door.” Bethany tied a black apron on.

“Figures,” Bianca said, glad to hear the light tone back in Bethany’s voice. “Always time for the boys.”

Bethany scoffed and shook her head. “Who needs ‘em? After that, I made a promise to myself. Three strikes you’re out, right? So, if he doesn’t commit and treat me like I deserve, he’s outta there.” She pointed like an umpire and pretended to spit. “He’s got three days.”

Bianca chuckled. With those rules, Jackson would have struck out a long time ago.

He'd be sitting in the dugout, alongside all the others from her past, watching his best friend hit a grand slam home run.

\* \* \* \*

"So, what do you think?" Jackson said. "Too big?"

Elton shook his head miserably. He might throw up. Or punch Jackson in the gut. Neither inclination sat well.

"Too small?" Jackson said. "Wrong shape."

"No. It's beautiful, I guess." He rubbed his hand over his face. His brow was moist, his neck hot. "I thought you two were fighting, though. I thought you had someone over here last night."

Jackson snapped the burgundy velvet box closed and set it down. He didn't look happy. He didn't look like a man in love about to propose to the woman of his dreams—of Elton's dreams. But, he didn't deny Elton's claims either. He didn't say anything, just stared at the damned box.

"Do you really think she'll say yes after all that's happened?" Elton asked. He needed to know.

If Jackson actually went and purchased the diamond with real intentions of proposing to Bianca, he must be confident in getting a yes. Jackson wasn't the kind of poker player to be fooled with a bluff. He was the kind you needed sunglasses on for.

And yet he hadn't noticed the change in Elton.

"Of course she's going to say yes. Bianca knows me and I know her. Better yet, I understand what she needs." Jackson tossed the ring box onto the coffee table and flipped the channel on the flat screen to ESPN. Basketball.

Elton snorted. He couldn't help it. The ludicrous statement was too much.

"Laugh all you want." Jackson shrugged. "It won't make it any less true. Think about it. If she had left me after the first time or even the third, I'd say no. But, this will be the fifth time she's discovered an indiscretion. And she still hasn't ended it. That makes her the perfect wife."

Elton's cheeks and neck began to burn with anger. She hadn't ended it. Had she lied? "Perfect how?" The leather creaked under him as he stiffened and shifted on the sofa.

"I'll never be a one-woman man. Hell, I'm not even a one-mistress man. I think deep down, Bianca wants a man like me. Someone who will take care of her but not bother her with sex."

"Not bother her?"

"She's just not a sexual person. She's more of a cuddler." Jackson wiggled his fingers in the air, demonstrating the word "cuddler" then drank from his beer bottle.

Fiery anger licked its way down Elton's belly. His hand rolled into a tight fist. His rational mind told him to calm down, that this was just another obstacle to his goal. The primal urge that had made him want to claim her, now wanted to defend her—with force.

Jackson tossed the remote control his way and finished his beer. The bottle clanged on the glass end table and rang in Elton's ears. He wanted to put his best friend's face through the table.

"So, Bianca's sister will be there. Cynthia. Everyone will be there. Show up no later than five, okay?" He rose and left, smacking Elton's shoulder on his way past.

When he heard Jackson's door close, he picked up his cell phone. He had to warn

her. He had to ask her why she hadn't ended it with Jackson or if she had why Jackson seemed to believe otherwise. But, a little voice told him to wait, to wait and see what happened. What she said. Maybe, Jackson proposing would be a good thing. Maybe, Bianca would finally be forced to set the record straight and see she had feelings for him, new ones, but real feelings with true potential.

Elton set the phone down. He'd held out all night and all day without calling her, so why now? He couldn't let this get to him. Not if he wanted to claim his prize. Better to see how things unfold.

It was three o'clock. "Hey, Jackson?"

"Yeah." He poked his head through the door, cell phone to his chest. "What's her sister's number. I may as well pick her up."

"That's my man," Jackson said, pointing like a referee.

An hour later, Cynthia climbed into Elton's car. "Just so we're clear, I'm no longer interested."

"Pardon?"

"I'm no longer interested in you," Cynthia said. "Sisters don't share."

"Cynthia, I'm not..."

She held her hand up. "I don't want to hear it. I'm going with you for Bianca's sake. Whatever you two were doing last night, and I don't want details," she said with a pointed look. "Was a mistake. She's going to marry Jackson and you need to let her."

"What if I love her?"

Cynthia's mouth fell open. "You love her?"

Elton realized he didn't want Cynthia to be the first to know. He shrugged. "Maybe."

"Maybe won't cut it," Cynthia said, adjusting her crossed arms. "Jackson has his flaws, but believe me, Bianca has more. They'll be happy if you let them be." Sincere concern shone in her eyes. She believed what she said.

He'd be lying if he said it didn't bother him. Elton saw he had more than Jackson to win over. He could very well have an entire family, friends too. The tall order didn't sway him though. If he could win Bianca, he could take on all of them and in the end, they'd be supportive and wonder why they ever imagined Jackson and Bianca as a perfect couple. She was worth it.



## Chapter Eight

“He’s up to something,” Bianca said. “I just know it. I can feel it.”

The salon’s afternoon traffic had slowed. She paged through a magazine, glancing every so often at her unusually silent phone.

“Jackson? What could he be up to?” Bethany asked, sounding tentative.

“Whenever Jackson screws up, he starts giving me the royal treatment. One time it was a spa day at La Valencia, another he rented a beach house in La Jolla.” The only call she got all day was from Jackson. Not one from Elton. Maybe Cynthia catching them proved to him how rash they were acting. Maybe it was over.

“Wow. He must really love you,” Bethany said and turned away.

But Bianca could hear the pain in Bethany’s voice and regretted complaining. Whatever lack of love life or not the girl had, she didn’t need to hear Bianca piss and moan about being pampered by Jackson. Carrie would understand. She would see the deception, the manipulation. She’d also call her out about not ending it yet and even considering Jackson’s plans, whatever they were.

Jackson had said to wear her party dress. Bianca mulled the statement over in her head again and decided he was throwing some sort of surprise party. Their anniversary was coming up. But they’d never make it to the date three weeks coming. Whatever it was, she was sure not to like it. His surprises were designed to guilt her into staying with him and she wasn’t going to let it work again. She was ninety percent sure about her conclusion, and Bethany’s slumped shoulders gave her an idea.

“What are you doing tonight?” Bianca asked, setting the magazine down.

“What do you mean?” Her voice sounded thick. She didn’t look up.

“Want to come to a party? There will be at least one single, good looking guy there.” By the end of the night, if she talked smoothly enough, more than one.

Bethany faced her and gave her the oddest look, her head tilted and eyes tight. Bianca almost felt like she were being re-evaluated, or perhaps seen for the first time.

“What’s the occasion?” Bethany said finally.

“I haven’t figured that part out yet but I’m sure it will be eventful.”

\* \* \* \*

The house Jackson rented boasted a full bar and Elton made his way directly to it. Undeniably expensive and gorgeous, the house couldn’t have been an easy find under what seemed like short notice. Jackson’s parents, Bianca’s mother and sister, friends, co-workers, they all arrived as directed, no later than five o’clock.

No one knew what the occasion was aside from Cynthia and Elton. Elton saw the ring, Cynthia guessed and got immediate confirmation when he’d stupidly, said, “Who told you?” in the car ride over.

No matter. Cynthia promised to keep it secret, zipping her lip, locking it and handing him the imaginary key without being asked to.

The third shot of tequila didn’t need the lime to chase down the burn in his mouth, now too numb to mind. The clock ticked and the crowd buzzed excitedly wondering what

Jackson was up to this time. Bianca's friend spotted him from across the room, narrowed her eyes and bee-lined to him.

Wordlessly, Carrie took the bottle, poured two shots and jerked her head at the patio door. "We need to talk."

Elton followed, prepared to hear another Jackson defender and readied to grin and bear it. The door shut out the inside noise, leaving the crashing waves below to sing their song against the wind.

"Is he proposing?" Carrie faced him squarely.

"Yeah." Elton waved off the shot she offered. "Need to give the first three time to work." The wind felt good on his warming face.

"How are you going to stop him?" she asked between gulps of tequila, no lime.

Stop him? She knew? "I'm not going to stop him." Then he remembered Bianca saying Carrie detested Jackson, thought she deserved better, didn't know why she stayed.

The last time she sat crying on his couch, she'd said it. He didn't repeat the same though he'd wanted to. Even her best friend told her to dump him, she'd explained, wiping her eyes with black smudged tissue wads. And yet she'd stayed. He should have asked her then—why?

Elton's confidence quaked. For the first time, winning Bianca seemed insurmountable, impossible. A part of him felt foolish. What if he put his friendship at further risk, exposed his feelings and she rejected him? What if Jackson found out? What if he never saw her again or worse—saw her over and over again, crying on his shoulder? He couldn't do it.

Carrie stared at him without sympathy. The tequila began working, numbing the hot pain welling in his chest.

"If you don't do something, then I'm afraid she will make the biggest mistake of her life," Carrie said at last. "For the capable and independent woman she is, she needs her knight in shining armor. She doesn't realize it so that makes it harder. So, Elton, I think you'd better start looking for a sword."

"It's a little more complicated than that, but, don't worry," he said, his stare unwavering from her icy one. "I always win." It sounded good.

She searched his face for a long moment, then cracked a smile. "Good. So, long as we're on the same team, wanna fill me in on Jackson's plan?"

Elton squinted one eye and tipped his head. "They'll be here any minute. I believe the idea is ask her and then bring her in, but, depending on what she does, he may also just bring her in then ask her."

"Put her on the spot. She won't say no in front of everyone. And he thinks all the approval from everyone will seal the deal."

Elton hadn't thought of that but nodded. His stomach clenched against the idea of her agreeing to marry Jackson. He wanted to believe what they'd shared was undeniably real to her as well, but how could he really know? Maybe he was just a distraction. Maybe it was only physical.

No. He knew it went beyond incredible sex. He trusted the instinct that told him not to give up. The attraction they felt was uncommon, and if he didn't give up, it would transcend the physical. In some ways it already had, when she'd come to him all those times, there had to be more.

"Uh-oh," Carrie said, bringing him from his thoughts. "They're here."

Elton steeled himself and watched as the couple entered and Bianca reacted to the surprise. Elton stood rooted, unable to move. Carrie held one hand to her mouth, the other to her stomach, as though she might be sick. The scene unfolded silently through the glass. Jackson gestured a sweeping wave, stilling the crowd. Elton watched as his mouth moved, imagining the words coming out. Was he saying how amazing she was, how he needed her? Was he declaring undying devotion? Love?

Bianca's face was frozen in shock and a touch of terror. Her eyes scanned the crowd. Was she looking for him? Elton blinked fast. The wind billowed his shirt. But, he knew, she couldn't see him.

When Jackson lowered, disappearing under the crowd of heads, her face turned to him. Elton couldn't see it, couldn't hear it, but knew. Carrie's hand grabbed his wrist. Elton couldn't tear his eyes away, waited to see the shake of Bianca's head that would reassure him. It didn't come.

Jackson rose, Bianca's hand in his. She glanced around again, the same look on her face, then back at the ring. Elton could see the stone from where he stood. It shimmered. Or did his eyes? A heavy sinking feeling grew in his chest, filling his body cavity with a pain he'd never known before. It felt akin to a child's disappointment, the kind that overwhelms and consumes. Like a child, he had trouble seeing its boundaries and surface, difficulty breathing above the drowning sensation it brought.

Carrie tugged hard on his arm and at the same moment, Jackson's lips left the hand he'd just adorned. Jackson's arm snaked around Bianca's shoulders and he turned them to the crowd. The noise of applause roared through the walls to Elton's ears. He looked miserably at Carrie who stood, cross-armed shaking her head in turns at him and at them. Bianca hadn't said no.

Carrie looked back at the party, stopped. She gasped. "What in the hell is she doing here?" She left him standing alone with the door open and the roar surrounding him.

A single tear slid down his nose. Elton swiped it away and spun around. He gripped the rail of the balcony, fighting to get control over his emotions. He couldn't let this stop him. Whatever he had hoped she might do, she didn't. Instead of blaming her, he blamed Jackson and his masterful manipulation. The man knew how people worked and used it to his advantage in all areas of life. The bullied little kid who Elton once stood up for and started a friendship with, had honed the skills once used to avoid confrontation, to create this world. To what end?

Jackson wouldn't be happy.

He'd stopped attempting to manipulate and control Elton years ago and hadn't really ever done it successfully. But, now, Elton could feel his friend's skills effect on his life, on his future. Past the pain, Elton found a seedling of anger. He latched onto it and pulled it to the surface.

Bianca deserved to be fought for. And Elton knew if he didn't try, even if he lost Jackson's friendship in the endeavor, he would regret it forever. The image of Bianca marrying his friend was a harder pill to swallow than never seeing Jackson again.

Resolved, Elton spun back to the door.

\* \* \* \*

In all her life, Bianca could not remember a hug as tight or warm as the one her mother was giving her. Emotion welled inside of her and she closed her eyes, wrapping

the moment like a gift in her memory to open and savor again. The arms were tight, her head lay on her shoulder, her mother even rocked her gently from side to side.

She didn't want to cry, it would only give everyone the wrong impression of joy, but the affection overwhelmed her. In all the years, she'd convinced herself there was nothing missing and suddenly, a hidden void presented itself, taking the tiny drop into its depths.

"Congratulations." Her mother pulled back, smiled adoringly, let go and the spell broke. The adoring of the smile faded into graciousness. A throng stood behind, ready for their congratulatory turn at the happy couple.

Jackson winked at her. So did the ring on her finger. Of all his surprises, this one held rank. Not simply considering the infidelities on both their parts. In truth, she just never thought Jackson was the marrying kind, let alone to her.

Suddenly, Carrie was in front of her, cutting off Jackson's Aunt Annie and almost knocking over the delicate, old creature. After a hurried apology, Carrie clasped Bianca to her and whispered, "What is she doing here?"

She'd almost forgotten poor Bethany and started glancing around for her, "I invited her."

Carrie pulled back and stared at her wide-eyed, a grin fixed on her face as she went in for another hug. "I thought you didn't want anyone to know."

Bianca returned the baffled look. "Why? What's wrong with Bethany being here?"

"Not Bethany," Carrie nearly hissed into her ear. "Jordan. Jordan is here."

"Jordan. You mean Riley-Jordan? From Angels?"

Carrie nodded, her chin knocking against Bianca's shoulder, then she faced her again, eyebrows up as far as they could humanly reach.

"Where?" Panic kicked in Bianca's throat. She swallowed against it and scraped her gaze over the thirty or so mingling friends and family trying to locate the last person on earth she would want there.

"Jackson, where's the bathroom?" Carrie smiled sweetly and listened to the directions.

Within moments the two were safely locked into the upstairs bedroom. Carrie fanned Bianca's face then began to pace the room. She used her hands like a politician, slicing through the air on point, holding her thumb up in a fist. If not for the green in her guts, Bianca would have smiled at the picture her best friend made.

"How the hell did he get her number?" Carrie said then inhaled loudly and stopped. "Okay. We need to think—to stay calm. Why is she here? You don't think he brought her for insurance do you?"

Bianca's pulse was almost audible, her heart beat so hard. "Insurance?"

"To make sure you said yes. If you didn't he could threaten to expose you."

Bianca stared at her friend and shook her head. "He wouldn't. He's a charmer, not a blackmailer." But, her mind hunted down a possible answer as to how Jackson got in touch with the most gossiping stripper in the entire club, the single girl who had worked there who would enjoy seeing Bianca humiliated. Only one answer came to mind. The one Carrie just supplied.

She didn't want to believe it of him. Jackson might be a philanderer, even a liar but to go down to the club and play detective seemed too cold, calculating. How could marrying her be so important?

There was only one way she could find out. And there was only one person she could trust. But, she hadn't seen him amid the crowd.

"Is Elton here?" she asked Carrie.

\* \* \* \*

Elton didn't like how satisfying it was to his ego to see Carrie and Bianca head upstairs, Bianca looking blanched. He didn't want her suffering. He wanted her happy. But, part of him reveled, seeing it as proof he had a chance. When Carrie came down the stairs alone, worry replaced the petty gloating fast.

He didn't wait for her to come to him, meeting her at the base and passing her, he whispered, "Stay here and watch Jackson."

She nodded, or so he assumed by the motion when he glanced away. Carrie was a good friend to Bianca. She trusted Carrie. He could trust her.

He took the stairs two at a time, and when he knocked and heard her voice, the primal need she provoked in him came to the fore. He opened the door slowly, shut it softly. Not allowing himself to wonder why, he turned the lock on the knob as he leaned against the door.

She sat on the bed, slumped and wide-eyed.

She was scared. The realization fed his inner primal caveman. He wanted to go to her, make her his, but his pride fought for attention. She may as well be a bunny, sitting so vulnerable and unmoving. He didn't like it. It wasn't like her. But, he remembered Carrie's words alongside the diamond on her finger.

"You're engaged," he said finally, hating that he sought reassurance even then when she clearly needed something else. But, he didn't want to be a damned shoulder this time. He wanted more.

"I haven't said yes." Her voice was weak.

"You haven't said no either."

Bianca frowned, looking hurt. "I need to ask you something. To tell you something." She pulled the ring off.

Elton braced himself not sure whether to hope or worry. The sateen comforter shushed under him as he sat next to her on the bed close enough to smell her—sense her—but not touch. Her lip quivered and he found himself bending his head to hers. His hand touched her cheek. When their mouths met, the embers of the fire he felt when he walked into the room flamed to life.

Her soft lips yielded under his suckle, opening and returning his gentle onslaught. She tasted so good, so sweet, and he groaned into her mouth. How could each time seem better? Her hand gripped his shirtfront and pulled him closer. Her tongue met his and danced, each thirsty for the other.

She broke away.

"What is it?" Elton asked and didn't mean her pulling away. Part of him wanted to keep on kissing those plump lips, wet, waiting, and then lick her body from head to toe. But he needed to know where he stood, so he reigned in his desire.

"How well do you know Jackson?" she said, searching his eyes. Her hand rested on his thigh.

"Better than anyone."

"How far will he go to keep me?"

It was a question he'd been searching for an answer to as well. "I can't be sure. He doesn't love you, I can tell you that." He ran a hand over his face. "He prizes you. You are the perfect trophy wife."

Bianca frowned and shook her head. "I'm no trophy wife. Drop twenty pounds and erase a few things from the past and I might be, but not now."

"You don't realize how amazing you are," Elton said, unable to hide his surprise.

Her cheeks flushed with color and her eyes fell away. "There has to be more to it. We have never been in love enough to think about marriage, even before I caught him cheating. Why me, why now?" Desperation hung in her tone.

She looked around the room, chewing a nail, as though it held some answers. Elton did as well but saw nothing that could help. It looked like any other vacation home he'd been in, like a hotel but homier. He didn't have an answer for her.

"Does he tell you everything?" She searched his eyes again.

"Yes," Elton said, leaving out, "unfortunately." How would she feel if she knew Jackson told him about virtually every encounter, every infidelity? Would she understand why he listened to them and why he never told her?

"Then you already know," Bianca said, a tinge of wonderment in her voice. Then she took a deep breath, the kind you take before jumping out of an airplane. "Would he use my past against me to make me marry him?"

Her past? What past?

She stood up, crossed her arms and faced him. "He's using my mom and everyone else to get me to say yes. Would he invite a girl I used to dance with to blackmail me, too?"

"Dance with?" Elton was lost.

"At Angels. There's a girl down there who still works there, and she isn't someone I'd ever want at any party, let alone my engagement party." She paced the room. "You'd think the party itself would be blackmail enough. He knows I'd never make a scene."

Angels. He racked his brain. The name sounded so familiar. Elton narrowed his eyes on her when he remembered why, disbelieving. "Are you saying you used to be a stripper?" He asked slowly, and prepared to get slapped for making such an outlandish guess.

"He didn't tell you?" Bianca's brows drew together, one slightly up in that way of hers, and tilted her head like a puppy.

"Uh, no. He didn't tell me." Elton wasn't sure what he wanted to know. "Are you sure?" And in part he was asking if she was sure she'd been a dancer, not just verifying Jackson knew about it.

"In the beginning," she said, jogging her chin. "I told him about four months into dating, before I found out about Gina, or whatever that one's name was. I thought I could trust him, that we were getting serious, that it would be bad to wait until later and he felt violated."

"Are you sure he knows?" Elton wanted to kiss her again, imagining her swinging around a pole, gyrating to pumping music, her body in relief and shadow. Yes. He could see it about her, a recklessness and abandonment a woman might count on to earn money in such a way. The rest of her was so put together on the surface. But then he'd seen her sleeping lioness waken. He hardly thought she'd enjoy knowing this though.

Bianca craned her eyebrow up and her chin down.

“What? Don’t look at me like that. I’m just surprised he didn’t tell me. Like I said, he tells me everything. Usually far too much.”

Bianca stopped. She sat back down. “I told him over dinner. We finished a bottle of wine and I blurted it out and he laughed and said ‘really’ a few times and then said ‘you’re secret’s safe with me.’ And we never talked about it again.”

Someone knocked on the door.

“Bianca?” Jackson called through. The knob jiggled. “Everything okay, babe?”

“Yeah,” she called. “Hide,” she whispered.

“Where?” He could choke on his stomach.

“The closet. Quick. Shhh.”

And the mirror door slid shut.

## Chapter Nine

Bianca glimpsed her startled reflection, smoothed her hair and features then opened the door.

Jackson. Not that she didn't know. She just didn't know him. And she thought she had.

"There you are." He kissed her cheek and held her waist so that she teetered and so that he could steady her. "Are you okay? Carrie said you weren't feeling good."

"I'm okay. I'm just stunned, I guess." She needed to play this smoothly. Very smoothly. "I can't believe you managed to put this together. Did you invite everyone here?"

He nodded his Romeo nod and moved in for her lips. Bianca sidestepped out of his embrace. She wanted answers and something about kissing him made her stomach turn, especially with Elton hidden just a few feet behind them.

"Where did you get everyone's numbers from?"

"Your sister mostly. Why? Did I forget someone?" He sounded less than worried and kept his hands on her like octopus tentacles. He leaned in for another kiss. "Aahhh. Nice big bed you have here." He nibbled her ear. The shivers it sent down her spine felt creepy, lecherous.

She needed him to focus. Leaving this room was not an option until she knew exactly what kind of danger Jordan presented. Only then would she face the skinny little blonde and get her out before her stint as an exotic entertainer became the news of the evening rather than this farce of an engagement.

"Jackson," she said firmly. "Do you remember our four month anniversary dinner?"

"How could I forget it? That little trick with your tongue, that little black dress." His hands stroked her arms and he walked her backward, kissing her neck.

Bianca cringed. Why did Elton have to hear this of all things? Her legs hit the bed and she fell back with a small squeak. Jackson fell with her, pawing at her breasts. "Jackson, do you remember the dinner though." Her annoyed tone didn't cause the slightest hesitation.

"Mmm, Bianca. It's been so long. Too long." His hand went to her knee and began crawling up her thigh. Bianca clamped down on it and tried to sit up. "I've missed this."

She nudged her body away. "Not here Jackson," she said, trying to sound her prissiest.

"Where's your ring?" He sat upright, pulling her hand with him. "Shit, babe, your ring fell off."

Bianca looked at the bed, then the windowsill, but she couldn't for the life of her recall where she set it down. The mirror door slid open slowly in her peripheral. Elton's hand peeked out and tossed something shiny onto the gray carpet. The ring. Bianca blanched and shot over to it.

"Here it is," she said, unsure why she felt so grateful. For Elton tossing the ring and saving her from being forced to fess up or for Jackson not seeing his best friend hiding like a criminal in the closet?

Jackson got off his knees and sat back on the bed. He ran his hands through his hair



and sighed in relief. A soft knock sounded.

"Sorry to intrude," Bethany said, peeking through the door. "I'm looking for the bathroom."

Jackson's eyes flashed between the two women. Bianca knew he must be pissed about the ring but didn't much care. As far as she could tell, Bethany'd just saved her from a lot of grilling, possibly even a pointless guilt trip on how irresponsible she was.

Jackson mumbled an offer to show her and Bianca stepped out of their way before closing the door hard behind him. She turned the lock, too relieved that he was gone to feel bad about that pained look on Bethany's face or her potential shy discomfort.

"He's gone," she said upon hearing Elton step out of the closet at her back.

"I know." Elton's hands came to her shoulders, startling her senses. Her body was so aware of him, even after moments apart. Bianca leaned her weight back and into his. She could feel his breath warm on her shoulder.

"That may have been the most difficult thing I have ever had to do in my life," he said, his voice raspy and low. Sexy.

"What do you mean?" she said breathlessly, leaning her head so her neck exposed.

"Bianca, you do something to me. I don't know how to explain it. When I saw him, heard him touching you, it was all I could do not to tear that closet apart and kill him."

His voice vibrated with want. It sent shivers down her arms, tickling her lower back. Bianca closed her eyes and pressed her hands against the muscular thighs behind hers. She did know. She could feel it also, this strange protective hunger overcame her too when her sister stood a foot away flirting with him. She'd wanted to claw her eyes out, hiss and screech, mark her territory.

His tongue flicked her earlobe as his hands traced shivers down her back and gripped her ass. She should stop him. His hands began methodically adoring her ass, his erection brushing against her. She wanted him to lift her skirt, the same skirt she had lifted only a day ago to fuck him in his car. The scent of their sex might still be on it if not for her quick shower this morning.

The remembrance of their scent mingling while she gyrated her hips down onto his only worsened her sudden craving need to feel him inside her again. Like an addict, the effect he had on her made the risks worth taking.

Bianca turned around, placing her hand on Elton's stiff cock bulging, begging to be freed from his pants. Just once more. Let her have just one more drink from this sin.

Glancing at the door she verified it was locked and dropped to her knees, setting the ring on the floor. She locked her eyes to his and together they unbuttoned his pants, tore down the zipper and loosened his cock from his boxers. The world fell away and all that remained was her and him, and the electricity between them.

His cock stood proudly before her face, pointing to the sky. God, but it was the perfect prick, long and thick. The tip contoured to the shaft with such nice symmetry. And he smelled so good, so clean, so hot, so male.

Her mouth watered. She swallowed. Elton's eyes beseeched hers. They spoke clearly, hope of having her mouth wrapped around his cock, laced with the fear of being discovered. Both titillated her higher, driving her further into the erotic ether.

She grasped his dick with both hands and rolled the tip in circles over her lips and tongue. He watched, and every nuance of pleasure showed on his face. She took him into her mouth, wetting the length so her hands could stroke his flesh along with her mouth.

Elton groaned and tilted his hips forward. "My God, Bianca," he said, low and raspy with passion. Passion for her. "What are you doing to me?"

Whatever she wanted. Exactly what she wanted. Bianca increased her pace, rhythmically massaging him. She felt the tip swell and the shaft harden further. She cupped his balls, pressing the palm of her hand to the smoothness beneath.

His eyes closed and he held his breath. He steadied himself with one hand on the wall. The other hand laced fingers into her hair.

Bianca tightened her grip and suckled harder. His face reflected a mental prayer for her not to stop. His eyes begged her. Emboldened, she winked at him, then moaned long and low as his cock slipped in and out of her mouth. Simultaneously her hand stroked up and down.

The tip swelled so large, she had difficulty accommodating it. He was getting close. She glided him to the back of her throat, opening her jaw and relaxing her tongue. She flexed her throat around his turgid tip. Elton closed his eyes, his head fell back and his hips thrust forward.

Bianca moaned. Elton groaned, a low and guttural sound. Primal.

She pulled him outward to her lips.

Through clenched teeth a gritty cry escaped him. He began to cum.

The first jerking throbs filled her with pride as he filled her mouth with his hot salty pleasure. Bianca drank every drop into her mouth, suckling loudly, loving the dirty way it made her feel. Loving more the dazed, grateful gleam looking back at her.

He looked enslaved. She was his master.

His eyes closed and opened, glossy and heavy lidded. She dragged her mouth one last time up and down, making him flinch in gratification, then slipped off his cock. For the first time in her life, Bianca didn't run to the nearest sink. His cum was smooth and warm in her mouth and easy to swallow down.

She grinned as she did.

Elton stumbled two steps to the bed and collapsed onto it with a gasp. "Bianca, you are my every wet dream come true."

She wiped her mouth and couldn't stop the wide smile from forming on her puffy lips. She liked making him so fiery hot that she was the only thing to cool him off. Her indelible mark was made in his memory, she could see it in the way he sighed and gasped.

"I know you don't want to hear this," he looked from the ceiling to her, still lying weary and prone on the bed. "Maybe it's too soon. Maybe it will scare you. But, I can't let you go."

Bianca's chest tightened. She rose slowly to her feet. His words filled her with a painful joy. Yes, they scared her. And he wasn't finished. She didn't want him to stop speaking but feared his continuing as well. Her smile fell away as emotion choked her.

Elton sat up, fixing his pants. "Don't be scared of me, Bianca." Sincerity rang in his words, shone in his eyes. "I won't hurt you. I would die before I'd hurt you."

She shook her head once.

"I can't let you go," he said softly.

Bianca blinked hard, turned and left.

\* \* \* \*

“Did you find her?” Bianca touched Carrie’s elbow. She couldn’t think about Elton. Not right now. First she had to do damage control, before he changed the damage into disaster.

“Yes. She’s here with someone. A client he’s trying to woo but I don’t think she’s part of the wooing. He owns some growing jewelry chain.” Carrie handed Bianca a glass of wine and a tube of pink lip-gloss. “You look like you got punched in the mouth. Oh, don’t tell me. I don’t want to hear what I already can unfortunately imagine. I’m so jealous.”

“Oh, yeah this situation is *real* enviable, Carrie.” Bianca dabbed some gloss on her sore lips, grateful. “I’ve turned my perfectly neat life into an utter mess over a crush. But, never mind me. Did you talk to her?”

Carrie smiled at her sympathetically. “She says she quit the business. But, I don’t know if I believe her. I always took her to be a lifer. No way she’d quit without a serious income and the jewelry guy looks a bit young to be a sugar daddy, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.” Her head began to clear. This was better. Here with Carrie, with sanity, doing something—taking action. “I know Elton’s been trying to get some classy companies for ad space. Still, we need to get her out of here. Jackson might not remember my telling him and if so, the last thing I need is for it to come from her.”

“When are you going to do it, then?”

“What?” Bianca played dumb but she knew that tone, knew that question. Carrie was once again calling her out on her bullshit in her oh so gentle manner. When was she going to end it with Jackson? Well, for starters, once she knew her secret was safe. But she didn’t want to say so aloud.

Now Elton knew. But, she could trust him. He’d more than blinked when she’d told him, but he had not judged. She would have seen it, felt it, right there in those precious first seconds.

Carrie shook her head. “You need professional help. I’m serious. Bianca, look at this. Look around. You are having an engagement party with the wrong man. It should be Elton, not Jackson.”

“I know I need to end it, all right.” And she hated how defensive she sounded. “It’s not exactly the best time though.”

“Will it ever be?” Though Carrie spoke them softly, her words stung.

Bianca looked away. Sometimes, it was hard having someone so far in her corner. Because there was little room left for some nice, peaceful denial covered in procrastination.

Across the room, Elton tilted his chin at her and continued chatting with her mother and sister. That look. The one from the room, the one from her apartment, it was clearer than ever. Seven feet to his left, Jackson talked animatedly to Bethany who looked a bit out of sorts but not uncomfortable. Leave it to her social butterfly soon to be ex-fiancé to make a female stranger feel welcome.

Should she get it over with, do it now? Then what? What about all these people? As she watched Jackson, building up her nerve, Jordan walked up to him and Bethany. Bianca’s gaze flashed to Elton, who stood closer than her to the disaster she just knew was about to occur.

The sneaky smile on the former—yeah, right—stripper’s face gave Bianca no doubt as to her intentions. She was the kind of person who thrived on drama and she was about

to start a whole mess of it.

Elton squinted and furrowed his eyebrows then followed her stare to the blonde about to worm into Bethany and Jackson's conversation. He looked back at her, nodded and walked over faster than she could pee her pants. Cynthia didn't notice his exit, but Bianca could feel the flash of contempt on her mother's face all the way across the room. She didn't care. Pissing off her mother came a distant second to Elton helping stop Jordan.

What he could do, she didn't know, but having him there helped so much she could breathe again.

Bianca tugged Carrie's shirt and they snaked through the crowd too. Getting Jordan to leave might take all three of them. But, everyone had congratulations to bestow on Bianca and by the time they reached Jackson, Bianca feared it was too late.

She looked to Elton. He shook his head and smiled reassuringly and suddenly Bianca let out the breath she'd been unconsciously holding. "Jackson, we need to talk."

"Who wants a shot?" Carrie said as Bianca pulled her fiancé away.

Jackson followed without resistance out to the patio. The city lights ringed the curving coastline as night dripped down to ocean. "Bianca, what is it? Are you okay?" He appeared truly concerned but she also heard his charm voice, the one that could sell ice cubes to an Eskimo.

Bianca breathed in and blew out loud. "Jackson, I can't marry you." With her words, a heavy burden evaporated away.

"Don't be silly." He dipped down to make eye contact, rubbing her arms like she might be cold. "Of course you can. Is this about Friday night?"

"No. Well, yes, but not in the way you think..." She tucked her billowing hair behind one ear.

"Bianca, I understand and, please, let me explain. I was with another woman Friday night, but not in the way you think." He dipped again to look her in the eyes, tilting his head. "The truth is, I'm seeing a therapist. She's ugly and old and really good at her job. I realize I have a problem and I've committed to changing. For you." He rubbed her arms again.

Bianca forgot what she had been prepared to say. Shocked, she shook her head and moved her arms away from his touch despite the warmth. "A therapist?" Was it worse than she'd known? Could he really be in love with her?

"Yes. I love you and I am willing to do whatever it takes to earn your love and trust back. Hey, where's your ring?"

Bianca flushed. "I—I put it somewhere safe until you get it sized. It kept coming off." The lie tumbled out. Well, it was partly true. The coming off part. Onto the floor might not be safe though. And as soon as she told him...

"See. I knew you loved me." He rubbed again. "And you don't have to say yes now, Bianca. I can wait until you're ready. Just don't say no." No charm voice, no charm look. Just blinking eyes and a strain in his voice. For the first time, Jackson actually appeared vulnerable.

She opened her mouth to speak the words that became so much harder by his. But Carrie was right. She had to. But, not for Elton. For her. "Jackson..."

"Hey, you two," Carrie's voice and the din of the house carried out the opened door to them. "Bee, I need to steal you for one quick second."

“Can it wait just five minutes,” she said and gave her a meaningful pleading look.

“It’s important,” Carrie sing-songed and returned the meaningful look. She reached her arm out to take Bianca’s hand, smiling at Jackson. “I’ll have her right back and you can finish your romantic moment, okay, Jacks?”

“Take your time, Carrie,” Jackson said. “I know how close you two are and whenever you need her, she’s yours.”

She caught Bianca’s hand and yanked her inside. “Carrie, I was going to tell him,” Bianca said.

“I know and I’m sorry but this can’t wait. We have a problem.”

“Okay, but stop dragging me.” Bianca pulled to a stop. “Is it Jordan?”

“No. She left, thank God. Elton said something to her and the jeweler and they left with smiles. But, I think you may have another fire to put out.” Carrie twitched her head to the left.

Bianca gasped. Cynthia, her darling of a little sister, was draping the length of her body onto Elton. Carrie didn’t follow, but Bianca didn’t need her to. It wasn’t her mess to clean up. It was Bianca’s and might soon be Cynthia’s unless she could calm down enough within the few paces she strode to reach them.

“Elton, Cynthia,” she said breezily, glancing around to verify her mother was nowhere in sight. “I see you’re enjoying yourself. Where’s mother?”

Elton looked away from her.

“Gone,” Cynthia said a bit too firmly. “And happier than I’ve ever seen her. Oh Bianca, you did it. She adores Jackson. See? I told you not to screw it up and for once, you listened.” She looked up at Elton, swaying a little and using him as balance. “Now if I can get a ring on my finger, she’ll finally love us both.”

The ring! Bianca left them, hurrying up to the master bedroom, the image of the ring next to Elton’s shoe while she sucked his cock, burning hot in her head.

“What is your problem, Bianca?” Cynthia was right behind her.

Bianca paused to stare then took the stairs as fast as she could without drawing attention. “Not now, Cynthia, okay?” Her sister always became confrontational after a few drinks. It and the annoying habit of tripping and ripping the knees out of jeans were her trademarks at many a college party. Usually, they were Bianca’s jeans. Not usually was she confronting Bianca though. But at least she was no longer touching Elton. Not that it bothered her. Not that he liked it.

“He is Jackson’s best friend,” Cynthia hissed, trying to grab Bianca’s arm and missing.

“Yes, and apparently yours for tonight.” She regretted saying it instantly.

“I’m just trying to make sure he leaves you alone so you don’t get caught. I mean, have you seen the way he looks at you. Or the way you look at him?”

Bianca paused outside the bedroom door and faced her sister. “So, I’m supposed to thank you? Since when do you care about my love life anyway?”

“I’m your sister,” she said, drunkenly affronted. “I want to see you happy and Jackson has a great job, makes a lot of money, and even mother likes him.” Cynthia’s gestured loudly, counting on her fingers, waving her arm about but at least she kept her voice low.

“Cynthia, just leave my happiness to me, alright. If you really want to be a good sister, help me find my ring.” Bianca softly knocked on the closed door.

Cynthia gasped, placing her hand on her chest, wobbled a little, and followed Bianca into the room. With the door closed, they silently searched the room, Bianca on the floor, Cynthia everywhere else. Within moments, Bianca found the tiffany set diamond near where she set it down, almost under the bed. Someone must have kicked it on the way to the bathroom Cynthia was now using.

“What a great house, huh?” Cynthia’s voice echoed above the stream. “Seriously, why on earth would you give any of this up?”

For an angel. But that was fantasy. Bianca contemplated the ring as well as the question. Pink and blue flashed in the light. Platinum framed glitter. Exquisite. Just like Jackson. He was everything she thought she wanted—on the outside—but he had one major flaw, invisible to the naked eye.

He didn’t value her.

Then she knew the answer. It was there all along waiting to be heard. Because it’s not worth it. The humiliation, the pain. And because maybe Elton was. Elton. Sweet, quiet, addictive Elton who only blinked. Who listened. Who couldn’t let her go.

Then he appeared, silently closing the door behind him, and her heart tripped up her throat. She gasped but it felt like a sigh as she drank the sight of him in.

Cynthia flushed from the bathroom and Elton winced. Bianca got to her feet and together, they rushed him into the closet. Her sister came around the corner, smoothing her dress, steadying herself a bit. “I only want the best for you, Bianca,” she said, a hint of slur in the word ‘best’ making it sound like ‘besthe’.

“I know you do,” Bianca said and hugged her. “And I’m sorry I stole Elton from you. But, I promise you I had no idea you were interested.”

“Nah. He’s really not my type. Too tall.” She lifted her hand high in the air to demonstrate. “I was just doing Jackson a favor. He said the poor guy hasn’t been laid in months. Little did he know, huh?” Cynthia laugh-snorted. “Do you think this place has a hot tub?”

“What a great idea!” Bianca walked her to the door. “Tell you what. Go find Jackson, ask him and I’ll be right down.”

“Okay,” Cynthia said, clapping and leaving.

“That was too easy,” Elton said, exiting the closet. Again.

“She’s an easy drunk,” Bianca said, shrugging one shoulder. “I’ve seen her worse. Which reminds me. Don’t ever let her do that again.”

“Do what?” He smiled coyly, stealthily moving closer to her.

Her heart skipped again. “Wrap her body around you like a friggin’ Christmas bow.”

He breathed in. “You’re jealous.” Two more steps and she could feel his body heat.

“No, I’m not.” But her voice was too high.

“No?” He raised one eyebrow and lowered his lashes, making his gaze look sexier than ever—like a predator’s. Like a cat’s. He inched nearer, backing her up against the bed in the same way Jackson had. But, with him, the bed hitting the back of her knees made her belly quiver and her clit pulse.

Oh, what he did to her.

Bianca’s breath became a pant as the shivery heat spread from groin to her neck and thighs. He was a tiger hunting. And she savored his chase. He even licked his lips like a cat. Before his hands touched her flesh, the attraction created between them did. It vibrated in a low hum like music in her veins. Bianca’s sweetest spot throbbed to life,

recognizing his scent and warmth.

Her body acknowledged the promise only he could fulfill, and reached out for it by spreading tingling hope outward, readying for what it knew was to come. For his fingers' strokes. For his tongue's delve, his cock's rush.

Her blood zinged, her breath dragged. His gaze held her silent and breathless in wait.

Only his hot pulsing cock could slake the need wetting her thighs, swelling her slit in readiness. His finger felt like a spark when it finally met the skin of her shoulder and slipped her spaghetti strap off. But, she didn't flinch. She wanted this fire and leaned in as he drew a tantalizing seam across her collar bone to her other strap. Her heart beat in her throat, her clitoris plumped.

Yes. Oh, please yes.

She was crazy for him. He made her absolutely mad.

His breathing came equally labored and he pressed her forward without pushing. The bed beckoned at her knees. So easily, she could fall back onto it and take him with her, opening her legs wide for him to plummet down into her depths. But, the risk of it hung in the back of her mind. She couldn't move, but knew she should. It was too much. They'd already risked enough mere hours ago when she'd sucked him dry.

She needed to untangle her mess with Jackson before it worsened but her body was tangled with this moment, with him.

Elton's eyes smoked with his hunger for her and they beckoned for an answer. She couldn't. But, she couldn't stop him either. His fingers purred down her shoulders and went to her thighs. Slowly, he lifted the edge of her skirt, sliding up her inner thigh and nudging her legs apart with a muscular thigh. Hardness willing her softness to open. To surrender. His other hand supported her lower back making her feel weightless, feminine. And her legs complied, rebelling against her brain, parting for him.

The anticipation of feeling those fingers touch her hottest flesh made her mouth water. Bianca swallowed. They had to stop. She couldn't do this again. But, her body begged for another taste, just one little taste. She was insane.

Then Elton touched her where she wanted most, and she did flinch and lean and sagged in a beg for mercy. He stroked her and spread her lips open for entrance, his thumb gently circling the topmost of her clit. Jolts of pleasure shocked through her body. She could explode, just like that, her body near suspended in his arms as he showed her impossible new heights of want.

She would beg for this if he made her. But he wouldn't. And she had no doubt he felt it too. His eyes whispered it to her, like a secret only they shared. His single finger slipped into her slippery arousal and she whimpered. She was so swollen, so close, but not so much so his finger could satisfy her pussy's craving. Her pussy needed more. It needed his big, long cock to spread, fill, press in and out, filling and fulfilling all at once.

"Elton," she pleaded, for what she couldn't be sure.

"Bianca," he whispered, tortured, but waiting.

For her choice.

Then Elton lowered his head and licked her neck just below and behind her ear. Her last knot of wisdom—of resolve—came undone. The dam broke. Desperation flooded Bianca's senses. His cock stabbing into her fleshy walls became her sole salvation.

She stripped her dress off as he yanked his shirt off. She lay on the bed, the satin cool and sexy on her naked skin while he rushed off his pants. In moments they were in

the sheets, protected and exposed all at once. Elton's hands raced over her body and his mouth found hers. His kiss matched her climbing, mind numbing desire, tongues lapping, lips pressing, teeth nibbling.

Elton. *Oh, yes—please, more.* Her body spoke her pleas and soothed the ones it heard.

Elton's hands raked into her hair sending tingles down her spine as he covered her body with his possessively, like he feared she might try to escape. But there was no running. No more. She could feel the animal in him, the tiger she glimpsed stalking her so purposefully. She placed her hand on his chest as his prick teased her portal and shook her head. Her pussy quivered in outrage as his tip backed away. Bianca nipped his lip with her teeth, narrowed her eyes on him, daring him.

A flash of danger crossed his features and in a breath, he flipped her onto her stomach. Bianca hitched her hips under his, bracing her knees firm. She looked back at him, ready and wanting. Perfectly, Elton slipped his dick into her pussy, spreading her ass wide to accommodate his girth. Getting the tip in, he drove into her hard, just the way she wanted.

Bianca grunted in satisfaction, tossed her hanging hair away and shoved back against his cock. Elton's hands took decisive hold of her ass, guiding her up and down his gorgeous prick. With each stroke, Bianca felt her orgasm build and edge. She arched lower to get as much as she could, reached under her stomach and cupped his tightening balls.

Elton groaned low. She could hear the animal in his trembling voice and it spoke to the primal part of her, soothing the beast he created.

Bianca moved her hand from his balls to her clit. In small circles, she massaged the nubby hardness, rocking back on his cock. Every thrust of his cock, she met and matched until she could beg no more. Her fingers and his thrusts threw her into sweet, hot shudders of climax. Her pussy cinched around his shaft so well she could feel the tip's ridge rippling in and out of her. Then she exploded and cried out into the pillow as orgasm swept her away from the real world and into the dream that was Elton.

\*

Elton knew it would send him over the precipice but he couldn't tear his eyes from her face. He watched Bianca's lips part, her eyes flutter closed, her back arch and when he felt her pussy hug his cock, it became too much. He did this to her. Him. No one else. Not ever again and she was the most splendid, hottest dream come true.

He pulled out his cock as his own climax coiled down and sprang forth from deep inside. And she opened her eyes and watched his cum spill onto her creamy skin, rocketing forth. He gripped his dick above her cheeks, saw a different kind of pleasure go over her. The beast was sated. Proud and satisfied.

Elton let all his breath out at once and lowered himself next to her. He hadn't realized he'd been holding it. He collapsed and wove his limbs around hers. They only had seconds, he knew, should be dressing but when he left her, the spell would break and the painful need of her would grow again.

Elton kissed her sweaty brow and reluctantly left to the bathroom, clothes in hand. She watched his ass as he walked, he could feel it.

\*

Bianca buried a pillow over her head. Elton Novey was going to be the death of her,



adorable butt and all. She'd never wanted or needed someone so much. It felt like being caught in a gale, with the risk of being easily blown away by another's whim. What was she going to do? Get dressed, a voice urged her, and go end it with Jackson. Before it's too late.

Bianca swung her legs over the edge of the bed and grabbed her dress. She had no idea where her tiny panties could be, didn't remember taking them off. As she scanned the floor and untwisted her dress, outside the door she heard a giggle. Her body washed with adrenaline as she bolted to the bathroom, unable to fix the bed's rumpled mess.

Elton stopped plucking at the waistline of his shirt when she came in. "What's wrong," he whispered.

"Someone's coming," she hissed and pulled her dress over her head, adjusted her full breasts into the supportive top of it and looked for someplace to hide.

## Chapter Ten

The shower. Bianca motioned for Elton to get into it. He complied just as the voices drew closer, entering the room. A woman giggled and said, "Someone will find us" in a low voice, which sounded strangely familiar. But then she knew everyone at the party. And what did she care who it was so long as they didn't find them.

Bianca climbed behind the burgundy curtain with Elton wincing at the noise of the plastic sheath. He had to hunch over to keep his head below the curtain line, and looked really uncomfortable. Poor thing. If she could learn to control herself, they'd be downstairs and no one the wiser. Well, if *they* could control themselves.

"Copycats," Elton whispered, smiling at her as he carefully lowered himself into a tight sit. He seemed totally unalarmed over the situation. Just like Carrie would have been.

Someone had to do the worrying.

Bianca put her finger up to her lips and warned him with her eyes to be quiet, but couldn't help smiling a little too. It was funny, the two of them post coital, stranded in hiding and forced to hear another couple's antics. It hadn't even occurred to her that someone could have been listening to them in the next room and she was sure the couple didn't consider it either. They'd probably had the foresight to lock the door, too. Elton and she had been too distracted to lock the door.

"Someone's got to be looking for us by now," Bianca said in a low whisper.

Elton shrugged, adjusted himself and offered his lap as a seat. "Can't find us now."

True enough. But the longer they were gone, the more people would wonder and, inevitably, would talk. She did not want to be anywhere near such a conversation. Even if she wasn't marrying Jackson, no one knew yet.

Her crouch getting uncomfortable, she decided not much more harm could be done after their two naughty assignations. She settled into the only available seat—his lap. It felt good. He pulled her shoulders to lean back against him. That felt even better.

Bianca rested her head on his shoulder and breathed in his scent. He still smelled clean and crisp and she knew she'd made him sweat. He was probably one of those rare guys who even smelled good without cologne. Her heart ached in her chest in a strange way. How did her life get to be such a mess in such a small space of time?

Everything had been on track. Well, almost everything. She'd left her sordid dancing career with no one the wiser, started a respectable business and had a successful, handsome man to call her own. Not true either. Jackson had been anyone's but hers and she didn't care to know how many.

Elton stroked her hair, kissing her head every so often. Muffles of pleasure floated to their ears but all she could hear was his heart beating, his breathing. Bianca closed her eyes and let the sounds, his scent, his touch fill her senses up. She couldn't deny how comforting his arms and lap were. Comforting and yet, sensual. He made her feel like a woman. Soft, vulnerable, seductive. Maybe if she could take in as much of it as possible, she'd be able to finally cut herself off from him.

Her mind went through the situation one last time and still she saw no good way to get what she wanted. Not even if weeks passed—months—and Elton and she did manage

to stay together beyond this lunatic attraction, what would people think? Certainly, Jackson would never forgive his friend.

And Bianca could only imagine her mother's reaction. Disowning didn't cover it. Somehow, she doubted her mom would be giving any tight, loving hugs over that announcement. The fleeting approval had been so nice, her first and last, she supposed. Oh well. She'd come this far without it, why start now?

The woman's moaning grew louder, the bed thumped the wall. Bianca looked up at Elton, stifling a laugh. He grinned and wiggled his eyebrows at her.

He pressed his hips up against her back. He was hard!

She was getting hot too, she realized, feeling the achy sensation of craving return to her lower region.

She imagined the two bodies mere feet away, separated by no more than fabric and wall—less really—a corner and a curtain. She could see in her mind's eye a man, bending over a luscious body, smacking her ass, fucking her hard. Slipping a finger into her dirtiest part. Bianca's pussy shivered again, in the now familiar Elton-want kind of throb. She wanted him. Again. She wanted to be bent over, driven into, touched in places she couldn't say out loud.

Elton bit her neck, his hands rode up her front and cupped her breasts. Another moan floated to her ears. Another wave of heat spiraled down into her. Bianca became suddenly hungry for it. She moved silently from Elton and turned to face him.

"We're so bad," she mouthed.

"The worst." He nodded, a gleam in his eye. "I want to fuck you," he mouthed back.

A quiver of pleasure ran between her thighs.

She unzipped his pants and pulled out his hard dick, enjoying the weight and feel in her hands. His eyes dared her to do more. She pulled her dress over her head and slipped it out of the curtain. She dared him back.

Elton's mouth parted. He eased down his pants. Bianca let the image of the couple fucking in the next room fill her mind. She saw the man yank the woman's hair, grip her hips, his buttocks flexing as his cock slowly pulled in and out of the woman's fleshy pink haven. His finger slipped in and out. She touched herself and so did Bianca.

Each sweet moan that came to their ears sounded closer to climax and suddenly Bianca was too. She urged Elton up and turned away from him. He needed no more direction and took hold of her ass as she bent forward and glided into her smooth core, already sated and sexed but ready to take more, harder, longer.

She wanted it rough and angry. She wanted to feel the power of what he could do to her, to feel him fuck her. Bianca pushed her ass back. He filled her up. He took it away. She arched and bent, feeling the spot she craved exposing to him, hoping he would read her mind.

The woman moaned. Bianca inhaled. Oh, yes. Just like that. Hard, long strokes so she could feel his every inch. Elton's hand drew closer to the spot, tentatively.

Please. Yes, please, just one little touch.

Elton answered each tilt of her hips with true sound thrusts, his hand going where it shouldn't but could. Bianca reached down and placed two fingers on her clit and twirled. She swallowed when her mouth began to water and her release climbed its approach. If he touched her there—on her asshole, her naughty spot—she knew she would instantly explode.

Elton stopped. He pulled out. She could have died. In an instant he spun her around lifted her and remounted her with such sureness and ease, thrills of feminine awe went through her.

The moaning in the room grew louder, insistent, and a high-pitched grunting joined in. Bianca put her hand over her mouth, but the eroticism was too much. And then his finger found what she'd been looking for. Deftly and smoothly, he slipped a finger into her. A small moan escaped her, she couldn't help it. He felt so good. It felt so wonderfully dirty. Elton drove into her as she spasmed, fierce and quick, like slaps against his cock, then changing into long smooth circles of sweet bliss.

Elton followed, the muscle straining against her walls then jerking. His head fell to her shoulder, his arms held her tight, his shaft buried.

On a gasp, Elton began to softly chuckle and she did as well. Jeez, they were nuts. Insane. Certifiably, and what was it about him that did these things to her? Or was she always so wanton, so *dirty* and simply didn't know it? She loved it. She loved what he did to her.

"You're amazing," he mouthed, something brilliant and clear shining in his eyes. Something more than lust. "Bianca, I lo—."

"Jackson!" the female voice moaned. "Oh, yes, Jackson."

Their bodies instantly stilled. Bianca looked at Elton wide-eyed. Her body flushed with prickly heat. Elton slowly shook his head at her. He mouthed the word "no" like "no, they couldn't have heard right". But, again, the woman called out "Jackson, Jackson, yes, oh yes," until a low grunt answered and the room fell silent.

Bianca's heart thumped in her throat, her mouth went dry. She couldn't believe it. At his engagement party. And to think she'd almost felt sorry for him after all his bullshit about a counselor. She'd almost felt bad about ending it, about what she'd done.

Fury raged through her, blinding her, making tears course down her face. She moved to leave. Elton took hold of her wrist and shook his head hard at her. He mouthed the words, "not now."

She freed her wrist, yanked the curtain back and her dress up from the floor. If not now, when? He deserved to be forced to admit the truth. He couldn't lie anymore. She stepped out in time to bump right into Bethany, naked, flushed pink from the romping fuck with Bianca's supposed fiancé hopeful.

Bethany gasped. A small, terrified yelp escaped her before she ran the other way. Bianca stalked after her, yanking her dress on. Jackson sat up in the bed, his mouth open as though about to speak. Bianca dared him to with her eyes. Bethany scampered behind him and under the covers.

"Jackson," Bianca said. "I can't believe this. No, that's not true, I can believe this. What I can't believe is, I almost believed you. Why in hell did you ask me to marry you when clearly, you don't love me?"

"I know, I know. Bianca, I need help."

Behind him Bethany grunt-gasped.

"She's my co-worker for Christ's sake. My friend, at least she could have been. Can't you keep it outside of my immediate circle?" She shook from the anger coursing through her. "You are nothing but a snake, a liar. I hope your penis falls off and rots, you stupid son of a bit..."

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Jackson asked, not her, but behind her.

Elton.

A new flash of humiliation joined the anger, competing for command. Elton stood behind her. She didn't have to turn around to know it, Jackson's face showed her.

"Listening to some pretty amazing sex from the comfort of the shower," Elton said as he joined her side, letting his hands brush her ass before they rested on her shoulders. His voice was firm, level. Calm.

It helped, if only a little.

"You've got to be kidding me," Jackson said but didn't sound very disbelieving. In fact he hardly sounded surprised. "Elton, you're my best friend. What is this some sort of prank to catch me in the act. Okay. Fine. Jig is up right?"

Bethany peered around Jackson's shoulder, pointing. "He's the one, isn't he?"

Bianca glared at her. "What?"

"The one on the phone. The one you were batting eyelashes and twirling hair over on Saturday. I knew it wasn't Jackson. You never act like that with him."

"What? Saturday? Have you two been screwing around behind my back?" Jackson appeared sincerely stunned, as though he never considered the possibility of Bianca finding Elton attractive.

"I don't see what the problem is." Elton put his arm around her. "The truth is out. Maybe now, everyone can see how things should be."

What? She turned on him. "This is how things should be, Elton? This? My fiancé fucking my friend?"

"In the bed we just got out of," Elton said quietly, searching her eyes.

Bethany grimaced. "Ew."

"That's different," Bianca said.

"How?" Jackson said, sounding eerily calm too. "It's okay for you to slut around, but not me?"

Jackson couldn't argue himself into the right somehow. Not this time. She wouldn't let him.

"How?" Bianca said, letting all her pent up anger drench her words. "Because I love him, Jackson, that's how. And you don't know what love is. You back me into an engagement, try to screw me one minute and then climb into bed with the first new piece of meat within range." Bianca yanked the covers away as she spoke, throwing clothes at them. "You need more than therapy, Jackson. You need to be neutered. My mother was here." Her voice neared yelling, tears coursed down her cheeks.

Then Elton's arms encased her flailing arms and body into a cocoon. She couldn't move, could barely breathe past the raw emotion welling up in her. Sobs racked her body, not out of sadness, but sheer disappointment. It wasn't hurt over Jackson betraying her yet again. It didn't matter with who. It went beyond him, past Bethany and all the others. The anguish came from her.

She'd tried to make the perfect match work. He'd cheated. She sought revenge, the perfect revenge, and ended up falling for Elton. She ended up in love. Weak and vulnerable. His arms held her as she cried. Bethany murmured an apology but it didn't matter. All that mattered were Elton's arms and her worst fears realized, dying on the floor.

\*

Elton would have punched Jackson square in the mouth if he had a free hand. But, he

didn't. Bianca needed both of them right now and he refused to let her down. Her words echoed inside him, filling the void of longing she'd created. He hardly believed it. She loved him. He shut his eyes and inhaled her sweet rosy scent.

And maybe she didn't hear herself say it. Maybe she would regret the admission. Or just maybe, the chance he'd been hoping for had landed in his lap. The truth was out and judging Jackson's reaction to it, their friendship would survive.

The woman in bed was no new conquest for Jackson. Elton recognized her. She was the first woman Jackson had ever, although probably unwittingly, been faithful to. So, maybe there was some twisted hope for them all.

## Epilogue

Bianca set her wine glass down and followed Elton onto the small dance floor. The music trumpeted a jazzy love song she didn't know the name of but recognized the tune. His hand slid down her back, settled on her waist. She rested her head on his shoulder, breathing in his soft cologne.

Under the tuxedo and shirt, his heart beat. She couldn't hear it above the hum of music, but she could feel it somehow.

Her happiness almost hurt. But, in a good way.

She never guessed any of this was possible. Not with him, not with anyone really, but here she was.

"There's a nice, large bedroom at the top of those stairs," Elton said huskily against her neck. "It has a nice, large bed in it. We can sneak off to it whenever you like."

"Elton," Bianca said in a mock scold. "What kind of girl do you think I am?" She returned his teasing smile, feeling the same sparkle in her eyes.

"Mmmm. The naughty kind." His hand slowly dipped lower, threatening to grab her ass in front of everyone. "It would be like old times. And new times."

His tongue traced her ear lobe, sending trembling through her belly and heat up her thighs. A year and they may as well have only met, it felt so fresh and vibrant.

"I could lift your skirt, slip my cock inside of you," Elton said, nipping her neck. "Hold you up against the wall deep in shadows and fuck you, make your pussy wet and hot and cum..."

Bianca pulled back to stop him before he ended up groping her in front of her dearest friends and most interesting relatives. She felt like every pair of eyes in the room could see her body reacting to him, the buzz in her veins, the throb between her thighs. Worse, being watched only added to her hunger. It wouldn't be the first time they forgot where they were, rapt in the riot of need coiling between them.

But, he stopped and simply held her, dancing in his strong arms.

Too late. Bianca's body had other ideas. It needed the satisfaction only his could seem to ever give. She needed to feel exactly what he'd described, to find the nearest place to see it through. She could feel his prick growing against her.

"Where do you think you're going?" Elton said when she pulled away from him.

She narrowed her eyes, mischief nibbling at her. "Upstairs, of course," she said low and sweet. "After all, what better way to celebrate our engagement than to christen our hotel suite, in every room, on every countertop, the balcony..."

Elton's head fell back and his deep throaty chuckle carried all the way across the room.

\*

"Wow," someone there said, wistfully. "Just look at them. They make such a picture perfect couple, don't you think?"

The woman the question was directed to slowly nodded. Though he wasn't the man she first hoped her daughter would marry, she knew Bianca had made another choice she could be proud of. With a smile, she looked around for them again on the dance floor. Now, where in the world did those two sneak off to?

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Amber's favorite thing about writing erotica is discovering and exploring new (and old) fantasies. That and the fact that few ever guess her to be so naughty under her good girl exterior. Like many writers, she is living her childhood dream as an author. She also writes Historical Paranormals and lives in Scottsdale, AZ with her two very snotty cats, Cinnamon and Lulu.



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