



HAYDEN
RENIER

EXPOSING
NICOLE

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romance

Exposing Nicole

A Ravenous Romance™ Modern Love™ Original Publication

Hayden Renier

A Ravenous Romance™ Original Publication
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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

The first thing I always notice is his smell. And not just the cologne he wears—I mean the smell of his body. It’s musky but spicy, and maybe there’s a hint of sweat in there. I can’t tell for sure, and figuring out the exact chemical makeup of his essence is pretty much the last thing on my mind. Let’s just sum it up by saying he smells deliciously manly. I’d gladly spend forever with my face buried in his neck, breathing him in, maybe tracing my tongue up to his ear so I can get a little taste, but he never lets me linger in one spot for too long.

The second thing I always notice is his hands. They’re slightly calloused. Large enough that I sometimes wonder if he could wrap one around my neck with little effort. Strong, but he’s not rough with them. Well, unless I want him to be. Usually he knows how he wants things to play out and just goes for it. He knows when to be pushy, or when to be gentle, but either way there’s an insistence in his hands. Determination. Like now.

It’s so dark that I can barely see him, but I can feel him. I turn to jelly as he pushes me up against the wall and presses his body against me, his hands gripping my shoulders, his mouth dangerously close to mine as we breathe heavily into one another. I want him to kiss me so badly that I swear I might die. He refuses.

“Tease,” I whisper, a little irritated but too overcome with anticipation to be overly annoyed.

He has control. I know it. He knows it. And even though it’s not in my nature to give in, I let it happen. I can’t help it. There’s something about him . . . something about his feel, his smell, his taste . . . everything about him drives me wild with pleasure and hunger.

He pulls me away from the wall and pushes me down onto my bed. Before I can sit up he plants one of those fabulous hands on my chest and presses me back down

while he lifts my skirt, gripping it in a way that leaves him white-knuckled. I lay back and continue to watch as he slides both hands up my outer thighs and pulls up my top a little with his teeth, kissing and licking my stomach while his hands work me out of my panties.

He pulls them off slowly, easing them down my thighs, past my knees, over my calves. As his fingertips skim every inch of my legs, I finally find a moment to be thankful for the punishing runs I've been putting myself through. It's obvious he's appreciative of my efforts, considering how his tongue has started to follow his fingers all the way down to my ankles. He yanks my panties the rest of the way off and tells me to turn over.

I feel him kneel next to me, but I can't see him—my face is in the pillow. He grabs my wrists with one hand, and with the other . . . my panties. He's tying my hands above my head using my panties. I try to squeeze my legs together to dampen the throb between them just a little—it's getting unbearable—but he's too quick for me. He finishes tying my wrists and grips my calves roughly, gently pushing them apart. Obediently, I keep them open. He removes his hands. My mind starts racing. Where is he? What is he about to do to me? How much longer do I have to wait?

And then, I feel it—lightly at first, then a little more insistent, on the back of my knee. It feels like . . . sandpaper? What the hell is he doing? I turn my head from the pillow and try to open my eyes, but I can't. Why the hell can't I open my eyes, and what the hell is he doing? It starts to tickle. I shake my leg a little in an attempt to stop it, but the sensation returns.

"Stop it," I laugh. "Stop, stop!"

I'm finally able to pry open my eyes and realize it's morning. I'm in bed, lying on my stomach, alone. The sandpapery feeling on the back of my knee comes courtesy of my cat, who seized the moment when my left leg escaped the confines of my down comforter and decided it was the perfect place to lick.

"Penelope, why can't you be a six-foot-tall guy with perfect hands and a

delicious smell?” I asked her, sighing. She purred in response. I took a quick glance at the clock: 8:42. Great. Late again.

“Up you get, kitty.” I nudged Penelope off me. She offered me a look that defined “unimpressed.” Despite her sour face—and my desire to go back to bed to finish that dream—I rolled over and swung my legs over the bed, then plodded into the bathroom.

As I waited for the shower to heat up, I scanned myself in the mirror. The firm running legs, the flat abs from yoga, the breasts that have gone down a cup size but are blessedly free of stretch marks and relatively perky considering. It’s funny what a break-up can do to your fitness regimen. Or other regimens, for that matter. Eyes meeting eyes in the mirror, deep breath, and . . .

“Sadie, you are sexy, fun, and fabulous, and attract strong, secure, kind, supportive men into your life right now.”

The words hung in the air. I held my own gaze. And when I couldn’t stand it any more, I laughed. Stepping into the shower, I found it hard to escape the sense of irony washing over me. If everyone knew what my private life was like, I’d surely be outed as a fraud.

* * * *

I could barely get into my office before I was bombarded. I didn’t even get a chance to sit down before the phone was ringing off the hook, my e-mail in-box was overflowing, and a copy editor was standing in the doorway. I decided to deal with the copy editor first. Dropping my bag and coat on the floor, I pulled out my chair and plunked myself down.

“What can I do for you, Noel?”

“Um, well, I, uh . . .” he stammered. I failed to understand what it was about me that terrified him so, but whenever he came to my office, he’d immediately turn bright red and lose the ability to speak.

“Noel—focus,” I said. He cleared his throat.

“Well, I need some clarification on some stuff in your latest column.”

I kicked my feet up on my desk and knocked over a bottle of lube. Noel’s eyes darted to it and stayed glued until it rolled under my desk. “OK, so what do you need clarified?” I asked. “And you can come in, you know. Here, have a seat.”

I got up and rounded my desk to pull out the chair that sat in front of it, then sat on top of the desk while motioning for him to sit. He tiptoed into the room as if the carpet were spiked with land mines and gingerly took a seat. He clutched a notepad and a printout of my latest column in his hands. I wondered if, when he let go of them, they’d reveal two sweaty palm prints.

“OK. So. I’m not completely clear on the, ah, process. You know. That you went through.”

I frowned. “Which part?”

He cleared his throat again. “Well. Um. The . . . Vaseline thing?”

“What about it?” I pressed. I knew I was being mean, but putting him on the spot was entertaining as hell.

“I, uh . . . don’t get why they’d put the Vaseline on, like, before, instead of . . . I don’t know. After?”

“Let me walk you through this,” I said, and stood up to shove some things back a little on my desk—didlos, two porn star action figures in flagrante delicto, a can of “sex mousse” that was designed to take the place of whipped cream but failed miserably by tasting like Styrofoam—then hopped up on it again.

“So they had me spread wide like this—” I flung my legs open, the spiked heel of my right boot nearly smacking Noel in the head, pleased that I had decided to wear pants that morning. “—and I was on this tablelike thing, right? So they put the Vaseline here.” I gestured from my belly button all the way down to my taint. “And the reason why they do it before is because putting the molding goop directly on me and having it harden would, you know, pull out my pubes when they tried to take it off.”

Noel winced and turned six more shades of red.

I smiled. “Not that I have any, after I wrote that piece reviewing the pubic trimmers.”

Noel went from beet red to ghost white in a split second. I wished I’d been recording his reaction to replay at the next company get-together.

“So the Vaseline makes for easy removal and cleanup,” I concluded, but kept my legs splayed because Noel was having trouble looking me in the eye in this position.

“I just want to make sure the piece flows properly, that’s all, and it didn’t make sense to me,” he muttered quickly, looking at the floor.

“Oh, no problem. And guess what? I’ll have my very own cyberskin replica of my goodies in about two weeks. Want one?”

“Can I get three for the office Christmas party?”

I looked up and realized my editor, Martin, was standing in the doorway with a devastatingly cute guy I’d never seen before. Right there, next to one of my bosses, was the textbook definition of tall, dark, and handsome. And there I was, sitting on top of my desk with my legs splayed, torturing the poor copy editor. I’d never wished I had windows more than at that exact moment. I swung my legs to the floor and stood with my knees locked and arms at my sides like a proper young lady. Martin walked in looking amused, with Cute Guy following behind him.

“Martin! We were just going over the edits on my latest column,” I said, trying to pretend he’d actually walked in on me filing my nails.

“We’re very hands-on here,” he said to Cute Guy, then turned back to me. “Sadie, I want you to meet Aaron Franklin. He’s taking over Rex’s spot as entertainment editor and will be overseeing the Web content until we fill that position.”

I nodded and stepped forward. “Nice to meet you, Aaron. I’m Sadie. I’m the senior editor. And the secret sex columnist, but I you probably figured that out.” I gestured to the blow-up doll hanging from the ceiling.

“Either that, or this is a more relaxed office atmosphere than what I’m used to,” he said, and smiled a crooked grin. “But I thought the sex columnist was Naughty

Nicole?”

“It is, and she’s me,” I said, looking from Noel, who was still staring at the ground, to Martin, who was looking back and forth between me and Aaron like he was watching tennis, to Aaron, whose eyes were so fixated on mine that he was about to bore holes right through me. “My parents are deeply religious types, and if they ever knew their daughter was running around town wearing a strap-on, I’d be kidnapped and subjected to deprogramming no matter how much I protested that it was for science.”

“Do you need me to sign something?” Aaron asked, turning to Martin.

“No, just follow her lead,” Martin advised. “She knows who knows her as Nicole and who knows her as Sadie.”

Aaron turned back to me and I offered my hand. “Welcome to my nightmare,” I joked.

He shook my hand and I felt a charge go through me. Did he feel it too? I found myself lost in hazel eyes that were perfectly flecked with just the right amount of green. I liked the way his eyes crinkled in the corners when he smiled. I was tempted to lean forward and smell his neck . . .

“And this is Noel, our copy editor,” Martin said, cutting into my thoughts.

“Hi, Noel,” Aaron said and offered his hand.

Noel shook it. “Can I go now?”

Martin nodded. Noel shot out of the chair as if a rocket had been attached to his ass. Martin fixed me with a look.

“Sadie, when are you going to stop torturing him?”

“When he stops being so uncomfortable around me and what I write,” I said simply.

Martin rolled his eyes. “He’s a devout Catholic!”

“He’s also old enough to start letting go of that guilt and start embracing his sexuality,” I said. “Better that I torture it out of him than some woman he picks up at a bar, no? Besides, I think he secretly likes it.”

Martin laughed. “Just tone it down,” he warned. “I don’t want us getting slapped with a sexual harassment suit.”

I shrugged as Martin walked out of the office. “Nice to meet you,” I said as Aaron followed. “Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with to get settled.”

“Maybe one of those bottles of lube,” he said with a wink. “See ya.”

As he walked out the door the intercom on my phone buzzed.

“Sadie?” came the voice of our secretary, who we all called Babs.

“Yeah, Babs, I just got in. Can you send it to voice mail?”

“It’s Abby.”

“Put it through,” I said, and went back behind my desk to grab the phone.

“You kept me waiting entirely too long,” Abby said when we were connected.

“You screening calls already?”

“I’ve barely gotten in the door and already I’ve been busted on my desk with my legs spread wide open in front of the copy editor, Abs. I thought I might get some work done before I start fielding calls from overzealous publicists trying to convince me their porn star is changing the world.”

“Is that a slam at me?” Abby asked in a tiny voice.

I laughed. “No, you publicize lifestyle clients. It just so happens that one of them happens to be a sex store. If you were calling me to tell me about how your client’s triple-F boob job is newsworthy it’d be a different story.”

“Oh, save it. You love your job and you know it.”

I curled the phone cord around my index finger. “I think I might be about to love it a little more.”

“Oh? Raise?”

“Cute guy started today.”

Abby let out a low whistle. “Might this mean that the sex columnist for one of the nation’s top men’s magazines finally gets laid?”

“Like you’re one to talk,” I shot back. “I haven’t heard of you hooking up with

anyone since Darren.”

“Yes, but I broke up with Darren only a couple months ago. And how long ago did you dump Carter?”

I sighed and uncurled my finger from the phone cord to run my free hand through my hair. “Nine months ago.”

“That’s correct. And how long has it been since you’ve had sex?”

“Fifteen months, six days, four hours, and twenty-three seconds. Not that I’m counting.”

“Tell me,” Abby said. “How is it, exactly, that you’ve been able to write a monthly column about sex when you haven’t had any in so long?”

“Simple,” I told her. “When we were still together I just wrote about the sex we had and experiments we did in the beginning. And since then I’ve busied myself with other stuff, like going to female ejaculation workshops, or sex parties, or having a mold of my nether regions done so that I can have a replica of my cooch in sex toy form.”

“And now I know what I’m getting for my birthday,” Abby laughed. “Remind me again why in the hell weren’t you and Carter having any for the last six months you were together, because it fails to make sense to me.”

“Me either, and I really don’t want to talk about it right now,” I said, changing the subject. “I’d love to chat all day, but I seriously have to get to work. I have to finish a piece about masturbation abstinence as a form of re-virginization before the end of the day.”

“Don’t tell me you’re practicing this,” she laughed.

“Are you nuts? It’s bad enough that my fantasies are better than my reality—I’m not about to take *that* away from my day to day.”

“Well, I called to tell you that Leigh is finally back from London and wants to meet up for drinks tonight after work. Are you game?”

“Let’s see . . . sitting at home in my pajamas and watching *America’s Next Top Model*, or going out to the bar with two of my best girlfriends, one of whom I haven’t

seen in nearly two years,” I said. “Tough choice.”

“I’ll see you at O Bar at eight.”

“Deal. Later.”

I hung up the phone and sighed again. I knew Abby was right—it had been too long. And while everyone and everything had been dropping hints to let me know maybe it was time to get back in the saddle, I was still having a hard time getting myself there. But still . . . Aaron’s eyes flashed through my mind. As I started answering e-mail, I wondered if a good, old-fashioned office fling might not be the thing to put me back on track. Now if only I could work up the courage to make things happen . . .

* * * *

Twelve hours and three glasses of Pinot Noir later, nothing mattered but me, Abby, and Leigh giggling our guts out.

“You seriously left him there?” Abby asked, gasping for air.

“Look, if he’s going to say something that disgusting to me during sex, I should be able to take off with his pants,” Leigh said with a straight face. “It shouldn’t matter if we’re in public or not.”

I was laughing so hard that tears were running down my face. “Leigh, you were *role playing*! It was *part of the game*!”

“I don’t care. I’m a lady,” she sniffed.

I smirked. “Is that what you tell yourself to get through the day?”

“This coming from the anonymous sex writer who allowed a man to destroy her self esteem so badly that she has to say daily affirmations in the mirror to remind herself how desirable she is,” Abby shot back.

The three of us paused in silence and looked at one another, then burst out laughing again. I grabbed the bottle of wine that sat in the center of the table and tried to squeeze a few more drops from it. No luck. I motioned for the waiter to bring us another.

“Seriously,” Abby continued. “Isn’t it hard to write something you can’t put

your name on?”

“Abs, you know my parents would seriously disown me if they knew.” I sighed.

“Yeah, sometimes the double life thing sucks, but what can I do?”

“I think you’re overdramatizing.” Leigh sighed.

I rolled my eyes. “You seem to forget the Christmas that Mom went into my room to get my laundry and found a vibrator in my suitcase. She screamed bloody murder, forced me to throw it out, then dragged me to confession. That was for a vibrator, Leigh. And it wasn’t even the Rabbit or something that looked like a phallus—it was one of those ones they used to sell in department store catalogs as a ‘personal massager.’”

“Yes, and how many of those have you broken over the past . . . how long has it been? Fifteen months, you said?”

“Are you going to lecture me about my sex life again?” I asked.

Abby shrugged. “I’m just saying . . .”

Leigh sighed. The waiter leaned over our table to pour each of us a fresh glass of wine and set the bottle down in front of Abby.

“Look, it’s not a bad thing—it’s a really good thing,” I said. “It’s taken me some time, but I finally feel like I’m at a place where I’m me again, you know? I mean yeah, I’m saying the affirmations and all, but it’s helping me get back to that person I used to be. And before you know it, I’ll be dating again.”

Leigh picked up her glass as if to toast and said, “Congrats on dumping him, girl, but you’ve made a mistake.”

I paused mid-sip and eyed her over the rim of my glass. She never knew Carter—most of our relationship had taken place while she was in London on business—but she knew enough from my stories to know that he and I were far from a perfect match. So who was she to say I’d made a mistake? “What, exactly, are you trying to say?” I asked her through gritted teeth.

“I’m trying to say that I’ve been single since pretty much the day I moved here.

I've had the misfortune of dating more egotistical, out-of-work actors than you can shake a SAG card at," she said, her eyes scanning the crowd behind me for more out-of-work actors. "The only exception to that rule is the last two years I spent in Europe. And I'm telling you, the last place you want to be single is Los Angeles."

I pondered her statement for a moment. Put quite simply, Leigh is a babe. She has long black hair that hangs like a curtain down her back, olive-toned skin, and gorgeous almond-shaped eyes. And like most Angelinos, she had a perfect set of store-bought 36-Cs. So, on paper, Leigh shouldn't have any issue with dating. And yet she did.

"You know what your problem is?" I asked her. She raised an eyebrow. "You go the same place over and over again with the same people, and most of them are guys."

Abby laughed knowingly as Leigh furrowed her brow. "So?"

"So what guy is going to approach you when you're surrounded by other men?" Abby asked.

"But they're just friends," she said.

"Even so, she's got a point about the same place thing," Abby said.

"Hey, I *like* O Bar," Leigh wailed defensively. "They have the best mojitos."

"Yes, and the same people all the time, and most of the cute guys here are gay," I said as Abby sputtered mid-sip. "Besides, you usually drink wine!"

"I like to mix up my drinks—I can't always drink mojitos," Leigh said, eyeing the waiter.

I shook my head. Leigh frowned. "What?"

"No waiters," I said. "See, that's the issue—the waiter is the only one who can figure out that the group you're with doesn't contain a boyfriend, because he's the only guy you talk to. How is any other guy supposed to get a read on you if you don't broaden your horizons?"

"How am I supposed to do that?" she asked.

A lightbulb went off in my head. "I have a proposal—for all of us." Leigh raised

an eyebrow again and Abby leaned in to hear better as I forged ahead. “You say L.A. is the worst place to be single, but I disagree. L.A. is huge. L.A. has tons of different places we can go to meet men, but we’re not going to meet them if we stay in the comfort zone of our usual Hollywood hangouts.”

“You’ve got a point,” Abby said. “So what, then?”

“So here’s the challenge,” I continued. “Every time we go out we choose a place that we’ve never been before and scope out the options. It could be a club, a lounge, a coffee shop, a new restaurant . . . hell, even a library. We’ll rate it on the potential for dates and how many dates we actually get. And we’ll commit to doing something at least once a month.”

Leigh traced her finger around the edge of her wine glass as she digested my proposal. “Does it matter if we approach them or if they approach us?”

I shook my head. “It’s all fair game. But the way I see it, we’re not utilizing this city’s resources to our advantage. So I vote that we make it an experiment and record our findings.”

“Oh, so *now* the truth comes out! You want to turn this into fodder for the magazine! You just want to use us for content!” Abby cried.

“OK, I’ll admit it, there might be something to that,” I said. “But wouldn’t you agree that it’s time to try something new?”

Leigh chewed on her bottom lip. I knew even before she opened her mouth that she was going to say no—anything that took any kind of an effort usually turned her off. “I tell you what,” she said. “How about you two do the experiment and tell me how it goes, and then I’ll reap the benefits of your research? ’Cause if this works, you’ll be doing so many women a great service. So naturally you’ll need someone to test your findings, right?”

I laughed. “Leigh, you are ridiculously lazy sometimes.”

Abby leaned back and rubbed her chin as if she were attempting to do her best Brando-as-the-Godfather impression. “Let’s make this interesting.”

“Oh? What did you have in mind?”

Abby leaned forward again and cracked her knuckles. “I say we set a deadline. And by the end of that deadline, the girl with the most actual dates wins.”

“Actual dates?” I asked.

“Actual dates,” Abby repeated. “Like, he has to take you out somewhere, you guys do something, he drops you back at home . . . unless you spend the night at his place. No coffee dates, no going dutch, none of that high school crap.”

“And what does the winner get?” I asked.

Abby smiled. “A spa day.”

I rolled my eyes. “I do a spa day once a month, if not more often on the months that really suck.”

“Yes, but do you do one on a white sandy beach with palm trees and water so crystal clear blue that you can see the ocean floor no matter how far out into the water you go?”

Now she had my attention. “Exactly what are you proposing? Or smoking, for that matter?”

“I’m proposing that the winner of this little contest get a trip to do a spa day at the Four Seasons on Great Exhuma in the Bahamas,” Abby said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted to go there?” I said, nearly leaping out of my seat.

Abby nodded. “I do, which is why I said we’ll make this interesting.”

“You sure you can afford that trip on your paltry publicist’s salary?” Leigh asked.

“I’ll have you know that I make damn fine money. Seeing as you’re not a part of this challenge, you don’t need to worry about how I’m going to pay for that trip,” Abby snarked at Leigh, then turned her attention to me. “The only person who should be worried about affording that trip is Sadie.”

“Speak for yourself, sucker, and make sure you bring enough money to cover my mai tais,” I said, and held out my hand. She shook it firmly, then let go to grab her wine glass. Leigh and I did the same.

“Shall we toast?” Abby asked.

“Sure, but to what?” I asked.

“I know,” Leigh said as we raised our glasses. “May the two of you finally find a way for me to stop being single without me having to make any effort, and entertain me in the process.”

The three of us laughed until Leigh allowed her attention to be swayed once more by the cute waiter watching her intently.

Chapter Two

The cursor blinked on my screen in a taunting way. *C'mon, write something*, it said. *I dare you*. I sighed. How come there were never enough hours in the day when I was on fire, while days where it was a struggle to get even a sentence out seemed to drag on for an endless amount of time? I needed a distraction.

“Sadie?” came Babs’s voice over the intercom.

“Yeah.”

“Can you go to Martin’s office? He’d like to speak with you, and there’s a box up here with your name on it.”

Must be another shipment of sex toys, which wasn’t great news, considering I hadn’t even finished sifting through the last one. “OK, tell him I’ll be right there,” I said.

The trip to Martin’s office was one I’d taken a million times before, so it’s not like I didn’t know how to get there. Even so, I wanted to take the long route past Aaron’s office. It had been a couple weeks since he’d started, and while I didn’t walk that way around the office often, I figured every once in a while couldn’t hurt. I stood up from my desk and snuck a peek in the strategically placed mirror that hung on the wall next to the door. Hair looked good, makeup wasn’t suffering from any late afternoon fading and feathering, my button-down was buttoned—or perfectly unbuttoned the right amount so some cleavage showed—and my skirt wasn’t riding up in an unflattering way, nor was there toilet paper stuck to my heel, thank god. I grabbed some proofs from the issue we were about to put to bed so I had something to carry with me for security.

I took a deep breath and walk out of my office—purposeful and businesslike, but with a slight swing to my hips that said, “I’m still a woman, and a sexual one at that.” Aaron’s office door was open, I could see as I approached. I started rifling

through the papers I was carrying as if I was so busy that I needed to read and walk at the same time. As I passed his office, I snuck a peek out of the corner of my eye. Dammit. He wasn't even in there. And then, whammo! I hit something hard and landed flat on my ass, my papers scattering everywhere. I looked up to see Noel staring down at me, his face bright red. He offered me a hand—the one that wasn't carrying his own stack of papers.

"I'm, ah, sorry," he stammered. "I didn't . . . you know. See you?"

Great. I suppose I should be happy I didn't run smack into Aaron and land flat on my ass, but still, it's not like getting mowed down by Noel was doing much for my Sexual Woman persona strutting down the hallway. I took his hand and allowed him to help pull me up.

"It's cool, Noel," I said, then bent to pick up the papers that had gone flying. "Did you get my last round of clarifications on that molding piece?"

"Yeah. Um, they were fine. I don't need anything else," he said, and took off down the hallway.

I shook my head. I don't know what it is with that kid, but some day I'll figure it out.

Martin's door was open when I got there. He was on the phone, talking animatedly, waving his hands around as if the person on the other end could see the physical emphasis he was putting on his words. I turned to go sit in the waiting room, but he looked up and waved me in. I took a seat on the other side of his desk and looked out the window at the street life below. Though our office was in Santa Monica, it wasn't close enough to the ocean for my liking. I wanted to be able to look out the window at the water on days that I had writer's block in hopes that something about the waves would help dislodge whatever it was that was keeping me from writing a genius piece. Not that I had windows in my office, but at least I could wander into Martin's and live vicariously through him.

"Sorry—publicists driving me crazy," Martin said apologetically after he'd

hung up the phone. “How is it you and that girl who works for Klein Associates stay friends?”

“Maybe because the only time I see her bulldogging people is when it’s something to benefit us, like if she sets us up with dinner reservations and they go awry,” I said.

“She never harasses you about clients?”

I shook my head. “We have an understanding.”

“Lucky you,” he sighed. “So I wanted to talk about your section.”

Dear lord, please don’t let me get laid off, I thought. “Sure,” I said, hoping my flash of anxiety didn’t register with him.

“You know we’re revamping the website, so that means we’re no longer going to be doing reprints of your column online.”

He’s leading up to it. He’s softening the blow. What am I going to do for money now? What does someone with my qualifications do for a living? Write box copy for dildos?

“That means there’s going to be a void in content,” Martin continued. “So I want to know, if you had free reign, what would you like to do for your very own section on the site?”

I blinked a few times as if that was going to help me process what he’d said. *I’m not getting canned? Hallelujah! He wants more? Double hallelujah!* “You want an article? Or—”

“I want whatever you want to do, but I don’t want a rehash of whatever is in the magazine that month,” Martin said. “The idea is to get people to read both, and the web content would have to be regular—daily in some cases—to keep people satiated until the next issue of the magazine comes out.”

“You know, I pitched this to you ages ago,” I said, smiling mischievously.

Martin rolled his eyes, a rueful grin on his face. “I know, I know,” he sighed.

“Save the I-told-you-so’s. You and I both know that corporate are slow adapters to stuff,

especially when spending money is involved. I finally won my financial battle over that, so now you just have to tell me what you want to write.”

I’d never been asked what I wanted to write about before, let alone fill a whole content section of a website. Thinking fast, I started rattling off ideas. “I want to do a quiz of some sort, based on a different theme every week—one of the ones where you have to add up your answer points to determine something about your psyche. I want to do man-on-the-street interviews where I get people to answer some deep, dark sexual question, and maybe we could do some kind of prize sponsorship to entice people to admit things.”

“What about something that’s typical you, though?” Martin interjected. “Something kind of like your column, where you put yourself in the situation and then write about it?”

The words came out of my mouth before I could even think of censoring myself. “Well, a couple weeks ago Abby and I made a bet of sorts over a challenge to date guys we meet by going to unusual places,” I told him. “I could write about our findings blog style, and then when I have nothing to report, I can just link to other stories about sex and write my thoughts about those?”

He nodded. “I love it.”

“Really?” I asked, trying not to do the dance of joy in front of him.

“It’s perfect. But can I be candid with you?”

My smile froze on my face. I didn’t know what to say, because that kind of question is usually followed with bad news or criticism. But Martin was looking at me expectantly, so I bowed to pressure and nodded.

“Sadie, you know I think you’re a great writer, and when you’re on, you’re really on,” Martin started. “But when you’re off, you’re way off. And when you were with Carter, you were way off.”

I leaned back in my chair. “I know,” I sighed. There was no use in arguing—he was right. When I was focused on Carter I really dropped the ball in the sex department

. . . in more ways than one.

Martin leaned forward and started picking at his cuticles. “And I don’t want to tell you this to scare you, but you came very close to losing the column. Do you know what changed my mind?”

“A lobotomy?” I joked. It wasn’t that I wanted to put myself down so much as I wanted to break the mood in the room, which was slowly but surely making me want to crawl the walls.

“Though I know a few editors who wish for that kind of thing, no, that’s not it,” he laughed. “Honestly, the moment you became single again, your column perked up. It was almost like he was holding you back. When he was gone, you became more adventurous again and started writing more freely.”

“Well, that was the whole reasoning behind having the pseudonym,” I reasoned.

“Yes, but as soon as your ex knew you and Nicole were one and the same, it was like you reeled it in. A lot.”

I nodded again. I hated that I let my relationship get in the way of my craft, but at the time I couldn’t help it. In the beginning Carter had been so supportive of my work, but as time went on his support turned into resentment and annoyance. So I censored myself in an effort to save our failing relationship, even though I knew deep down it was beyond D.O.A.

“Anyway,” Martin said, “it’s not that I want to tell you how to live your personal life, and I’m not trying to be an asshole, but the column suffers when you’re coupled and it flourishes when you’re single. I really don’t want to have to make someone else be Naughty Nicole, so I strongly recommend you not get involved with anyone.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked. “Look, though I admit I’m not in a headspace to go jumping into a relationship any time soon, I’m also not going to actively going to avoid it. That’s ludicrous. What happens if I meet someone during this little experiment and fall in love?”

“Then I guess you’ll have a choice to make,” Martin said.

I searched his eyes to see if there was the possibility of him suddenly breaking into laughter and telling me he was joking. No such luck.

“Look, let’s not worry about that now—you’re single and the column rocks, and this dating project thing is going to make for great content considering you’re back to throwing all caution to the wind.” Martin opened the editorial calendar and scanned it. “Can you coordinate with Aaron so we can work out a publishing schedule?”

Oh, I’ll coordinate with Aaron all right. And screw your warning! I thought. Instead I nodded sagely.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have a web editor in place soon.”

“Oh, I’m not worried,” I said maybe a little too quickly. Martin’s face suggested he had a hunch I found Aaron hot, so I changed the subject to dampen the embers. The last thing I needed was my boss worrying about me eating a pickle out of the company jar. “So does more content mean a raise?”

“Ha,” Martin said. “I got the money to expand the site and hire an editor. One battle at a time.”

He turned back to his computer, signaling that our meeting was over. I stood from my chair and put the papers on his desk.

“Oh, and Sadie?” Martin asked as I neared the door.

I turned to look at him. He was still glued to his computer.

“My dating warning goes double for Aaron,” he warned.

“Martin, he’s the last guy I’d hook up with—I’m not big on office affairs,” I lied. Before he could see my nose growing I stepped out into the hall and swung by reception. True to her word, Babs had a gigantic box sitting on her desk. I could barely see her behind it.

“Babs?” I asked.

“Please get this thing off of my desk before I give it away to the next person who walks in the door,” she said.

I laughed and picked it up off the counter, then started back down the hallway—

the long way, past Aaron's office again, just in case. The problem was I couldn't see a damn thing—I had to go by feel. Soon I became so engrossed in navigating the hallway without running into anything or falling down that I'd completely forgotten about the sassy hip walk, or even that I was going past Aaron's office.

"Johnson?" his voice called from his office.

"Yeah," I managed. The box wasn't so much heavy as it was awkward.

"You need a little help?"

"Nah, I think I got it," I said. I could hear him coming up behind me as I rounded the corner to my office.

"You sure?"

"Totally."

Somehow I made it through my door and dropped the box on the floor, relieved I didn't hear anything that sounded like glass breaking or plastic cracking. I pushed the box a little further inside with my foot.

"What's in that thing?" Aaron asked.

I turned and smiled at him. "I don't know. Want to find out?"

A loaded question for sure, but I tried to play it innocently. He smiled, and I could feel it between us—that feeling you get when you and someone you're hot for are speaking in double entendres, and you know it means more than the words coming out of your mouths. It was sending a charge directly south. When he nodded, I grabbed my scissors off my desk and started popping staples out of the box. As one side opened up, a box fell out the side. I picked it up and read the packaging.

"John Holmes' Realistic Cock," I read aloud, then jammed the scissors in the top of the box to open it. I pulled out the dildo—all twelve and a half inches of it—and bit the head. Aaron laughed.

"Didn't have lunch?" he asked, amused.

"Testing for durability," I said, then tossed the appendage on my desk to continue digging through the box. I popped more staples and finally peeled away a good

section of the packaging to reveal a few more sex toys sandwiched in with some kind of furniture piece.

“Here,” Aaron said, and pulled on the other side of the box, revealing what appeared to be a bondage bench. It looked kind of like a prayer alter, almost A-shaped, but laying on its side. I grabbed the piece of paper that sat on top of it and started reading aloud.

““Made to support ridiculous amounts of weight because you never know just how many people will be on this at the same time,”” I said, punctuating that last point with a raised eyebrow. Dog-piling on a prayer bench wasn’t high up on my priority list, but who was I to point fingers if that was someone else’s cup of tea? ““The top is built at a twenty-two-point-five degree angle to prop the sub’s ass up in the air quite nicely. Incredibly comfortable with a two-inch padded top and a two-inch padded kneeler for hours of uninterrupted fun. These kneelers are very popular for spanking and doggie-style entrance. We provide four restraints points for you to totally immobilize your submissive.””

When I looked up, Aaron was holding the restraints in his hands. His face held no expression, but his eyes . . .

“So,” he said as if he were making a statement, “how, exactly, does one do this?”

I don’t know what came over me, but I put the paper down on the desk and walked over to him, taking the restraints out of his hands.

“Hold your wrists out,” I said, holding his gaze. He hesitated, but only for a moment. I undid one of the restraints and fastened it around his wrist, tearing my eyes away from his to take notice of his hands. His nails were clean and filed, but not in a metrosexual manicured way. There was a scar on his left index knuckle that ran toward his wrist. As I tightened the lead on the restraint, I traced the scar with my finger.

“How did that happen?” I asked softly, and started binding up his other wrist.

“Hockey,” he told me, then held up his wrists, cuffed in leather, a leash hanging

off each binding. “Now what?”

“Well, you kneel on the bench and put your arms on either side of it, then I loop the leads through those holes in the side so you can’t get up.”

He shook his head. “That’s not really my speed.”

“You wanted to see how it worked,” I reasoned.

“I want you to show me,” he said, lowering his voice.

My brain hurriedly took stock of the situation. I was wearing a shortish skirt, but the bench was positioned so that my rear would be pointing away from him and the door, so no worry about flashing ass to anyone in the hallway. But what if someone walked by and saw me on the bench, him with his wrists bound, and noticed the sparks between us?

Fuck it. This was too much fun, and I wasn’t about to kill this opportunity because of fear.

I challenged myself to hold his gaze once again as I backed away from him and stepped behind the bench, kneeling down on it, then leaning my torso down. My ass felt like it was fifty feet in the air and my skirt was barely covering it, but I didn’t care—he couldn’t see anything aside from a cleaved view down my top. I gripped either side of the bench to simulate what it would look like if I were wearing the restraints and had them locked down. My heart was racing. My palms were sweaty. But I didn’t let go of his gaze. Not once.

Until Patrick, the sports editor, walked past my door, did a double-take, and walked into my office.

“What on earth is that thing?” he demanded, making Aaron—whose back was to the door—jump.

I knew I had a choice. I could act like I was doing something to be ashamed of, or I could play it off and diffuse the situation. I decided to go for option B.

“Martin ordered it,” I explained. “It’s a motivational thing to help us get our work in on time. If we don’t, we have to strap ourselves into this thing to receive a

paddling. Wanna try it?”

“Fuck no,” he said. “I’ll get my stuff done on time, thanks.” With that, he walked back down the hallway. Meanwhile, Aaron had managed to unbind himself and tossed the restraints on my desk.

“I’ve gotta get back to work, Johnson. Later.” He winked and walked out the door, leaving me bent over the bench, feeling slightly foolish. As I stood up I heard my messenger client beep, alerting me to a new message. I slid behind my desk to see I had an IM from ModelMatt26, a guy I’d interviewed for a piece I was doing about the history of California surf culture. It was one of the so-called straight pieces I wrote from time to time so I could prove to my parents that my journalism degree was being put to good use and simultaneously insuring I wouldn’t be excommunicated from the family.

Model Matt wasn’t usually my type—he was younger by four years and had that typical surfer-dude mentality, not much direction in life aside from chasing tasty waves and eating raw food to purify his body . . . but oh, that body. It was chiseled and toned in a way that men who model underwear are chiseled and toned. I didn’t think bodies like that actually existed in nature until I’d met him in person for our interview. I was convinced the photos he’d e-mailed me were fake.

He’d flirted with me relentlessly when I interviewed him, but I figured that was just to ensure his placement in the article. He’d asked for my contact info, which I’d gamely given him, thinking things would cool off once the article was done. And as of that day, the article was done. I looked at his message.

how r u?

The anal retentive in me wanted to tell him he wasn’t Prince and tell him to write out his words, but I refrained. Instead, I typed back, *Great! The article was officially wrapped up today, so keep your eyes peeled for the issue—it comes out in three months or so. Thanks for all your help!*

I closed the window, thinking that would be the end of it. But it popped up

again.

that's not why i messaged u.

I frowned as if he could see me. *What's up? Do you not want to be in the article anymore?*

no, i want to know when you're going to let me take you out.

"Take me out?" I asked aloud, then laughed. I was sure he was joking. As I was pondering his motivation, he wrote again.

seriously. no ulterior motive. i dig u.

I was infinitely impressed by the correct usage of the word "ulterior." Was there maybe more to him than initially met the eye? I wondered . . .

i'm waiting . . .

I typed back, *Hold that thought, on the phone.* Then I immediately picked up the phone to call Abby.

"If I met a guy through an interview I did, that counts as a new place to meet men, right?" I asked when she answered.

"Why do you ask?"

"Remember that Matt guy that I interviewed for the surf piece?"

She nearly choked. "Model Matt, the Greek god?"

"That's the one."

"Honey, if he's asking you out, he counts twice."

"Good to know—I think I'm bringing a date to your party tomorrow night," I said.

"Bring him everywhere," she said. "Can I call you after I finish lunch?"

I looked at the clock. "Yes, though most people don't have lunch at four."

"Most people haven't had the day I've had either. It's been mayhem."

"OK, we'll talk later. Bye."

"Say yes!"

I laughed and hung up the phone, then turned back to my IM. *When were you*

thinking? I wrote Matt.

whenever u want, just name the time n place

Tomorrow night my friend is having a party for her company at a new club in Hollywood. Interested?

i'd go anywhere with u. e-mail me yr address and details and I'll pick u up.

I smiled. My dating fortune appeared perfectly positioned for the change I'd been hoping for.

* * * *

The next night I found myself in the passenger seat of Model Matt's beat-up Jeep Cherokee, listening to Fishbone, driving down Hollywood boulevard en route to the club.

"So what's this party for, anyway?" Matt asked me. The way he drove entertained me. He had one hand lazily guiding the steering wheel with the other propped in the open window, his right foot working the gas and break while his left foot—bare, of course—was propped up on the dashboard. And he hated wearing a seat belt. If he ever got hit hard enough, his knee would go right through his face.

"One of Abby's company's clients is doing some sort of a project launch, so they're having this big to-do with an open bar," I told him. "They're usually tons of fun, but if you wind up bored, we can always split and go somewhere else."

"I'm cool—whatever," he said, looking over at me and smiling lazily. I knew it was way beyond early to be thinking about such things, but I wondered if his lackadaisical attitude would be something to rub off on me—I was an admitted control freak—or make me insane. But then I got lost in those green eyes of his and suddenly I didn't care. Though I'd been crushing on Aaron for a while, it was just nice to enjoy the feeling of lusting after someone new. It was something I'd thought I'd forgotten how to do after Carter.

Matt pulled up at the club and slipped his flip-flop back on his left foot before the valet made it to his door, then hopped out. As he rounded the front of the Cherokee

to meet me, I realized his button-down wasn't buttoned at all, revealing a perfect six-pack. I resisted the urge to lick it and instead started buttoning him up as if he were my kid. My hot kid. That I was in no way related to. He grabbed my wrist and brought his nose within inches of mine.

"What's the matter? Concerned someone will try and take me away from you tonight? I'm all yours," he said teasingly.

I couldn't decide if his cockiness was annoying or cute. I looked at his pecs. Cute. "No, I'm concerned they won't let you in the club half naked in flip-flops."

"What if this were your club?"

I smiled. "We won't talk about what the dress code would be like for you in my club."

"Maybe we can talk about it later."

He grabbed me by the hand and led me to the door, where I gave my name to the guy handling the list. He gave us wristbands and let us in. I wasn't surprised to see the club packed to the walls—Abby's parties were always hopping—but the question was how to find her. Between the music and the people I wasn't sure I'd have much luck.

"SAAAAAAAAAAAAADIE!" came a cry, and I looked through the crowd to see Abby's arms in the air. I motioned to Matt, who navigated through the mass until we reached Abby, who flung her arms around me.

"I'm so glad you could make it," she yelled into my ear.

"Of course, where else would I be?" I said. "This is Matt."

Matt held out his hand and shook hers. "Good to meet you," he said.

"Likewise," Abby beamed, then winked at me. "Have you seen Leigh?"

I shook my head. Abby pointed behind us. "Smoking patio," she said. "Come back after you've found her, I want to introduce you to some people."

I nodded and hugged her again, this time getting the distinct whiff of vodka—Red Bulls off her breath. Apparently we'd arrived to the party fashionably late enough

that everyone was well on their way to a good buzz. When I met Leigh on the smoking patio, it was confirmed. She was only under the influence of a couple kir royales and she was already three sheets to the wind.

“I’m such a lightweight,” she moaned. “Who’s this?”

“I’m Matt,” he said, once again holding out his hand to shake hers.

“Nice to meet you, Matt,” Leigh said, swaying slightly as she brought a cigarette to her lips and attempted to light it with the hand clutching her third kir royale. “How’d you two meet?”

Matt took the lighter from her hand and sparked it. “She interviewed me for a story and finally gave in after the hundredth time I asked her out.”

Leigh took a long drag on her smoke. “Oh yeah? What do you do?”

“I’m a model,” he said, puffing his chest slightly.

Leigh whipped her head toward me and shot me a look.

“I’m sorry, ladies, I see a dude over there that I know and I wanna catch him before he splits,” he continued. “I’ll be right back.”

Leigh and I watched him go, admiring the way his ass looked in his jeans, until Leigh exhaled a steady stream of smoke into the air and broke the silence between us. “A model? I don’t ever want to hear you bitch about my actors-slash-waiters ever again.”

“Shut up,” I told her. “They’re not my norm. I’m trying something new.”

“He is gear, I’ll give you that,” she said, drawing in again.

“Who’d you come with?”

“The boys. Who else?” Leigh asked, shrugging.

I laughed as Abby walked up and planted a kiss on my cheek. “Where is your man?” she asked.

“Over there being social,” I said.

“So tell me, seeing as we’ve never done a party here before, does this count as a new place to meet men?”

“If my job counts as a new place, then so should yours,” I reasoned.

“Good.” Abby grabbed me at the elbow. “Come with me, I want to introduce you to someone.”

I looked to Leigh, who waved us off—she was still smoking and wasn’t about to give up her prime spot of real estate on the patio. I allowed Abby to pull me back inside and take me to the back bar, where she led me up to a guy standing off to the side with some of her coworkers.

“Sadie, this is Josh,” she said with a beaming smile on her face. “Josh, meet Sadie, one of my dear friends.”

He was tall and lean, with dark, close-cropped hair and ice-blue eyes. He smiled and offered his hand, and I shook back. There was something oddly familiar about his grip. I couldn’t place it. It was disconcerting. Almost like I had met him somewhere, but I couldn’t place where.

“Nice to meet you,” I said.

“Likewise,” he nodded.

“Josh is media too—he’s a syndicated newspaper columnist,” Abby explained to me, almost proudly. “He started out writing locally and got so much attention that he’s now in every major newspaper across America.”

I nodded. I knew without her even telling me that she was completely smitten by him.

“Sadie is also a writer,” Abby told Josh, momentarily allowing herself to become distracted by her client waving from the other end of the bar. “Excuse me, I’ll be right back.”

“So a fellow writer,” Josh said with a smile. “Does that mean you have little people talking to you inside your head too?”

“All the time,” I laughed. “In fact, I asked my boss if I could get health care for them too.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t go too well.”

“Not so much, no,” I said. “Any luck on your end?”

“No, but I can keep you posted if you like.”

He smiled again, lifting his drink to his mouth and taking a sip. He was either drinking orange juice or pineapple juice mixed with some kind of booze. I watched his hands, which looked massive by comparison to the glass. He had to be at least 6’3”. His shoulders were broad, but not football-player broad, and it didn’t appear that he had anything pierced or tattooed . . . from what I could see, anyway. I liked his sense of humor, and he seemed capable of carrying on a decent conversation. I debated whether or not taking a sneak peek south would yield anything considering we were in a dark club. If I hadn’t had Matt with me, if I knew for certain Abby wasn’t into him . . . no, there were too many variables that were in the way. Best just to enjoy the conversation. Well, and maybe admire the dimples in his cheeks.

“So I have to say, I’m impressed with your communication skills,” he said, jolting me out of my analysis of him.

“Is that so?” I asked. “That’s good to know. I’ve been practicing in front of my mirror every morning before I leave for work.”

“Oh, yes—you and I have been talking for exactly two minutes, and you haven’t mentioned your screenplay or great American novel. Plus, you seem to be able to look me in the eye when you speak. You’re more socialized than most writers I know.”

I laughed. “You say that as though they keep most writers at the zoo. How many do you know?”

“Enough to know that most of them suffer from various forms of social retardation,” he said. “Don’t you find?”

I thought back to the other writers I knew from some of the periodic social gatherings I went to for media professionals in the area. Aside from some rampant and aggressive networking, I couldn’t think of any outright idiocy. “Maybe I’m just lucky, but most of the ones I know are fairly outgoing.”

“Maybe it’s a newspaper thing,” he reasoned. “Who do you write for, anyway?”

“*Menz*,” I told him. “I’m a senior editor there.”

“Ah yes! I’m well familiar with it.” Josh’s face lit up. “And now I know that you’re Sadie Johnson. You wrote that feature about visiting the tequila distilleries in D.C.”

I smiled—it was always nice to meet someone who liked what we were doing. “Yes, and I still have the hangover to prove it. You a fan of the magazine?”

“Of most of it, yes.” He brought his mouth to his glass again and pulled out an ice cube, then started chewing.

“I know the frat-boy humor can get a little out of control sometimes,” I said by way of apology. “But if you look past it—”

“Oh, it’s not the frat boy humor,” he said, cutting me off. “It’s the sex columnist.”

If we were in a Looney Tunes short, this would be the point where an anvil would fall on my head and make that *clang!* noise before a sky high bump sprouted out of my skull. In all of my years of writing about sex, not one guy had ever complained about the content. I had tons of women write me and tell me I was a horrendous slut, but men? They *loved* me! “I see,” I said tightly.

He nodded. “It gets tiresome, don’t you think?”

“Actually, Nicole’s column is one of the more popular sections of the magazine,” I told him, trying to gauge whether he was really being serious. “You honestly take issue with it?”

“Look, to each their own,” he said. “But I really think the *Sex and the City* era really ushered in an unsavory type of woman.”

Despite my desire to stay calm to not give myself away, I could feel my blood beginning to boil. “How do you figure?”

“Nicole is a perfect example of this,” he continued. “It seems that we’re now in this era of women acting like men, but the whole reason why men like women is because they act like women. If we wanted men, we’d just all be gay. So these women

who think this kind of date-and-run lifestyle is cool are actually ruining their chances of ever finding a mate. I think it all boils down to insecurity.”

“Writing about sex makes her insecure?” I asked incredulously.

Josh nodded. “Don’t you think? In fact, I have this theory: Naughty Nicole is clearly a pen name, so I suspect she’s either ashamed of what she writes, or—not to sound insensitive—perhaps she’s overweight.”

“Overweight?” I repeated.

“Yeah, or maybe she’s a guy,” he said. “Is she on staff there?”

“She’s freelance,” I said. “Why?”

“I was actually planning on writing a series of columns discussing how the abundance of sex in various forms of media is doing us more harm than good, and I’m interested in talking to her about it,” he said. “Or him. You know, whichever. But if she’s a he, that would make for a much better series. What a coup it would be to out Naughty Nicole as a fraud!”

As the words left his mouth, it finally dawned on me what column he wrote.

“Wait a second, you’re Josh Kelly. And you write ‘Back to Basics.’”

He bowed. “At your service. You read my column?”

“Actually, my parents do,” I said, a feeling of horror creeping over me.

“Fantastic! And what do you think?”

I think I want to strangle you, despite how attractive you are. And then I think I want to run in the opposite direction. I looked for Abby, and was relieved to see her heading my way. “We’ll have to continue this another time—I see Abby coming toward me and she appears to be on a mission. You know how that goes.”

Josh laughed. “I certainly do. It was great chatting with you, Sadie, I hope we get the chance to do it again soon.”

I don’t. “Enjoy the party,” I told him.

He raised his glass as if to toast. “Likewise.”

I grabbed Abby by the arm before she could make it back to Josh and led her

into the bathroom to conference.

“So?” she asked excitedly.

“He’s cute,” I told her. “But he wants to destroy me.”

Abby frowned. “How so?”

“Abs, he writes this insane right-wing column that my parents love to read, and he thinks my column is written by an insecure guy or something,” I said, the words falling out of my mouth in a jumble. “He thinks there’s something behind Naughty Nicole and wants to expose her. Which means expose me. Which means I’m done for, because my parents live and die by his column!”

“Oh Sadie, relax—it was just party talk,” Abby reasoned. “He’s been drinking.”

“He seemed pretty lucid to me,” I grumbled.

“I guarantee you he’ll forget about it tomorrow, especially if I flirt with him.”

I looked at the grin on her face and decided it was time to change the subject.

“Is this the one?”

She hit me in the arm. Hard. “It’s too early to tell that, silly!”

“Not like that, and Jesus, that hurt,” I told her, rubbing my bicep. “I mean he’s the one you’re interested in.”

She nodded. “And he’s single.”

“Then it looks like the coast is clear, tiger,” I teased her.

“Yeah, but it’s business! I can’t be hooking up with people I need to get exposure for my clients.”

I rolled my eyes. “Tell me something. At this exact moment in time, does that really matter?”

I could see the wheels turning in her head until her face broke out in a wide grin and she started giggling.

“I thought not,” I told her.

“C’mon, let’s dance,” she said, changing the subject and leading me out onto the dance floor.

Two songs. Four songs. Six. Bathroom. Shots for Abby and her coworkers. More dancing. Meeting more people, chatting with Leigh, watching Abby try to drunkenly play it cool in front of Josh, checking in with Matt and his friend here and there . . . before I knew it, it was last call and the ugly lights were coming on. Thankfully my date looked as good with the lights on as he did off. There was just one problem—he was too drunk to drive.

“Are you OK to drive?” he asked.

“Yeah, I didn’t drink anything tonight, so I’m good.”

“That wasn’t because of me, was it?”

“No, of course not! I just wasn’t in the mood,” I explained.

Matt handed me his valet ticket and a twenty. “Thanks,” he said. “I guess I just didn’t pay attention to how many shots I was doing with my buddy Kyle.”

I laughed. “How many shots *did* you do with Kyle?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said, pulling me close to him. “Not so many that I can’t . . .”

He leaned in and nibbled my ear. I breathed deep and inhaled his scent, best described as designer surf—a mix of salty ocean and Gaultier for Men. When his mouth started traveling to my collarbone, I pulled away from him. I didn’t want to get all riled up in front of Abby’s coworkers. Not that I was adverse to PDAs, but not during what was essentially a business function. Besides, anticipation was half the fun. Luckily Matt knew what I was hinting at and took me by the hand, leading me out to the valet stand. Leigh had left a long time before, and Abby was engrossed in conversation with Josh. I waved at her halfheartedly from over my shoulder. I don’t think she’d have realized if nuclear war had started that very second. And I certainly didn’t want Josh to pay any more attention to me.

It didn’t take valet long to grab Matt’s Jeep. We’d almost closed the place down, and were one of the last few cars in the lot. Matt hopped in the passenger seat while I took the driver’s side and moved the seat up so I could reach the pedals. As I started

to drive, I wondered if there was something I should say to fill the silence, but I found myself at a loss for words. The air was thick with electricity. Not the way it had been that afternoon with Aaron, but there was a charge there all the same. Just when I was starting the mental debate over whether or not I should kill the vibe with words, Matt reached over and tugged gently on my earlobe. Next he traced his finger down my jawline, down my neck to my collarbone, then slid it across my chest and laid it to rest underneath my bra strap. I wanted to look at him, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from the road, not when I was driving an unfamiliar car.

Matt took advantage of the situation and slowly slid his finger further and further down the strap until he was inside my bra resting on the top of my breast. At which point he slipped his other fingers in and cupped it with his entire hand. I felt butterflies in my stomach as he kneaded me gently, then held me again as his thumb and forefinger lightly pulled on my nipple, rolling it between the pads of his digits, until it became hard . . . which was right when he leaned over and pulled my hair back behind my ear with his free hand and traced the outside of my ear with his tongue. I wanted his mouth on my breast right that second—I didn't care how many traffic hazards it might cause. It had been so long since I'd felt the warm wetness of a tongue tracing my nipple punctuated with a well-timed nibble here and there . . . the thought of it was driving me crazy.

A drive that would've normally taken thirty-five minutes took me twenty. I found a spot on the street in front of my building and did such a horrible job of parallel parking that we practically needed a map to get from the car to the curb, but I didn't care. Matt took my hand again and led me through the lobby to the elevator. Once we got inside he pushed me to the wall. Mashing his hand against the keypad, he hit six floors at once as he maneuvered his other hand back inside my top and liberated my breast from its bra cup. He bent his head to meet it and wasted no time getting to business—licking me, sucking me . . . I dug my hands into the back of his head, partially to hold him there, partially to ensure I wasn't going to fall over. I was worried

my legs weren't going to hold me up until we made it to my floor.

Stumbling out of the elevator with my breast hanging out of my shirt, I fumbled with my keys as Matt stood behind me, sliding his hands down my front into the waistband of my skirt. I finally heard the lock pop open and pushed open the door, letting us both inside in the darkness. Penelope was mewling about having not been fed yet, but she'd be fine until the morning—I knew she had dry food, and I had more pressing things to tend to. I kicked the door shut behind us and led Matt to the bedroom, kicking off my shoes and peeling off my coat as I went. We both climbed on the bed and kneeled in front of one another. I slowly undid the buttons I'd so painstakingly done up out front of the club just hours ago, revealing those pecs, that stomach. I peeled off his shirt and tossed it on the floor.

In turn, he pulled my shirt over my head and slid my bra straps down my shoulders, then reached behind me to undo the clasp. Both garments fell to the bed as he leaned over to continue what he had started in the elevator, cupping my breasts with his hands, moving his mouth from one to the other to ensure they got equal time. I slid my hands down his muscular back, admiring the shape of his shoulders, the way his body tapered down to his waist.

I was starting to grow impatient. I pulled away from him so I could push him back down on the bed, busying my hands with his belt buckle, pulling off his jeans. I stood over him and slid my skirt off, followed by my panties, and straddled him. Finally, our lips met—tentative and teasing, he kissed me softly but intently. Nicely. It was sweet, but I wanted more. I kissed my way down his chest, my hands grazing his body as I moved, until I made it down to his boxers. I went to slide them down his hips, but he stopped me.

“I hate to tell you this,” he whispered, “but I think I had too many shots tonight. If I'd have known for sure that I was going home with you tonight I wouldn't have had so much to drink.”

I sighed. “All right.” Disappointed, I started to pull back my bedding so I could

go to sleep.

“No, wait,” he said, grabbing me by the arm. “That doesn’t mean I can’t do something for you.”

He sat up and traded spots with me so that I was lying in bed and he was straddling me. He kissed me again, then licked his way down my neck, to one breast then the other, down my stomach, around my belly button, then between my legs, where he paused and breathed on me, hot and heavy. I fought the urge to squirm and press myself up into him, but the wait was making me batty. Finally, he brought his mouth down to me, kissing, licking, exploring every inch. I threw my hands over my head and gave into the sensations, curling my legs around his back, concentrating on how good it felt to feel someone again. His tongue probed me softly then licked upward, circling my clit, then back down again as his hands made their way up to my breasts, his fingers finding my nipples.

It was enough to send me over the edge. I felt the sensation building in my core, and before I knew it, I was flooded by a wave of orgasm. I gripped the pillow behind my head and gasped, trying desperately not to moan loud enough to wake my neighbors as Matt buried his head between my legs until my shuddering ceased. When I was done I curled over on my side with a huge smile on my face, which disappeared only when Matt leaned over me to kiss me. He curled up behind me. I don’t even remember falling asleep—I just remember feeling exhausted.

When I woke up the next morning, he was gone without a trace.

Chapter Three

I knew what I wanted to write about Model Matt. It had taken a week of agonizing, but I'd finally figured it out.

I know it's the ultimate cliché to say you can't judge a book by its cover, but whoever said that was a liar. In some cases you can definitely judge a book by its cover—especially when the cover says "Talks the talk, but doesn't walk the walk—especially in bed."

I leaned back and reread my words. Maybe they were a little harsh, but I was irritated. It didn't matter to me that Matt couldn't get it up—especially considering the orgasm he gave me. It's not like he's the only guy on earth who drank enough to render his equipment inoperable. What was annoying me was the fact that he'd completely disappeared afterward. Not only did he leave sometime in the middle of the night without saying good-bye, but he didn't call, he didn't IM, and he didn't e-mail me. I was hardly looking for a relationship from him, but was it too much to ask to have a little courtesy call thrown my way? So far, it was looking like I was going to lose the bet . . . and have a pretty dry blog to boot.

"Why do you look like you want to throw your monitor through the wall?" Aaron asked.

I looked up from my screen to see him standing in the doorway nursing a smoothie from the juice place down the street.

"Maybe because I do." I sighed.

He walked in and took the empty seat on the other side of my desk, putting his smoothie down and picking up a lipstick-shaped vibrator that I'd been planning on writing something about. "Trouble at home?" he asked seriously.

"Do you really want to know?"

He put the vibe down and fixed me with a sympathetic gaze. "Try me."

I debated whether or not I wanted to fill him in on the whole story considering the crush I had on him. Then again, it wasn't like he'd made a move, and he knew full well what my section of site content was all about. "OK, explain something to me," I said. "Why is it that if a guy can't get it up, it's grounds for turning tail and running without so much as a thanks-for-the-date e-mail?"

Aaron shrugged. "I don't know."

"I don't know? That's your answer?"

He nodded, finishing a sip from his smoothie. "I've never had it happen to me."

I rolled my eyes. "Of course you haven't. And let me guess, you're eight inches and have the circumference of a soup can."

"Nine," he corrected.

"Right. And you can get hard, and stay hard, at the snap of a finger."

"Pretty much."

I looked at him sitting there, acting all cocky, and debated throwing something at his head. He was just so . . . so *smug* that I couldn't stand it.

"What's the problem?" he asked, cutting into my thoughts.

"I just find it hard to believe that in your entire sexual history—which I assume is lengthy and varied?"

Aaron nodded again.

"Right," I continued. "And you're trying to tell me that during that entire time, not once have you had a problem."

He put his smoothie on the floor next to the chair and kicked his feet up on my desk, resting his arms behind his head, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Nope."

"Do you tell all the girls you bed about your amazing prowess?" I asked dryly.

"If they ask, sure."

I leaned back. His body language was annoying me. "You do realize that in telling them this, you're setting the groundwork for them to feel pressured to have an earth-shattering time. What if they don't?"

“It hasn’t happened.”

I was growing more and more infuriated with him. And he knew it.

“Are you going to give me the *When Harry Met Sally* speech?” he asked.

“No, I’m not going to give you the *When Harry Met Sally* speech,” I shot back, mimicking the mocking tone in his voice.

He laughed and slid his feet off my desk. “Why is this so hard for you to accept?”

“Because everyone has a sexual learning curve,” I reasoned. “Nobody is born an expert; nobody bats a thousand at the orgasm plate.”

“I started reading *The Joy of Sex* as soon as I was old enough to read—found it in my parent’s bedroom,” he said, retrieving his smoothie from the floor and playing with the straw. “Most valuable book I ever read. I memorized it. So by the time I started fooling around with girls, I was well versed in the female form.”

The way he looked at me challenged me to say something, but I had nothing. My mind was empty of witticism, and I didn’t want to resort to schoolyard accusations of bullshit, even though I knew it was. It had to be. Didn’t it? Schoolyard or not, I wanted to kick him.

“Sadie?” came Babs’s voice over the intercom.

“Yep,” I spat. Aaron smiled a little.

“Leigh is on the phone. Voice mail or send her through?”

“Send her through, please,” I said, waving Aaron out of the room. As I picked up the phone, he made a big production out of standing and adjusting himself before walking out the door. I couldn’t decide what pissed me off more—his disgusting display of arrogance, or how much it made me want to leap over my desk, tackle him to the floor, and see if he could put his money where his mouth was . . . which, naturally, angered me even more.

“I can hear you fuming, you know,” Leigh said.

I frowned. “No you can’t.”

“OK, so I can’t. But you just told me you were fuming with your response, so what’s your problem.”

“Men,” I said disgustedly. “Or more specifically, boys.”

Leigh clucked her tongue in a tsk-tsk way. “Matt still AWOL?”

“Yeah, but he’s not the issue, really,” I told her. “If he’s going to melt down because he couldn’t perform one night, that’s his problem, not mine.”

“So it’s the work guy, then.”

I didn’t say anything. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that it was a bad idea to start an office fling, especially when said fling was so full of himself that I’d likely just be a notch on his belt and fodder for office gossip. The entire time I’d worked at the magazine I’d never before had any desire to bed anyone I’d worked with. I liked keeping work and personal separate, and up until now there wasn’t anyone I worked with that I’d consider hooking up with anyway. Not that I would now, with the way he clearly delighted in swinging his dick around.

“Quit stewing,” Leigh said, interrupting my train of thought.

“I’m sorry, I can’t help it,” I sighed. “See? This is why I was happy being single and not complicating things with dating.”

“Have you ever thought that maybe you’re the one who complicates things?”

I frowned as if she could see me. “How do you figure?”

“Sometimes you just gotta let it flow, man,” she told me. “You’re so hung up on controlling the situation. Have you ever thought that might be your problem?”

“Leigh, I do *not* try to control people.”

“I didn’t say you did—I said you’re hung up on controlling the situation. Look at the thing with model guy—when he said he was too drunk to work it, you were ready to give up and go to sleep until he had other ideas. And with work guy. I don’t know what’s pissed you off about him today—”

“He’s an arrogant fuck,” I interjected.

“Well, have you thought that maybe he has something to be arrogant about? Not

everyone who's cocky is a blowhard. What's wrong with being proud of your skill?"

I absorbed her words. I thought back to the day when Aaron and I were testing out the bondage bench and recalled how I was initially pushing for him to bend over it until he kind of stonewalled me. Though it wasn't the norm for me, I had to admit being bossed around that was kind of fun. Maybe Leigh had a point.

"All I'm saying is not everyone fits into the box you're comfortable putting them in," Leigh continued. "And maybe by letting go and letting things happen as they will, they might be given the opportunity to surprise you. And maybe help you—"

"If you say 'think outside the box' I will throttle you." I laughed.

Leigh laughed too. "OK, so I was going to say something along those lines. Maybe not exactly, but . . . do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Yeah, I do. I guess you have a point."

"Sucks when I'm right, doesn't it?" she asked smugly.

"Don't press your luck," I teased. "So to what do I owe a mid-day call, anyway?"

"The boys are doing poker night and I'm so not interested in participating," she said. "So I was calling to see if anything is going on."

"I've got a work assignment tonight that's also a back-up for the contest," I told her. "I'm going to a sex club downtown to play fly on the wall. Abby's coming with me. We're meeting at my place around nine if you want to join us."

It sounded like Leigh's end of the phone went dead. I was just about to hang up when she said, "Sounds disturbing."

"I'm assuming that means no?"

"No, I'm just trying to decide what one wears to such a thing and whether or not I have something appropriate in my closet."

"How about a Catholic schoolgirl's outfit?"

"Not likely," Leigh sniffed. "Exactly what kind of potential dates do you expect to meet at one of these things?"

“I don’t know, but I figure I’m just gonna let it flow and see if anyone surprises me,” I snarked back.

“Touché. I’ll see you around nine.”

“Around?” I asked. “No, at nine. Not nine forty-five!”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you soon,” Leigh told me, and hung up.

I put the phone back in its cradle and looked back to my monitor to reread what I’d written. Deciding I’d been far too bitchy, I deleted it. The problem now wasn’t just figuring out what to say, but how to learn to go with the flow. Rather than obsess, I decided to try and focus on work. Just as I started typing away an instant message popped up on my screen. It was Aaron.

Exactly what is the circumference of a soup can, anyway?

I smiled and set my IM to “Away” so I could concentrate.

* * * *

As we pulled into the parking lot of the sex club, I was relieved to be greeted at the gate by a big, burly security guard with a clipboard.

“Are you on the list?” he asked when I rolled down my window.

“Yep, Sadie Johnson,” I said. He flipped through the pages on his clipboard and found my name, then crossed it off with a red pen. He went back to his guard post and returned with a green ticket that he stuck underneath my windshield wiper.

“Go ahead and park in the empty spot next to the black Mercedes,” he said.

Abby, Leigh, and I walked inside the club. At the top of the stairs was a counter with a sour-faced dreadlocked girl sitting behind it reading Charles Bukowski’s *Post Office*. I stood and waited for a moment to see if she was going to acknowledge our presence. No such luck.

“Hi,” I said.

She looked up at me, her eyes rimmed in black charcoal, her hands in fingerless black-and-red striped gloves. She sighed and put her book down, revealing a rainbow-colored hoop in her bottom lip.

“Name,” she demanded.

“Sadie Johnson.”

She picked up a list that was sitting on the counter and flipped through it, located my name and marked it off.

“ID, please.”

The three of us handed her our IDs. She looked at each of them quickly before handing them back.

“You guys are comped for the evening. I’ll buzz you in, but wait for Gordie so he can show you around,” she told us.

As we stepped into the hallway, Gordie was walking toward us to greet us. He was a shortish, affable guy with floppy brunette hair, and spoke in a soft, happy tone. He looked more like he should be teaching third grade than running a sex club. Realizing I was pigeonholing again, I gave my head a shake. Gordie didn’t bat an eye.

“Sadie—lovely to see you.” He patted me on the shoulder, smiling broadly. “Who did you bring with you?”

“These are my friends, Abby and Leigh,” I said as he shook their hands. “I hope we’re dressed appropriately?”

Gordie looked us up and down—me in a red scoop-necked top and black vinyl pants, Abby in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt, and Leigh in a black dress, her signature uniform. All three of us were in heels.

“Perfect,” he said. “We encourage our members to wear what they’re comfortable in—so as long as you’re comfortable, that’s what matters. Follow me and I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Gordie led us down the hallway, giving us a brief history of the club, then started pointing out the different rooms.

“Off to the right there is our retail set. Sometimes film companies shoot here during the day,” he said.

“Porn or mainstream?” Leigh asked.

“Both, actually,” Gordie told her. “Now, normally these doors to the right would be open—they’re the medical sets, with doctor stations. But when the doors are closed it means there’s people in there playing.”

Just as Gordie finished speaking, a muffled moan wafted out from behind one of the doors. Leigh, Abby, and I exchanged glances and smirked. Gordie led us further down the hall.

“This hallway runs straight through to the other side of the club,” he said. “And it stays dark, so when you’re walking through it sometimes there are people in there waiting for you, or fooling around . . . you know, whatever floats your boat.”

“People can just grope you without permission?” Abby asked.

“It’s understood that if you go down that hallway, you’re consenting,” Gordie explained. “Down this hallway is what we call the Sultan’s Tent. They’re kind of sectioned off as little areas for couples, threesomes, or moresomes to fool around in, but they’re not private, so people can watch if they want. That’s another general rule: if the door is open, it means you welcome viewers or other participants, but participants have to be invited to play.”

“Sex clubs are very polite,” I observed.

Gordie smiled. “We just don’t want issues—this is all about fun.”

“Any celebrities ever come here?” Leigh piped up.

Gordie nodded. “But we don’t talk about them—privacy is important to us. So when they make their reservations, we make plans in advance to bring them up through a private entrance, then give them a private room.”

Leigh nodded and waited for him to finish speaking. “So what you’re saying is you’re not going to tell us which famous people hang out here.”

“I’m afraid not,” Gordie laughed, then led us into a large room that looked like a nightclub. There was a bar area, booths with tables, a dance floor, and all were filled with couples in various states of dress and undress, some chatting, some making out, some watching.

“In addition to the rooms I showed you, there are many other themed rooms down the hall,” he said. “A jail room, a hospital room, a mirrored room . . .”

“Pretty much anything we could dream up, I’m assuming,” Abby noted.

Gordie nodded. “Make yourselves at home. And if you have any questions—”

“I think it can wait,” I said, cutting him off. “Don’t worry about us—we’ll figure it out from here. Go back to work.”

Gordie smiled again and gave us a little wave. “Good night, ladies.”

The three of us looked at each other.

“Drink?” Leigh asked.

“Definitely,” Abby blurted.

“Immediately if not sooner,” I agreed. We sidled up to the bar and ordered virgin cocktails courtesy of the club’s no boozing policy. After cursing a blue streak we checked out the scenery. I wasn’t sure what Leigh and Abby were looking at, but I was transfixed by a couple on the dance floor. The funny thing was, they weren’t really dancing. Well, she wasn’t, anyway. She was sitting in a chair next to the dance floor as what I assumed was her lover basically gave her a lap dance, running his hands all over her, moving in to kiss her and pulling away right when she opened up to him, teasing her. It wasn’t until I noticed her struggling to touch him that I saw her wrists were bound at her sides.

“Shall we get a table?” Abby asked.

I nodded and grabbed my Shirley Temple off the bar, left a twenty behind and started to follow Abby and Leigh to a booth. As they plunked themselves down in one that gave the optimum view of the whole room, a guy dressed in a sparkly silver skin-tight top, shiny black pants, and a Zorro mask stepped in between me and my destination. I looked at him curiously.

“You have delicious feet,” he said. “May I kiss them?”

Normally I might have come up with some smart-assed remark, but I figured being in Rome, I should do a little like the Romans do. Within reason, of course. I

nodded. He smiled and knelt at my feet, kissing my toes one by one through the peep toe in my shoe. First one foot, than the other. He took his time, lovingly cradling my heel with his hands. I was pleased when I realized tongue wasn't a part of the deal as he stood back up and bowed to me.

"Thank you. Now may I show you something?"

I let a laugh escape from my lips. "Depends on what it is."

"There's a group starting in the room down the hall," he told me, motioning beyond the dance floor.

"Maybe in a while," I said. "I'm going to catch up with my girlfriends first."

He smiled and moved aside as I continued on to the booth, where Abby and Leigh sat staring in mock horror.

"Explain," Leigh demanded when I slid in next to her.

"He wanted to kiss my feet," I said simply. "Who am I to say no?"

"Ew," Abby said, wrinkling her nose.

I shrugged. "What? At least he politely asked permission, which is more than I can say for most guys at the bars we go to. Those ones are usually filled with slimy guys named Sal asking me to play hide the worm."

Leigh raised her glass, her eyes pointed in the direction of the bartender, while Abby squirmed in her seat, a look on her face that suggested she might burst. I took the bait.

"What, Abs?"

"Can I talk about Josh just a little bit longer, and then I promise that's it for the end of the night?"

"Oh god," Leigh exclaimed. "On the drive down here you told us he owns property, has a great nonpsycho relationship with his mother, is an only child, is outdoorsy, loves the beach, hates seafood, is allergic to wine, played basketball in high school, has never been married, drives a Lexus, and has a metabolism that allows him to eat roughly seventeen times a day. What else could we possibly need to know about

him?”

“He likes horror movies,” Abby said sheepishly.

“How do you know all this? Have you been grilling him?” I asked.

“Of course not,” she spat, looking at me as if I suggested she gut kittens and build an altar to him. “I have my sources. Haven’t you seen *The Tao of Steve*?”

I looked at Leigh, who was still mesmerized by the bartender. I looked back at Abby and shook my head.

“It’s this movie about this guy who figures out the key to getting women, and boils it down to three points: Be desireless, be excellent in her eyes, and be gone.”

“And what does this have to do with Josh,” I asked, playing with the straw in my drink.

She crossed her arms over her chest, almost triumphantly. “That’s what I’m doing with him.”

“How’s that working out for you?” Leigh asked, refusing to turn our attention to us.

“Who knows? Whenever I talk to him it’s about clients.”

Leigh gave her a thumbs-up.

“Usually, anyway,” she added mysteriously.

I nodded, hoping to wrap up that conversation, then turned my attention to the bar, where a couple decked out in coordinating fetish garb ordered drinks. I didn’t want to get into any Josh discussions. Not when I knew the guy had it in for me, wrote one of the most abhorrent columns I’d read in a long time, in addition to being unfortunately attractive.

“What do you think of him, Sadie?”

I turned back to Abby. “I don’t know, he seems cool. Much better for you than Darren. But how is this going to impact your part of the contest?”

“It’s not. What better way to be desireless and be gone than to be on a date, which I am next week?” she said.

“Good point,” I told her.

“Do you think he’s hot?” she pressed.

For some reason I didn’t like her line of questioning. It felt strange that she’d pinpointed me over Leigh. “I guess?”

“Well, would you ever go out with him?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, because first of all, the guy wants to kill my career while simultaneously getting me disowned by my family. And secondly, I wouldn’t go after someone you were interested in. There’s plenty of other fish in the sea.”

“But what if I weren’t interested in him.”

“Abby, what is this about?” I asked, annoyed.

She curled her lips into a smile, her eyes sparkling, and put her hand on my arm. “Hon, I’m just curious what you think, that’s all. So just tell me!”

“OK, well, if it’ll get you to stop asking me these questions, than yeah, he’s hot,” I said. “And I don’t know that I’d have a relationship with him, but I might take him for a spin. As long as I knew my superhero identity wouldn’t be compromised.”

“I’m so going to tell him you said that,” she crowed.

“Just don’t,” I advised firmly, then looked back over at the bar, hoping to change the subject. The fetish couple had moved on, but I noticed the Toe Kisser sitting at the bar chatting with the bartender. He looked over at me and raised a glass. I raised mine in return. Abby’s line of questioning really bothered me. She’d never asked me before if I’d been interested in any of her beaus. Then again, I’d only known her to be with Darren, whom I’d spoken to maybe three times the entire year they’d been dating. But still. It felt awkward . . . and I couldn’t decide if it was because she was pressuring me for answers, or because I’d answered that Josh was hot. Either way, it’s not like it could go anywhere. What kind of future could there possibly be for me and some guy who thought I was ruining the moral fabric of American women?

“Are you going to introduce us to captain foot fetish?” Leigh asked, disconnecting me from my inner monologue.

“I take it you’re only acknowledging his presence because he’s talking to your bartender,” I teased.

“He is not my bartender, but you have to admit he’s cute.”

I slid out of the booth. “Come on—we might as well see something worth seeing, even if we’re not going to join in on the action.”

Leigh and Abby slid out of the booth and followed me back to the bar, where I approached Toe Kisser.

“OK, so what did you want to show me?” I asked.

“Follow me,” he said, hopping off his barstool and heading past the dance floor. He offered his hand to Abby, who shook her head and pointed at Leigh. She took it. I took the other. And with Abby trailing behind us, the four of us walked down the hallway and around the corner to what I think Gordie had told us was the Sultan’s Tent. It looked like a tent, with reams of jewel-toned fabric hanging from the ceiling. In the center of the room was a mass of cushions on top of beds that sat on the floor, one right next to the other as if they’d all been pushed together to make one big bed. On top were so many bodies that I wasn’t sure what the exact head count was.

“Watch,” Toe Kisser whispered, leaving me, Abby, and Leigh standing against the wall a short distance away from the action. I looked at them and raised an eyebrow, but they were watching the beds with great curiosity. I figured if I was going to have something to write about I should probably do the same.

The room was dimly lit, so it was hard to make out faces in the teeming mass of bodies on the bed. But there was no mistaking what was going on. I didn’t know how long it had been going on for, but long enough that nearly everyone was mostly naked and half of them were moaning pleasurably. I watched the threesome closest to us. A taller, heavysset man stood shirtless by the side of the bed while the two women he was with—also shirtless and braless, one blonde, the other a redhead—sat at the corner and kissed tenderly. As their lips brushed their hands traveled, stroking cheeks, brushing shoulders, and finally grazing breasts, lightly at first, then a little more insistent, teasing

and tugging on each other's nipples as tongues started to entwine. When the guy at the side of the bed started to stroke their heads, they stopped kissing and looked at one another, then up to him. While the blonde reached to undo the button on his pants, the redhead ran one hand up and down his leg while resting the other one in the blonde's lap.

His pants dropped to the floor to reveal he wasn't wearing underwear and was so hard that I thought he might burst. The blonde and redhead smiled appreciatively and went to work. They each picked a side and kissed their way down his shaft, then extended tongues, licking their way with short strokes all the way back up to his head, where their tongues entwined again, except this time the kiss was much more passionate. The blonde pulled back first, leaving the redhead full clearance, which she took with gusto.

Licking the tip of his cock, she circled the head with her tongue and flicked the underside of the ridge, then slowly wrapped her lips around him, taking him all the way down. She pulled back and plunged him deep inside her throat again as the blonde positioned herself behind and curled her arms around the redhead's waist, sliding her hands into the redhead's panties to play with her clit. The redhead took a break from sucking to let a moan escape from her lips, then descended again, using her hand to work his shaft, twisting as it worked in tandem with her mouth moving up and down on him.

The bed started to move as some of the couples began to fuck. One woman rode a guy off to the right, her hips grinding into him as he guided her with his hands on her hips. It didn't take her long to orgasm, at which point he flipped her over and fucked her hard. In the center of the bed I noticed Toe Kisser pumping away at a woman wearing the same mask as his, his ass flexing with every thrust, sucking on fingers she'd had on her clit.

With the action getting more vigorous, the threesome I'd been watching changed their course. The blonde laid back on the bed as the redhead turned over and

kissed her roughly, then pulled back and tongued a trail directly south. As she buried her head between the blonde's legs she positioned hers on either side of the bed corner. The guy then knelt on the floor, planted his hands on either cheek and buried his face in her ass, causing her to throw her head back in ecstasy.

I couldn't help it—I was so turned on. I could feel the desire building in me. I thought back to the week prior when Matt had gone down on me and felt the heat building between my legs to an uncomfortable degree. Had Abby and Leigh not been there, I might've considered bringing myself off to relieve the pressure. I already felt like eyes were watching me, and I wasn't so sure I wanted to join the pile of people on the bed. I looked around the room and spotted a guy on the other side in a suit and tie. He was watching me. I could feel myself blush as if I'd been caught doing something naughty and turned my attention back to the threesome.

I could tell the blonde was nearing orgasm. The redhead was working her fingers in and out of the blonde's pussy as she licked, the blonde propped up on her elbows watching, breathing heavily. And then, almost as if on cue, her legs started to shake. She threw back her head and arched her back, gripping the bed for stability as her legs vibrated and her hips bucked. As her bucking died down, she sat up and dug her hands in the redhead's hair, pulling her in for a kiss.

I looked back at the suit and tie guy. He was still watching me. I felt a charge go through me when my eyes met his again. I couldn't tell much about his body beneath the suit, but he looked kind of Clark Kent-ish with his chiseled jaw and glasses, although his look was more stylish and angular than Clark. I started feeling nervous again and turned to look at Leigh and Abby, who were whispering to one another in between observing the action.

"I'm gonna go to the bathroom," I told them. "I'll be right back."

Leigh waved me off. I turned around to make for the hallway and walked smack into someone.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I—"

I looked up and realized I was face to face with Noel, who was in a tank top and a collar with a leash that was being tugged on by a raven-haired buxom babe who looked like a descendant of Bettie Paige. The look in his eyes was pure terror. I didn't think there was anything I could say that would make him feel better, so I ducked my head down and dashed out to the hallway, where I leaned against the wall and took a deep breath, eyes closed, concentrating on calming myself down just as yoga taught me. Moments later I felt a hand on my shoulder. I opened an eye. It was Noel.

"Hi," he said tentatively.

"Hi."

"Look, you're not—"

I knew where he was going with his line of questioning and cut him off. "Of course not. I'd never tell anyone without your permission."

He sighed. "Thank you."

"Can I ask you something?"

He eyed me warily. "Maybe."

"Is this why you've been so jumpy around me at the office? Because you thought I'd discover you at some point?"

"Kinda," he said, nodding.

"Why? Of all people, you know I'd understand and not judge you."

"Because it's not my work life, and I don't need everyone at work knowing what I do in my free time—I'm a private person," Noel explained, wringing the leash between his hands as he spoke. "It's not that I'm ashamed, I just . . ."

"Want to keep your private life private," I said. "I understand. No worries. What you do outside the office is your business. Go have fun."

He patted me on the shoulder again and left me in the hallway, where I once again closed my eyes and started deep breathing. I knew enough about my own boundaries to know joining in on public group sex—even though I knew everyone had clean tests as required by membership—was just not where my comfort level was at,

but goddamn, was that scene I was watching hot! It would give me solo material for weeks. I mentally repeated some of the happenings until I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Noel, I *promise* you I won’t say anything. We’re cool.”

“I’m sorry?” came a deep voice.

I opened one eye to see suit and tie guy standing next to me.

“I’m sorry, I thought you were someone else,” I said, and straightened up in an attempt to not look as aroused as I was.

“That’s OK. So listen, I’m having a hard time figuring out how to approach you.”

I wasn’t sure how I should respond to such an opening, but he was cute, so I figured I’d give him an opening. “I’m hardly an expert, but that seemed like an approach to me.”

“OK, well, let me explain,” he started. “This isn’t normally my kind of thing. I mean, not that it’s necessarily yours . . . well, it sort of is. Wait, this is coming out wrong. I couldn’t help but notice you across the room in there.”

“I’m going to take that as flattery, considering everything that was going on in there,” I told him.

“Good, because it *is* flattery.”

I made a mental note to take “Get Hit on at a Sex Club” taken of my list of things to accomplish before I died.

“Anyway,” he continued. “I’m here because a friend of mine talked me into coming with him. So here I am supposedly his wingman, and he took off to some private room twenty minutes in and I haven’t seen him since. So I was about to leave, but I figured as long as I was here I should see something I could tell stories about. And then I saw you, and I found you attractive, and when I saw you walk out I figured I might’ve blown my chance to attempt to ask you to do something somewhere other than here, because that would be weird. I mean, assuming you’re single.”

I laughed. “Are you going to take a breath now?”

He inhaled theatrically.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Rich,” he said, exhaling. He pulled his wallet out of his coat and fished inside it, then handed me a card. “I’d stay and chat, but I’m about to turn into a pumpkin, so if you’re interested drop me a line. And if you’re not, at least I’ll have a good story about how I attempted to pick up a woman at a sex club as if I were at the corner pub and not surrounded by naked people doing things naked people do.”

He offered me his hand. I shook it. “Have a good night.”

“You too,” he said, and left me standing in the hallway.

I looked at his card. He was a financial advisor with a huge firm. I thought back to the last CPA I’d gone out with and remembered how dull he’d been and debated shredding the card. But was it really fair of me to judge Rich based on stereotypes? Not if I was going to heed Leigh’s lecture and win the bet. Instead, I slipped his card inside my purse and went back to the orgy room to retrieve Leigh and Abby. My mission was accomplished. It was time to go home.

Chapter Four

The sun was beating down on me, tempered slightly by the ocean breeze, but thankfully not so much that I had to wear a jacket. I'm not usually big on leaving the office for lunch, but I was going completely stir crazy and needed a break. So when Abby called and asked if I wanted to have lunch at her office I jumped at the chance. We didn't take enough advantage of only working four blocks away from one another.

I stopped in at a local deli and ordered myself a salad, and found my thoughts drifting back to the night of the sex club as I waited. Rich and I had been back-and-forthing through e-mail, trying to pin down a time to go out, but both of our schedules had kept us from finding the right date. That, and admittedly I was kind of gun shy about going out with someone whom I'd met over group sex. While I didn't want to stereotype him, what kind of guy did I really think hung out at a sex club?

I wasn't given much of a chance to ponder—the waiter who took my order showed up with my salad so fast that I wondered if they had it ready before I'd even ordered it. I took the bag and continued on my way to Abby's office.

I could hear Abby shrieking on the phone. I walked into her office to see her pacing with her headset on. She motioned for me to sit, which I did—and promptly began digging into my food. It was nearly 2:00 and I was starving. I watched her rant and rave about something having to do with placement in a magazine—something about her client being promised the cover and not getting it—but tuned out after a while to focus on the joy of eating a well-made cobb.

"I am so sorry you had to hear that," Abby said when she hung up.

"No big," I told her, mid-munch. "You're lucky I have some salad left for us to actually have lunch together."

"Good, and we're actually a threesome today."

I grabbed my things and stood from my chair, frowning. "We are? Who's

joining us?”

Abby smiled a little and walked out of her office, motioning for me to follow her. I watched her stalk down the hallway as if she were preparing to attack anyone that got in her way. She was on a mission.

“Are you OK? You look like you’re ready to kill someone,” I said as we rounded the corner and headed into the lunchroom.

There, sitting at the table with a sandwich, reading the newspaper, was Josh.

“Sadie, you remember Josh,” she said nonchalantly, and pulled out a chair for me.

Josh looked up from the paper and beamed. “Hey, nice to see you again!”

I’d never wanted to run out of a room more than at that very moment—not even at the sex club when Toe Kisser detangled himself from the throbbing mass of bodies in the Sultan’s Tent to give me his version of a seductive dance, pantsless in his silver shirt and mismatched knee socks. I debated begging off with some kind of work thing, but realized it would come off as too contrived. Best just to sit down and play it cool.

“Ditto,” I said, offering a slight smile and taking a seat at the other end of the table, plunking my salad down in front of me. I focused on tearing through it while Abby rifled through the fridge and pulled out some plastic containers, then grabbed two bottles of water from a flat that sat on the counter. She sat across from me and slid one of the waters my way.

“Josh was in the neighborhood and decided to drop by,” Abby said with a slight smirk.

“It’s always a pleasure to drop in on one of my favorite publicists,” he said, folding up the paper.

“And how’s your day going, Sadie?”

“Good,” I said cheerily. I didn’t want to reveal too much.

Abby dug her fork into her container and pulled out some kind of mystery meat. “Nothing’s new?”

I could kill her. I just couldn't figure out how to get away with it. I knew I wasn't going to be able to stay mum for the entire lunch, so I tried to pick the most innocuous thing I could talk about that was work related. "Martin is all gung ho about doing special themed issues now, so he's trying to figure out how to make me write things to fit the themes he has in mind without being horribly obvious."

Abby chewed thoughtfully, frowning at me, then swallowed. "Themes? Like how?"

"You know how magazines have their Christmas issue and all that?"

"Don't you guys already do that?" Josh asked.

I nodded, swallowing a mouthful of salad. "Now he wants every issue to be some kind of theme. So like, the summer issue. The activities issue. The movie issue."

"The issue issue?" Abby laughed.

I rolled my eyes. "I'm sure that's next. I don't know—I never thought there was anything wrong with what we were doing in the first place, so why we need to label every issue is beyond me. But he's thinking he wants to start with the movie issue."

Josh set his sandwich down and grabbed a napkin. "So what kind of feature do you think you'll be doing for that issue?"

"I'm not sure yet. I've been batting around some ideas that I'll run through with Martin before we figure out a solid plan of attack," I said carefully. I knew that I wanted to visit an adult movie set and write about being an extra—but that was the last thing I wanted to say in front of Josh. He'd know in a heartbeat that I was Naughty Nicole.

"I liked your piece on muscle car obsessives," Josh said. "Especially the guy who slept in his garage next to his car—that was classic."

"Yeah, his wife didn't think so." I laughed.

"I didn't really think that she had a place to complain," he said.

I couldn't be positive, but I could swear there was a gleam in his eye when he said it, almost as if he was challenging me. I didn't want to get sucked in—not into the gleam, or the smile teasing his lips, or his deliciously defined bicep and how the arm of

his T-shirt curled around it . . . Wait, where was I?

“What do you mean?” Abby asked, taking the lead being extended my way.

“He makes a living, right? So if he wants to spend part of his living on a car hobby, she doesn’t really have any place to complain about it as long as he’s doing his part to support the family,” Josh explained.

I blinked, absorbing what he said. “But that’s her complaint,” I said. “He *doesn’t* spend that money on the family and kids, so that’s why she has to work—to help support the family because he doesn’t hold up his end of the bargain. As a result the kids suffer.”

Josh crumpled up his sandwich bag and tossed it in the garbage can. “Maybe that’s why he uses cars as an escape—because she’s not holding up her end of the bargain.”

My mind flew to one of his recent columns about what America would be like if we adopted a more fifties attitude toward living. “In what way?” I asked tightly. “By not being barefoot and pregnant, standing in front of a hot stove all day?”

“I didn’t say that,” he started.

“You didn’t have to,” I shot back.

“So maybe it’s that women should just spend all their time on their backs,” Abby stated. She’d put down the mystery meat and planted her palms on the table as if she were ready to launch herself at him.

“Now this is part of the problem with this oversexualized culture we live in,” he said, then turned to me. “Sadie, you remember when you and I discussed this at the party, right?”

“Vaguely—it was a while ago,” I said carefully. While I was tempted to tear into him, I worried that some of Nicole’s words would come out of me and blow my cover.

“I won’t bother to run it all down again, but my point is, sex has a time and a place. And these days women are bringing it up everywhere but the bedroom because it’s trendy to do so. This is part of what’s not only driving a wedge between couples,

but tearing away at societal morals.” He turned to Abby as he jerked his thumb toward me. “Her magazine is partly to blame with the garbage they publish from that sex columnist, Nicole.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. “I can hardly speak for Nicole, but I have to say that I don’t see anything wrong with a healthy discussion about sex. The more people talk about sex, the more in tune to their wants, needs, and desires they are . . . and that shouldn’t matter if it’s in or out of the bedroom.”

Josh nodded. “When was the last time you had a date?”

Abby sputtered as she attempted to sip out of her water bottle. “Excuse me?” I asked.

“The last time someone asked you out. When was it?”

“That’s not really your business,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest protectively.

“See, this is exactly the problem,” he said. “You guys get all wrapped up in what you think is cool and makes you one of the gang and don’t think about the bigger picture.”

“What *you* want?” I shot back.

“No, not me specifically,” he backpedaled. “Everyone. The world works in a specific way whether you like it or not. I’m not trying to be a jerk, but evolutionarily and historically speaking, it’s proven.”

I’d been chewing the inside of my cheek to keep from railing on him for so long that I worried I was coming close to wearing a hole in it. “That’s quite presumptuous of you to assume I haven’t been dating.”

“It’s OK, Sadie. We all hit dry spots.”

Abby kicked me under the table. I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Josh, who was holding my gaze the way people do when they’re trying to assert their Alpha Dogness. I wasn’t about to let him think he had power over me.

“Tell me something,” he said, switching gears. “Do you think your sex

columnist is happy flitting from flower to flower all the time?”

“I have a feeling Nicole is perfectly happy doing what she’s doing,” Abby said a little too defensively. Josh kept staring at me, waiting to answer.

“Nicole is perfectly happy doing what she’s doing,” I said, echoing Abby. It felt strange to talk about myself as if I were another person.

“Really?” he asked incredulously. “Really and truly? Because when I read her work what registers with me is someone who is searching for somebody to love her. And because she can’t find anyone, she looks at sex like it’s a sport—bag all the men you can find, the one with the highest score wins.”

“Oh, that is so not what she does,” I said, finally bubbling over. “Nicole is on an exploration and documenting her findings. I could see your point if she were on a husband hunt, but she’s very clearly not. So because she’s experimental and finding her sexual tastes, that makes her sad and lonely?”

“No, it’s because to an extent, it appears that she devalues herself as a person by not allowing herself the pleasure of connected sex with someone who loves her,” Josh said, leaning back in his chair and stretching his arms behind his head the way Aaron does when he’s acting cocky. It made me want to kick the chair out from under him.

I uncrossed my arms and cracked my knuckles. “I think that’s the sign of a man who is insecure about a woman not actually needing a man, but choosing whether or not she even wants one.”

“Sadie, I’m not trying to be combative—I’m trying to be compassionate. But you have to admit, that bet she has going on with her friends for the website? I worry that it’s far more destructive than even she realizes. It’s the epitome of that whole sex-as-a-sport thing.”

“I would think you’d be impressed with it because it’s a reasonable way to search for a mate,” I said, rolling my eyes.

Josh shook his head. “Not at all, but now that you mention it I really think that’s the thing that would really and truly make her happy. Settling down and finding an

appropriate partner . . . you know, it's just something all women need to think about. The world would be a completely different place if they weren't so obsessed with being men."

I rolled my eyes. "It's not about being men so much as it's about coming into our own and making our own choices, which leads to finding our own power, which is really what freaks you guys out."

"The problem is, you *do* have power, you just don't want to accept where it is," he said. "If we were just a little more connected to one another in a more private way, I think our society would be much better off."

"Sure, Josh," I said. The whole discussion was making me uncomfortable. I looked at my watch and decided it was time to get back to the office. I gathered the remainder of my lunch and bagged it. "I should roll."

"It was a pleasure chatting with you," Josh said, and stood from the table, offering his hand.

I pushed back my chair and debated not shaking, but that would seem unsportsmanlike. I didn't agree with his stance, but that didn't mean I had to be rude. I met his eyes—that icy blue stare cutting right through me—and reached out to shake his hand. He gripped mine firmly.

"Hopefully we can continue the conversation," he continued, giving me an extra squeeze as that gleam in his eye appeared again. It sent a shock directly south, which almost made me yank my hand out of his. How could someone with such antiquated views possibly turn my crank?

"I'll walk you out," Abby said to me, then turned to Josh. "You and I still have to talk business, so don't go anywhere, and don't piss off anyone else in my office while I'm seeing Sadie out."

Josh laughed. "I'll try to keep my trap shut."

I followed Abby down the hall again. When I was out of earshot, I smacked her in the arm.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” I hissed. “Not only is that man the most offensive person I’ve ever met, he wants to destroy my career! How could you invite him to lunch with us?”

“Have a good afternoon, hon,” she said with a wicked grin, then flounced off, leaving me standing in the lobby feeling irritated, exasperated . . . and confused. I waved good-bye to the front desk guy and walked back to the elevators trying to reconcile what was going on in my head. It was clear to me Abby was toying with me for some reason, but what for? And it was certainly clear that Josh and I were hardly a match made in heaven, even as friends. But why in the hell did I care either way what either of them were thinking or doing? I decided to give up the analysis. Nothing made sense, and I didn’t have the energy to force it when said energy should’ve been expended on a new column. I didn’t feel calm again until I stepped back out into the sunshine.

* * * *

Back at work, after two hours of trying I realized I couldn’t concentrate and none of my usual tricks to get me on track were working. Flinging dildos at walls, rolling a bottle of lube between my hands as if I were rolling dough, surfing sex blogs, checking the comments on my latest post about the bet . . . I didn’t know what I wanted to say about *anything*, let alone this month’s column. Though the night at the sex club was still vivid in my mind, finding the right words to describe everything in a PG manner was proving to be more difficult than I anticipated. Just how many euphemisms for penis could I get away with? I didn’t want to think about it anymore. Nor did I want to think about my lunchtime spar with Josh, which was bothering me more than I wanted to admit. But what bothered me more: what he was saying, or how hot he was while saying it?

“Oh god, don’t even go there,” I muttered to myself, shaking my head.

I got up and decided to head to the break room for a glass of water. Maybe stretching my legs would help. Maybe it wouldn’t, but staring at my computer trying to

make the words magically appear wasn't working too well either. With any luck a walk would erase the image of Josh's bicep out of my mind. I took my time wandering down the hallway, peeking into other people's offices. Patrick was chewing on a pencil as he typed, wearing earphones that blasted Pantera so loud that I could clearly hear the lyrics in the hallway. Tammy, our travel editor, was on the phone, no doubt setting up another press trip to somewhere tropical under the guise of needing to do research. Neil, the health and fitness expert, had his door closed, which meant he was likely meditating. I decided to take the long way around again to saunter past Aaron's office. When I peeked in, he was sitting at his desk with the lights low, looking out into the hall.

"Hey," I said.

Aaron waved me in. I stood in the doorway.

"Your brain frozen too?" he asked.

"Seems to be the case," I told him, fiddling with a ring I'd decided to wear that day. Somehow it made me feel more secure standing there in front of him.

"Why does it always happen around the same time?"

I shrugged. "Murphy's law?"

He sighed and stretched his arms out, balling his hands into fists, then fanning them out again. "I'm gonna kill that fucker if I ever meet him."

"What are you working on?" I asked.

"Oh, it's deep, life-changing stuff," he told me. "A top ten list of the hottest MILFs on television."

I laughed. "And you're having trouble coming up with names?"

He looked insulted. "Why do you say that so mockingly?"

"Because I wouldn't expect you to—"

"Have standards? I have very high ones," he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Is that so," I challenged.

"Yes, that's so. In fact, they're very specific," he said. "I like them around five-

seven with honey-blond hair, but not that bleach blond crap—makes them look too washed out. Not skinny, but athletic. I specifically like strong thighs and a roundish ass, kind of like what you'd find on a girl who bikes. Or runs."

My heart caught in my throat. Was he seriously talking about me?

"She's gotta have a good sense of humor. Smarts is a must, but she also has to appreciate the finer points of frat-boy humor. And she has to own a pair of black pants with chains hanging off the hip, a white V-necked top, and black knee-high boots with a heel."

Oh god, he just described what I'm wearing. What do I say?

"Hey, Aaron—oh, hey, Sadie."

Perfect fucking timing, Noel, I wanted to scream as he walked in the room, but instead I said, "Hey, Noel, what's up?"

"Not much. Listen, I'll have the final version of your piece on sex stores across the nation to you in about an hour, can you just look it over and make sure everything is cool?"

Aaron looked stunned. I smiled. "Sure, no problem."

"Thanks." Noel turned to Aaron. "I have some questions about your Carlin interview, do you have a sec?"

"Yeah," Aaron said, still looking confused as he stood from his desk and stood next to Noel. I tried to keep my amusement to a minimum. I could tell he was trying to figure out what the hell had changed between Noel and me. Noel finished scribbling notes and turned to leave.

"See ya, Said."

I nodded my head to him as he walked out the door, then turned back to Aaron.

"What did you do to him?" Aaron asked.

"Not what you're thinking, that's for sure," I said.

He chewed on his bottom lip. "So how did the about-face happen?"

"We just reached an understanding, that's all," I said mysteriously. "It's all very

innocent.”

Aaron was about to speak up again when Babs cut in on the intercom.

“Aaron, your four-thirty is here,” she said.

“Thanks Babs,” he replied, then walked toward the door . . . toward me. He got way up close to me, so close that his nose was a millimeter away from mine. Though I could feel his body, he wasn’t pressed against me so much as he was hinting at the pressing. I could feel his breath on my lips, his hands almost touching mine but not quite, his chest coming close to mine but not enough.

“Excuse me,” he said in a low voice, then slid past me and exited into the hall.

I waited a beat of three before swearing under my breath and continuing on to the break room, where I grabbed a glass from the cupboard and filled it with water. Then I returned to my desk, where I attempted to distract my brain from Aaron. He was making me crazy. I wished we could just cut through all the bullshit and get down to business. No more teasing, no more pussyfooting . . . I wonder what he’d do if the next time he came into my office, I grabbed him by the shirt and threw him on my desk, pushing his shirt up so I could bite one of his nipples before liberating my breasts from my bra and teasing him with the opportunity to nibble, but pulling away before he was able to get a taste.

Then, when I had him suitably worked up, I’d push my skirt up around my waist and tear his pants open. I wouldn’t want to waste any time teasing or tempting him by then—I’d want to suck him. I’d want to own him with my mouth, feeling him press against the back of my throat as I cupped his balls with one hand as I used the other in tandem with my lips, moving furiously up and down, making him moan. He’d lean forward and watch, a look of concentration on his face as he tried not to come. And as I worked, he’d slide his hand down the small of my back, over my bunched up skirt, down the curve of my ass and dip between my legs, where I’d already be wet with a mixture of sweat and desire.

His hand would cup my pussy, his fingers insistently probing, trying to get

through my panties as I'd wiggle just out of reach, sucking him harder and faster as I continued to tempt his fingers . . . and finally he wouldn't be able to take it anymore. He'd yank himself out of my grasp and pull me to him, kissing me roughly, his hands clawing at me in a mix of desperation and craving. Then, pushing me back and sliding off my desk, he'd pick me up and put me where he'd laid only moments before and yank my thong to one side so he could dive between my legs, his tongue warm against my clit, his fingers sliding inside me as he sucked and lapped. He'd want me to come. He'd need me to come. But he wouldn't have any of it. He'd be too intent on being inside me.

Taking control of the situation again, he'd pull me up on my feet and turn me around, pull my thong to the side and grip my ass with one hand as he pushed me to bend over the desk with the other, and enter me roughly, making me moan as he pushed deep inside me. He'd plant both hands on my hips to steady himself, but would fuck me with such force that the entire desk would shake. And I wouldn't care. I'd just hang on for the ride, delighting in the feeling of his cock sliding in and out of me, imagining how it looked from his point of view, until the combination of the two brought me to such a thunderous orgasm that I'd have to grip the desk until I was white-knuckled to keep from falling over.

But he still wouldn't be done with me. He'd keep me bent over, but pull me away from the desk a little and spread my legs wide apart, then start thrusting hard as he'd curl one arm around my waist and plant his hand between my legs, rubbing my clit. It would still be tender, but he wouldn't let up or let me squirm away, and the next thing I'd know I'd be coming again. And this time he wouldn't be able to contain himself as my pussy throbbed around him. The closer he'd get to coming, the faster he'd pound me, causing me to cling to the desk until he pulled out and let loose. And I'd slide off my desk and drop to my knees to taste him, licking him gently as he regained awareness.

It would be fast, it would be furious, and it would be fantastic.

“Sadie!”

I jumped and looked around, but didn’t see anyone. “What!”

“I knew you were there—I could hear you breathing heavy,” Babs’s voice said from the intercom. “Do you want to take a call from Stu Landers?”

Stu was the director of a traveling swinger’s network that was trying to get me to do a story on his events. I knew I should take the call, but I didn’t want to dampen my fantasy orgasm buzz. “Just send him to voice mail, thanks.”

I heard Babs click off without a word and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly in an effort to get my heart rate back to normal. I needed to get my shit together if I was going to finish my work for the day. Taking a few more moments to replay thoughts of what it would be like to fuck Aaron on my desk, I decided the best way to ease back into work mode was to check my e-mail. Penis enlargement ads, press releases about porn movies . . . and then, I was surprised to find one from Rich.

As luck would have it, I no longer have to work late tonight—my deadline was extended. I know it’s super late notice, but what are the chances you’d like to go out for dinner somewhere tonight, maybe the Spanish Kitchen? If you send me your address I’ll pick you up at 8.

Perfect. Just the thing I needed to distract me from . . . well, everything. I wrote back:

Sounds good. Here’s a link to my place from Mapquest.

Dinner with Rich sounded like a great idea. I settled back down at my desk and started working out how I was going to PG up a piece on a sex club while simultaneously obsessing over what to wear.

* * * *

I decided to wear a jewel-toned wrap dress with the same knee-high boots I’d worn to work. I’d gotten halfway through my piece on the sex club. And by the time we finished our first drinks and appetizers and ordered our entrees at the restaurant, I figured out that dinner with Rich was a horrible, horrible idea.

“C’mon, tell me,” he said.

“I really don’t think it matters,” I said distractedly. I was looking around the restaurant for something—*anything*—that could save me.

“It’s not that big a deal—I just want you to look and tell me if you think I could do it.”

I sighed. “Rich, anyone could do it.”

“Yeah, but you and I know it helps to be gifted.”

I picked up my fork and considered stabbing him in the eyeball with it, then decided against it and played with the tines instead. Aggravated assault wasn’t something I needed to start a police record with. Public nudity or some kind of act of lewdness, maybe. In fact, maybe that could be the subject of a new column . . .

“Sadie, would you—”

I snapped. “Rich, I am not going to look at your cock and tell you if it can make you a porn star. So, please, we’re in a restaurant. Put it back in your fucking pants and zip up.”

He looked somewhat stunned as his hands fumbled under the table. “You know, I wouldn’t think you’d be such a prude,” he griped. “I mean, I met you at a sex club.”

“And here I was trying to convince myself it wasn’t a good idea to stereotype you for the very same reason.” I sighed, looking around the restaurant again.

“What’s that supposed to mean? That I’m some kind of freak?”

Oh no, it’s totally normal for guys to whip their dicks out in the middle of a restaurant to help determine their future in porn, I thought. But I decided it was best not to pick a fight at this point. Who knew what other tricks he could have up his sleeve? “Excuse me,” I said, standing up from the table. “Little girl’s room.”

As I walked across the restaurant I debated my options. Faking sick wouldn’t work—there’s no way he’d buy me getting suddenly stricken with the flu in five minutes. I could call Abby and have her phone me back to tell me there was some kind of emergency. Ugh, too obvious. I couldn’t believe this guy didn’t even know about my

secret sex column and he was still acting like a kinkazoid. Lord knows how he would have behaved if he knew.

“Sadie?”

I looked to my right. There, sitting at the bar, was Leigh’s friend Nick. Nick the actor. Nick the hot actor with the spiky brown hair and the hazel eyes and the perfect five o’clock shadow and the tight body. Nick the actor that I’d always harbored a secret crush on.

“What are you doing here?” I squealed, hugging him tightly.

“Just having a drink. I was supposed to meet my writing partner here, but he bailed just as I ordered, so I figured there was no reason to waste a good gimlet,” he said, smiling broadly as he took his seat again. “Wow, it’s great to see you. You look gorgeous.”

“Thanks.”

“Having dinner? Are you meeting the girls?”

I shook my head. “On the date from hell, actually.”

“Really. So you’re single?”

“Has it really been that long since we’ve seen each other?” I asked, trying to do the math in my head. “I’ve been single for quite a while now.”

Nick looked me up and down again. “Leigh didn’t tell me.”

“I suspect Leigh has more on her mind than my love life,” I said.

“Yeah, but she’s my eyes and ears when I’m not in town.” He took a sip of gimlet and held the glass on his knee. “So do you need an out?”

“Funny you should ask—I was just debating my options.”

“How about you and I go grab a drink somewhere?”

I smiled. “Are you asking me out?”

“Do you want me to?”

Nick held my gaze, then put his glass on the bar. He reached into his pocket and extracted his wallet, pulling out a bill and tossing it next to the glass. Slipping his wallet

back into his pocket, he stood from his stool again and grabbed my hand.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“But what about my date?” I asked.

Nick shrugged. “He’ll figure it out.”

He led me the long way through the restaurant so Rich wouldn’t see me leaving, then out to the street where he gave valet his ticket.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked?

“How about Bar Marmont?”

Normally I hated it there—it always got so packed and loud around this time of night, and it was always hard to find a spot at the bar, never mind a table. But in the grand scheme of things, it didn’t really matter. Everywhere was going to be loud and annoying to navigate in Hollywood at this time of night. Rather than complain, I smiled my acceptance of his plan. When his Range Rover pulled around he opened the door for me and walked around the front to get to the driver’s side. And then we were off, leaving Rich and his penis-flashing behind.

“How’s work?” I asked.

“I just got back into town last week. I was up in Canada shooting a Lifetime movie,” he said. “And don’t laugh—their movies are actually pretty good.”

I laughed anyway. “Since when do you watch Lifetime?”

“Well . . . since never,” he admitted. “But the script was good, so I can only assume that things have changed over there.”

“So what did you play—the caring husband, the caring boyfriend, or the evil guy who tries to ruin the heroine’s life in some way?”

“Come on . . . Do you really think I could play a villain?”

“Sure, why not? I know all about your love ’em and leave ’em attitude,” I teased.

“Ah, my reputation precedes me.” He sighed. “So who told you that, Leigh?”

“Actually, a swimsuit model who did the cover of our magazine was having a

really hard time with your departure up north,” I told him. “In fact, makeup had to keep redoing her eyes because she was crying so much.”

Nick frowned. “Was that Bridgette?”

“Nope.”

“Laurie?”

I shook my head. “I think her name was Kaia?”

“Kaia, Kaia,” he said, trying to place her. Then the light bulb went off. “Oh yeah, Kaia. She was . . . interesting.”

“Exactly how many swimsuit models do you bag in a week?”

“Why are we talking about swimsuit models when you’re finally mine for the taking?” he asked.

I raised an eyebrow. “What makes you think I’m yours for the taking?”

“Why do you answer a question with a question?”

“You did it first, back in the restaurant.”

“So? I’m asking you now.”

I shrugged. “Because I need more information?”

“Bullshit,” Nick replied.

“OK, because I can.” I uncrossed and recrossed my legs, silently wishing the air conditioning was on.

Nick reached over and rested a hand on my knee. “You’re derailing the conversation.”

“You mean the one where you admit how many swimsuit models you bag in a week?”

Nick pulled up in front of Marmont and stopped at the valet, but took a moment to stare me down as he slid his hand from my knee to my thigh. “This isn’t finished, you know,” he said.

“We’ll see,” I told him as the valet opened my door. I hopped out and waited for Nick as he got his ticket, then followed him up to the entrance. Predictably there was a

handful of people outside waiting to get in, but Nick breezed up to the front and shook hands with the door guy, who let us walk right in. While things like that didn't normally impress me, I had to admit it surprised me that Nick was able to pull it off so simply. He was a successful actor in terms of commercials, movies of the week, and regular guest spots on sitcoms, but he got treated like an A-lister everywhere he went, thanks in large part to his charm.

We sidled up to the bar just as a woman and her date were leaving a stool and an empty spot. Nick gestured for me to take the chair and squeezed in next to me.

"Two shots of Patron," he said when the bartender appeared. "With fixings, too."

"What are you trying to do to me?" I asked.

He smiled wickedly. "You trying to tell me you don't like tequila?"

I shook my head. "Not on an empty stomach!"

"You're gonna be fine," he told me, and grabbed one of the shot glasses, which looked more like a small tumbler, half filled. He handed it to me, picked up the other, then grabbed a lime wedge and put it in his mouth. He leaned forward, gesturing for me to take it in mine, so I gently clasped the rind with my teeth and took it from between his lips. He leaned forward and nudged my chin up with his nose, then kissed lightly down my neck until he reached the hollow before licking his way back up. Grabbing a saltshaker off the bar, he dumped salt down the trail he'd left on my neck. Then he leaned in, licked it off, downed his shot in one fell swoop, and as he slammed the glass down on the bar, he placed his hands on either side of my face and took the lime from my teeth.

"How was it," I asked once he'd disposed of the rind.

"You tell me—you're next," he challenged.

I'd been sitting sideways with my legs crossed in a ladylike manner, my torso cheated towards him a little to facilitate the tequila shot, but decided it was time to raise the stakes. Clearly the planets were aligning to give me the opportunity to find out if

my longtime crush was better as a fantasy or reality, and I wasn't about to pass it up—especially considering that my more recent crush was a coworker, and I wasn't about to dip my pen in the company inkwell.

I swiveled in my seat to face him, carefully spreading my legs to make sure my dress fell appropriately so as to not flash everyone else. I grabbed Nick by the collar and pulled him closer to me with my free hand, then interlaced it with his right hand, bringing his fingers up to my mouth. As I looked him dead in the eye I sucked on his index finger, swirling my tongue around the tip before tracing it all the way down the length.

He leaned forward. "You're killing me," he muttered in my ear.

I pushed him back a little with the hand holding the tequila as I extracted my other hand from his, resting his wet finger on my collarbone as I reached for the salt and dumped it where my mouth had been moments before. Bringing his finger up to my mouth again, I slowly and deliberately sucked off the salt, then downed the shot. I went to grab the lime off the bar but Nick got to it before I did, motioning for me to open my mouth and squeezing the juice onto my tongue.

"Not bad," he said admirably.

"Oh yeah?" I curled my legs around his waist while giving him the best innocent look I could muster. He gripped my hips and pulled me in to him, his lips hovering over mine, threatening to get dangerously close.

"I think we need more drinks," he said. "What do you want?"

"A margarita," I told him, squeezing him with my thighs. "With salt."

As Nick turned back to the bar, I realized the couple next to him had just watched our entire exchange. The girl grinned and gave me a thumbs-up.

"That was hot," she hollered over the din.

I smiled and gave her a nod in return, but unwrapped my legs from around Nick's waist as I did so. After the sex club I was pretty sure I wasn't into giving public shows. When Nick handed me my drink and finished paying the bartender, I hopped off

my stool and led him to a darker, less populated corner of the bar.

“So,” he said.

“So,” I repeated.

“So how long have you wanted me?”

I laughed. “You realize you’re living up to that actor’s stereotype about it being all about you,” I said.

He looked shocked. “You mean it’s *not* all about me?”

“Sad but true.”

“My world is shattered.” He took a sip from his drink. I realized, predictably, that the shot was already hitting me. I was a major lightweight when it came to drinking without a solid base of food in my stomach. The only good part about that was my inhibitions went right out the window, which meant I was no longer worried about what I wanted to say, how I wanted to act . . . basically, controlling the situation. I was free to wing it and not worry about repercussions.

“Do you remember the night we first met?” I asked, playing with the straw in my drink.

“Yes,” he said, pulling me closer to him.

“What do you remember?”

“I remember we were at that party for the fashion week launch,” he said, playing with a lock of my hair. “And I remember when Leigh introduced us, she specifically told me you were taken. And I remember that despite that, I flirted with you anyway.”

“Yes, and then you took home one of the go-go girls,” I teased, sipping from my straw before putting my drink down on the shelf beside us.

“Only because I couldn’t take you home.” Nick set his drink next to mine.

“Oh yeah?” I pressed against him and curled my arms around his neck.

“Yeah.” He wrapped one arm around my waist while he pressed his other hand between my shoulder blades.

“So do you think indulging this fantasy will ruin things?” I snaked my fingers into his hair.

“Only one way to find out.”

He leaned in. I pulled back. When he shot me a confused look, I pulled him in and kissed him, my lips softly brushing his once, then again before opening a little more to welcome tongue. When he pushed me against the wall as his kiss got more insistent, I barely noticed the shelf digging into my back, choosing instead to focus on sliding my leg up the outside of his. Whereas before I was worried about putting on a show for the bar, it no longer mattered. As far as I was concerned the only two people in the place were me and Nick.

He pulled back and traced my lips with his fingers, which I took in my mouth and sucked as my eyes searched his.

“Oh god, Sadie,” he said, and pulled me in to kiss him again, his lips pressing into mine, our tongues entwining. My head was swimming. Everything felt so good and I couldn’t figure out how much of it was the tequila or Nick. After a while it didn’t matter. Time was standing still and the only thing on my mind was the feel of Nick’s lips on mine, his hands all over me, the taste of tequila and salt on both of us, the sweet and musky scent of his skin.

Nick turned me around as we kissed, facing my back to the crowd as he removed his right hand from my back and traced his fingers along the curve of my breast, down my stomach, and started snaking inside the front of my dress to get between my legs.

“Nick,” I started to whisper in warning.

“Don’t worry, nobody can see,” he said, and kissed me again. That was enough to convince me. I relaxed and let him slip his way inside the front of my dress, where he lightly traced my mound through my thong. I readied myself for him to slip his fingers beyond the elastic to get at my warm wetness, but he didn’t. Instead he slipped his fingers back out of my dress and up to my breast, then eased his hand inside my bra

and found my nipple. He lightly grazed it at first, then rolled it between his thumb and forefinger and pulled back to suck on my bottom lip as he did so. I gasped as I felt a wave of desire surge through me.

He brought his fingers up to my lips again and I sucked them enthusiastically, taking them into my throat and curling my tongue around them as I made sure to get them nice and wet. He pulled them from my lips and found his way between my legs again, this time sneaking his fingers inside my thong and sliding them inside me. I tried to moan, but he clamped his mouth down on mine and kissed me passionately as he teased my opening before plunging them inside again. As his fingers slid in and out, his thumb manipulated my clit.

It felt like we had been there for hours by the time Nick's lips traveled to my earlobe, which he nibbled.

"Imagine what it's going to feel like when I slip my cock inside you, Sadie," he growled. "Imagine what it's going to feel like when I have you on all fours, your gorgeous ass high in the air . . . mmmm, I can't wait to make you come over and over again."

I wanted to tell him I was going to come right that very second, but I couldn't find the words. Instead I grabbed his wrist and held him there, then sucked in my breath as I felt the lower half of my body start to convulse, praying nobody else could see. Nick slowed his fingers as my orgasm subsided, then kissed and licked his way down my neck as his hands cupped my ass. I worried momentarily that he might leave wet fingerprints on my butt, then decided I didn't care—especially after the appetizer he'd just given me in preparation for the main course. I dug my hands in the back of his head and bent my head to his ear.

"I want you so bad, Josh. You have no idea."

He paused and pulled back. "It's Nick, babe."

"I know it's Nick." I ran my fingers down his jawline.

"You just called me Josh."

I sputtered. “No I did not! You’re Nick!”

“Yeah, I know. And yeah, you did.”

I searched his face for some kind of indication that he was joking. Nick was a good actor, but he wasn’t that good.

Nothing. He was dead serious.

Shit.

Chapter Five

I pulled my car into the parking lot and was amazed to find there were still spots available. Luck was on my side this afternoon. I pulled in to a spot at the far end of the lot and parked, pulled my bag out of the back seat and locked up, then kicked my flip-flops off so it was easier to walk. Despite my sunglasses being firmly planted on my face, it was way too bright out. I squinted. My head started to throb a little. As far as I was concerned it was way too early to be up, let alone out at the beach.

I trudged through the sand toward the general area where Abby told me she'd be, looking for a red blanket spread out with all her stuff on it. I spotted her before I spotted the blanket. She was wearing her favorite turquoise bikini—the one she wore when she wanted to flirt—and shouting encouragement toward the volleyball court. I spotted her blanket off to the side and dumped my stuff on it, preparing to lay down and sleep until I heard her squeal as the game broke up.

"I'm so happy you're here," she said, flinging her arms around me.

"It's not like you haven't seen me ever," I told her, readjusting my sunglasses from the squishy hug she gave me.

"Well, obviously, but you've been working really hard lately and not coming out to play."

I nodded. "Yeah, I know. You know me—work mode is safer sometimes."

"Are you OK?" Abby asked with a frown, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"I'm fine. My head hurts."

"I'll get you some water," she said, and bounced off to her cooler to grab me a bottle. I pulled off my shirt and shimmied out of my yoga pants, revealing my standby tanning bikini, a simple white number that made me look more tan than I actually was. As I bent over to dig my iPod out of my beach bag, I felt something cold on my back.

"Ai yah!" I yelped, turning to see Abby holding my bottle of water. I took it

from her hand and mimed beating her over the head with it.

“What’s with you? You’re totally out of it today.”

I finished swigging from the bottle. “Headache.”

“From?”

“Hangover.”

Though Abby was wearing lightly tinted shades, I could still see her rolling her eyes. “You’re not still claiming to be hung over from your night with Nick, are you? That was, like, three weeks ago!”

“It was a *lot* of tequila,” I wailed. Abby rolled her eyes again. “OK, no, it’s not that. Last night I had to go out with this publicist for some porn company—”

Abby gasped. “You’re cheating on me?”

“You know I want to visit a set, Abs, and until your company reps porn—”

“Unlikely,” she interjected.

“Exactly. So needless to say, there was wine. I probably had a glass more than I should have and am paying the price for it today.”

“I take it you’re not going to play volleyball, then.”

I sighed. “Abby, have you not yet learned that the more you ask me to play, the less I want to?”

“But you play so well,” she whined.

“I don’t care,” I sighed. “I just want to come to the beach and vegetate. I force myself to do all sorts of active things throughout the week and I’m always scheduled up the ass. Can’t I have one day where I just play it by ear?”

“Oh, all right,” Abby said, then looked over her shoulder. “By the way, there’s someone here who wants to say hello.”

“Oh yeah?” I followed her gaze to the volleyball court, where a crowd of people were high-fiving and going their separate ways after winning a game. One of them—a guy with a swimmer’s build in aviators and blue shorts—headed towards Abby and me

“Oh yeah,” Abby said, smiling.

I squinted again, lamenting that I was clearly having issue with focus today. Then it dawned on me. “Abby, please tell me that’s not—”

“Josh, you remember Sadie,” she said cheerily once he got into earshot.

“Of course,” he said, smiling widely as he walked up to me. “How are you?”

He threw his arms wide and dived in for a hug. I didn’t know what to do.

“Oh! Well, hi there,” I said, allowing myself to be folded into him, halfheartedly hugging him back. He was sweaty and slightly sandy from playing. And he smelled good. I tried to remind myself how much I hated his views on women’s roles in society, but it was hard. I pulled back from him.

“You going to play a game?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nope, it’s been a long week, so I’m just going to set up here and live vicariously through all of you.”

“She’s lazy,” Abby explained.

I refrained from smacking her in the arm, choosing instead to plunk myself down on the blanket and get situated for a nap. “Have fun,” I said cheerily, but dismissively enough to make it clear I didn’t really have much else to say.

When Abby came back from taking him to her cooler for water and snacks, she plopped down on the blanket next to me. “So?” she asked.

“Abby, you have got to stop doing this,” I said.

“Doing what?” she asked innocently.

“Don’t play coy with me—you know damn well what.”

She rolled over on to her stomach. “If you mean inviting him to the beach, it’s a free country—he can go where he wants. I just told him that sometimes we come out here and play volleyball on the weekend and said it was an option if he wanted to join us.”

I repositioned my pillow and stretched out my legs, laying down on my back and throwing my arms overhead so I could tan my armpits while I slept. “That’s exactly what I’m talking about—inviting him to join us. Inviting him to join us when he’s

incredibly opposed to pretty much everything I write and the way I choose to live my life, and let's not forget that whole thing about wanting to expose my alter ego."

"Oh please—he hasn't mentioned anything about that since you guys met at my party," she said.

"Yes, and speaking of the party, that's when you made it incredibly clear you were interested in him," I reminded her.

"Sadie, I don't like to mix business with pleasure—I can't go there," she said. "I adore both of you. And it would make me happy if two people I adore got together and made each other happy."

"That would be all well and good if the guy weren't an oppressive, obnoxious jerk."

"You didn't seem to mind his hug hello," Abby pointed out, poking me in the side as she talked.

I decided not to dignify her remark with an answer. I didn't want to continue this line of discussion any further.

"I told him about the spin thing," she pressed.

"What spin thing?"

"When we were at the sex club and you said you'd take him for a spin," she said.

I lifted my head and raised my sunglasses to look at her. She was grinning like the cat who got the canary. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

She shook her head.

"Abby, that was something I said flippantly to get you to shut up about grilling me on him," I hissed. "That was not something to be repeated! I'm so furious with you right now that I can't even think straight."

"Oh relax—he seemed interested when I said it," she told me. "He asked if you might be coming to the beach and I told him probably, so he told me if you were here that he'd make more of an effort to get to know you. It was a good thing!"

I didn't want to hear another word. "Whatever," I said, sliding my shades back down and lowering my head to its rightful spot on the pillow. "We'll see if that happens."

"It already has," she teased.

"How's your count going?" I asked, changing the subject.

"I'm still beating you—got another date this week with a real estate mogul."

"How can you be beating me when I had two dates in one night?"

Abby laughed. "When did you pull that off?"

"Rich and Nick."

"Oh yeah—you never really told me what happened with Nick anyway."

I didn't want to admit to her that I'd called him Josh in the heat of the moment, and everything pretty much went downhill from there. I guess the delicate sensibilities of an actor dictated that him having designs on more than one woman at a time was a-OK, but if that woman had any interest in anyone other than him, it was game over. We chatted amiably for a while after my slipup—focusing on his amazing prowess and career, of course—and when my head started to pound from the combo of too much tequila and lack of food, I excused myself from the evening and took a cab home. Rather than explain all that to Abby, I gave her a pat answer.

"You know how actors are," I said.

"Oh, I do," she replied. "And you're getting sleepy, which is boring me, so I'm gonna go play a game."

"You do that."

Abby planted a kiss on my cheek and bounced off to join the others on the court while I allowed myself to drift off to sleep. I could hear the waves crashing behind me and felt my anger and irritation washing away as I idly thought about how I'd respond if Josh came over to chat with me. Not that it mattered—we were sworn enemies just based on our jobs, even if he didn't really know about mine. I just couldn't go there. It wasn't safe . . . for so many reasons.

I awoke with something freezing cold on my stomach.

“What the—”

I sat up with a start, pulling my sunglasses off my head. Abby giggled devilishly, her hand full of ice.

“What is it with you, acting like a six-year-old,” I demanded. “Can’t you leave a girl and her hangover in peace?”

“It’s the beach, Sadie, It’s supposed to be fun!”

I tried to give her my best don’t-fuck-with-me glare, but found its power diminishing the more Abby bounced around like an excited child. Finally I gave in and started to laugh.

“Isn’t it about time for you to turn over, anyway?” she asked.

“I have an internal clock for that sort of thing, but, now that you mention it, I could cool off a little. Wanna come down to the water with me?”

“I will,” came a male voice.

I looked up. Josh was standing in front of us, downing a bottle of water.

“Great, I need to finish up my game,” Abby said, and practically sprinted off the blanket. I took my time slipping my iPod back in my bag and finding the case for my sunglasses, trying to prepare myself for what to say or how to act.

“Are you coming, or what?” he asked.

“A girl can take her time on a Sunday,” I told him.

He laughed. “Take any more time and it’ll be winter.”

I stood and made a face at him, then walked off the blanket toward the water. “So is this what you do for fun?” I asked.

“Torture hungover writers? Yes,” he teased. “Actually, I’m not usually a big volleyball player, but I like to try something new every once in a while. What about you? What’s your activity of choice?”

Sex toy testing, I nearly blurted, and tried to stifle a smile as I had the thought. “I’ve been getting into running more lately, but I like hiking too.”

Josh walked into the water as I dipped a toe in, trying to get acclimatized. He started splashing it further up his legs in an effort to get the sand off him. “Where do you hike?”

“Malibu,” I told him, going ankle high in the water. “Is that ladylike enough?”

He laughed. “Apparently you have some misconceptions about me.”

“Oh, I don’t think I misconcept anything—you made yourself pretty clear over lunch at Abby’s office that day.”

Josh started moving further back into the water, leading me along with him.

“Because I believe that people are too open about sex?”

“Based on way outdated gender stereotypes.” I allowed myself to go waist deep in the water. “And then you insulted my singledom.”

“You still didn’t tell me how long it had been since you’d had a boyfriend,” Josh said, splashing me.

“That’s because it’s none of your business,” I yelled, splashing him back.

“Why are you afraid to tell me?”

“I’m not afraid to tell you,” I snapped. “It’s just that I’m getting over a very painful breakup and I’m not sure that I’m ready to do anything more than dip my toes in the water, thanks.”

I stood there in front of him, my arms crossed protectively over my chest, and immediately wished I hadn’t blurted out those words. Josh moved toward me . . . or maybe he was just steadying himself against the waves crashing into us.

“I’m sorry, Sadie, I didn’t mean to be insensitive,” he said. “It’s just in my nature to assume that if someone isn’t being open with me, it’s because they’re hiding something.”

“It’s fine.”

“Can I be nosy and ask what happened?”

I shielded my eyes from the sun so I could get a better look at Josh. He seemed sincere, but I didn’t want to let him that deep into my head—not knowing what I knew

of him already. “It was just one of those things. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, it just doesn’t work out.”

He nodded. “I understand. I broke up with my girlfriend almost two years ago now.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Actually, it kind of surprised me,” he said sincerely. “She had lots of goals, dreams, and ambitions, but she could never really follow through on them. So when my column became syndicated and I started working on a book, she couldn’t handle it. And rather than own up to that, she started acting out. Breaking up with her was really hard. I really loved her, but as time went on I realized the person I loved was the person I was dating in the beginning, not the person I had to break up with.”

I was stunned. I didn’t expect that kind of heartfelt confession out of Josh in a million years. Then again, it could be all part of his ruse to get me to trust him and lead him to Nicole.

“Yes, but it’s probably for the best, seeing as you’d want a Madonna in public and a whore in the bedroom,” I pointed out.

“Oh, don’t get me started on Madonna,” he laughed. “I blame her that we’re all so publicly yappy about our kinks and quirks.”

I frowned, trying to steady myself against the waves. “Would you rather that we all become closeted? Or maybe that we start dressing in ways that hide every exposed inch of skin?”

Josh laughed. “Sadie, explain something to me. What is so wrong with keeping an act that should be private between two people exactly that? Private?”

Just as I opened my mouth to answer, a huge wave crashed into me and sent me hurling forward—right into Josh. He landed backwards in the water with me on top of him, and the more I scrambled to pull away, the more the flow pushed us together.

“See, even the ocean agrees with me,” he joked once we regained our footing.

“That’s about enough,” I said, wringing out my hair.

“Of the conversation or the water?”

“Both.” I started my way back up to the blanket.

“You sure you don’t want to play a game?” Josh pressed once I towed off and prepared to lay down again.

“Oh god, not you too,” I moaned.

“I’ll take that as a no,” he said. “Enjoy your sun.”

I slipped my sunglasses on again as I watched him bound back onto the courts to see who needed an extra player. It was interesting to hear his little show of heart in the water, but I was having a hard time taking it as genuine considering the tone of his column. Either way, I was relieved that he seemed to have let go of the Nicole situation. Abby was right—he hadn’t mentioned it since the party, so clearly he was off the scent. I laid down on my stomach, dug in my beach bag, and pulled out my iPod again, fastening in the ear buds and closing my eyes in an effort to lull myself back to sleep.

I could smell Josh before I felt him—that mix of ocean and sweat. I kept my eyes closed, wondering what, if anything, he was going to do. All I could hear was ocean, but the rest of my senses were on full alert, anticipating his next move. Would he start innocently chatting me up again, or try to entice me into playing volleyball? I finally got my answer when I felt him straddle my ass and lean forward, bringing his mouth to my ear.

“Don’t move,” he instructed.

“But people will see,” I whispered.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, and I felt his fingertips dance down my back, headed toward my bikini bottoms as he got off of me and moved to the side. I felt him hover there, almost as if he were unsure what to do next . . . or maybe he just wanted me to think that. I stayed frozen in place, my mind moving a million miles a minute, trying to fight the urge to turn and look at what he was or wasn’t doing. And then I felt him—his hands untying the ties on my bikini bottom, then pulling the fabric away, leaving me exposed. He traced a finger over the curve of my ass and across my thigh,

then eased my legs apart. I felt him reposition in the space that lay between them.

I felt the palm of one hand slide up and grip a cheek, a sensation repeated on the other side. He kneaded me a little, then let go. I felt him reach for something. Then he tapped me on the ass.

“Up,” he commanded.

I did as I was told, lifting my ass in the air, my stomach off the blanket. I felt him place something under my belly as he tapped me again.

“Down.”

I eased myself back down, noticing the difference in sensation with my ass in the air. Hands were on my cheeks again, gently spreading me apart. Then I felt it. Softly, teasingly, a hot, wet tongue on my clit. I tensed my body with anticipation, dying to know when he was going to give me more. But he stayed there, lightly swirling his tongue on my button, his hands holding me there as he licked with a feather-light touch. I wanted to push myself into his mouth, but I couldn't move with the way his hands were clamped on me.

With my legs tense and quivering, Josh finally took pity on me and let his tongue travel from my clit, licking the outsides of my pussy, then resting just outside, teasing entry. I moaned as I felt him slip the tip of it inside me, curling it a little, flicking a little, then pulling out to trace around the outside again. Just as I was about to cry foul, it happens—using the full length of his tongue, he licks from my clit all the way up my ass, then goes back for seconds before burying his face between my legs, his tongue dancing on my button, his hands clamped on my ass, trying to hold me still as I quiver. But I can't help it. His tongue is amazing, expert in its navigation of my wetness, flicking and curling around me at a steady, firm pace until my breathing picks up and my hips start to buck. He takes one of his hands off my ass and slips it between my legs with his fingers cupping my mound. And when his thumb starts manipulating my clit, he fucks me with his tongue until I come in crashing waves.

Once he's had enough of my taste, I feel the head of his cock threatening to

enter me, teasing my warmth and wetness. And then he pushes in and begins to fuck me with long, slow strokes, leaning down to talk in my ear as he slides in and out of me.

“You’re not allowed to turn around, but I want you to know what this looks like and how it feels,” he says, his breathing becoming labored with every stroke of his cock. “After I made you come, your pussy was so flushed—so plump and ready for me. And when I slid inside you for the first time it was like you swallowed me. You’re so hot and wet, but I can feel you grip me . . . the way you envelop me. And I’m going to make you come with me inside you. Can you feel me pressing against your G-spot?”

“Yes,” I managed. The pressure was exquisite torture as I felt his cock hit me at just the right angle.

“I can feel you getting hotter and wetter—that’s how I know I have you. But I’m not going to speed up or slow down. I’m going to keep . . . moving . . . just . . . like . . . this . . . until you come for me. You like how this feels, don’t you?”

His hand forced its way between me and the blanket, finding its way inside my bikini top to pinch my nipple. I moaned loudly, clamping my eyes shut. I wanted to concentrate on what I felt. I wasn’t going to last much longer.

“I can feel it building,” he growled. “I can feel you start, how you’re getting tighter around me, how you’re sucking me in and gripping me as I keep . . . fucking . . . you . . . the . . . way . . . you . . . like . . . it. Are you going to come for me now?”

“Yes!” I cried.

“Tell me. Tell me you’re going to come for me now. *Now!*”

“I’m . . . oh . . . my . . . god!”

An explosion. I was overcome by it, completely speechless, unable to do anything but surrender to the feeling of my pussy gripping his cock followed by the sensation of his cock throbbing inside me. I can feel him panting in my ear, how his body tenses as he releases, how our bodies mesh deliciously.

I feel exhausted. I feel elated.

I feel something whack me in the back of my head. Jerking up, I open my eyes

and look around.

“Dude, so sorry. I called ‘ball’ to warn you, but you were snoring.”

I focused on a surfer boy type, who bent to retrieve an errant volleyball that had whammed me in the head.

“You OK?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I muttered.

“You sure? You were moaning.”

I was horrified. “It’s all good,” I assured him.

I had no idea how long I’d been asleep—or how many people had heard me.

Note to self: No more sleeping at the beach when going through a sex dreams phase. I suddenly became aware of how embarrassed I was that I’d just had a sex dream starring Josh . . . and how cold I felt. The sun’s power had diminished considerably. I grabbed my cell phone from my beach bag and looked at the time. It was nearing 5:00. I sat up to see Abby and her other beach buddies still playing volleyball, now taking over three courts as they played tournament style. I still needed to run some errands and decided it was time to split. As I slipped my shirt back on and pulled up my yoga pants, Abby bounded over.

“Are you outta here?”

“Yeah, I’ve gotta go grocery shopping,” I said. “Have fun winning the tournament.”

She pouted. “You didn’t even talk to Josh, though.”

“Abs, he didn’t come over here to get to know me at all, as you’d claimed he was interested in doing,” I said, lowering my voice so only she could hear. “If he were really that interested in doing more than destroying me, he’d have come over to chat me up. He’s just being friendly because he thinks I’ll eventually lead him to Nicole. He’s just biding his time before he strikes.”

“But—”

I grabbed my bag. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow, Abs,” I said, hugging her. “Take it

easy.”

As I walked away she gave me a playful smack on the butt. I took a sneak peek over at the court where Josh was playing, intrigued to see if he gave any reaction to my departure—a wave, a good-bye . . . nothing. I was right. Guys who were interested made moves, and Josh was not making any kind of a move. Besides, there was no way anything could work out for us anyway—how could a sex columnist and a guy intent on sending American women back to the Donna Reed era have a future? Simple—they couldn’t.

* * * *

The next day at work I found myself in the rare position of having finished all my pieces for the latest issue way earlier than usual. I tried writing a little about my dating drought since Nick for the website, but nothing witty enough was coming to me. I could have started working on new stuff to get ahead on the next issue, but it was so unusual for me to be finished early that I wanted to enjoy it for a little bit. I didn’t have any appointments or interviews, so I was free to dillydally for the rest of the day . . . which, admittedly, wasn’t for much longer, but I took moments of peace when I could get them.

“Sadie?”

It was Babs on my intercom.

“Yeah, what’s up, Babs?” I looked at the penis clock on my desk, which read 5:24.

“Are you coming?”

I frowned as if she could see me. “For?”

“It’s pub night. You were supposed to be in the lobby at five-fifteen,” Babs said.

Dammit, I *knew* I had been forgetting something! “I’ll be there in a second,” I said, and started shutting down my computer. So much for being work-free until the end of the day. Then again, it’s not like company pub night was a horrible experience. Martin rallied us once a month or so to head down to the local brewery and talk shop—

at least, until the staff got too soused on draft to make any sense . . .

I grabbed my purse and shut my office door behind me, then headed toward the collection of voices talking over one another.

“All right, the fun has arrived, we can go now,” I joked.

“Nice of you to join us, Sadie,” said Neil.

Allowing myself to get sucked into the field trip vibe as everyone chattered excitedly as if they hadn’t been let out of the office in months, I stuck my tongue out at him. He retaliated by pulling my ponytail.

“Martin, Neil is pulling my hair,” I mock-whined.

Martin laughed. “Neil, if you don’t knock it off I won’t let you go to the yoga conference in San Francisco next month.”

Neil shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’ll be good,” he said as we all headed for the elevator. It took two loads to get us all down to the lobby, and then we started the block and a half trek to the pub.

“So what are you working on these days?” Neil asked me as everyone fell into chattering groups.

“Well, I just finished my stuff for this issue—”

“Are you serious?”

I nodded. “Why?”

“God, I haven’t even started this month’s stuff.”

“Neil, you know it’s due in three days, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “I didn’t think it would be this hard to do an exercise list for the ultimate couch potato, and yet here I am.”

I skipped over a divot in the sidewalk that I would have almost certainly caught my heel in. “Do you have your nutrition piece all mapped out?”

“Yeah.” He frowned.

“Why the frown?”

“I don’t like the title.”

I turned to look at him, but he wouldn't look back. I poked him in the arm. "And it is . . . ?"

Neil took a deep breath. "The meat lover's guide to eating out," he said with a resignation in his voice.

I laughed. "What's wrong with that?"

"It sounds like it should be one of your columns, not mine," he wailed.

I wrapped my arm around his shoulder. "C'mon, Neil—come to the dark side!"

"Sadie, the main reason I took this gig was because I wanted to spread a different message about exercise and nutrition to men. I wanted to do it differently than all the others, and now what am I doing? The same damn thing everyone else is doing, except with questionable double entendres as headlines!"

"So talk to Martin about it," I suggested. "Maybe you guys can reach a compromise."

Neil looked hopeful. "Do you think so?"

"Look, he hired you because he respects your work—with . . . wait, how many books do you have under your belt?"

"Seven," Neil offered.

"Right. He can't ignore that kind of expertise, can he?"

"Thanks, Sadie. I didn't mean to complain."

I patted him on the shoulder and slid my hand back up the strap of my purse.

"It's no problem whatsoever."

"So where's Aaron been these days?" he asked.

I shrugged. "How should I know?"

"Oh, come on—it's not hard to notice there's something between you two, no matter how hard you try to fight it."

Dammit. This is exactly what I didn't want, which was precisely the reason why I'd been playing it way cooler than I had been over the past few weeks. Well, that and I was momentarily distracted by thoughts of Josh. But still. I didn't need the entire office

in on my private life any more than they already were by reading my column. There had to be a way to play this off to throw him off the scent.

“It’s totally innocent, Neil,” I said evenly.

Neil rolled his eyes. “Sadie, seriously.”

I looked around perhaps a little too theatrically, but I wanted to make a point.

“All right. Are you the only one who knows about this?”

“I guess,” Neil said, looking worried. “I mean, the only reason I figured it out was because I always see you walking past my office now, and you really have no reason to do that.”

Shit! It was only a guess! I could’ve come up with some kind of reason for that.

Oh well, on with the plan . . .

“You have to promise me to keep this to yourself,” I told him.

Neil nodded, his eyes wide, waiting for further instructions.

“It’s for a column,” I continued. “I wanted to do a funny piece about how to effectively flirt in an office environment. And seeing as he’s new and doesn’t know all my tricks the way the rest of you guys do, I figured he’d be a good target.”

“I get it,” he said, smiling slyly. “So he’s a patsy!”

“Bingo.” We crossed the street. The pub already had nine-to-fivers spilling out onto its patio.

“I didn’t think you’d be interested in him—he’s a bit of a meathead.”

Aaron a meathead? Not when you took time out to chat with him—he was actually quite smart. I almost jumped to his defense. Almost. Instead, I continued on with my lie. “So you’re going to keep this between us, right? I’d hate to ruin the article.”

“You have my word,” Neil said. “But that still doesn’t explain where he’s been lately.”

Someone ahead of us pulled the door open. I heard some kind of garbled, hollered greeting that sounded familiar. When Neil and I walked through the door, I

figured out why. There, at the end of the bar, sat Aaron. In addition to looking like he'd gotten started before the rest of us, he looked better than I ever remembered. Maybe it was because we were out of the office, maybe it was the lighting . . . I couldn't tell for sure. But all I knew was his Izod shirt was unbuttoned just enough to show a tantalizing view of his collarbone and the beginnings of his pecs, and the arms of said shirt were hugging his biceps in a rather seductive way. I don't know how long I'd been drinking in his image before he caught me. Raising his glass, he smiled teasingly and nodded in my direction as our coworkers gathered around him.

"You're doing great," Neil said in my ear.

"Oh, thanks," I said, tearing my attention away from Aaron for a moment.

I followed Neil to the bar and listened to him blither on about PREs and BMIs and other initialized things I didn't care to know anything about, but my mind was on Aaron. In the office we were always so professional—so buttoned up. I'd never dealt with him in a social situation and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

"What'll you have?" Neil asked me.

"Just soda water," I told him, allowing my eyes to roam around.

"Sadie, it's pub night!"

Aaron had left his post at the end of the bar. Where did he go? "Yeah, I know—I hate beer."

"So have some wine," Neil insisted.

"All right, something red," I said, though I had no desire to drink it. I was in no mood to get even the slightest bit loaded. But I also wasn't in the mood to get a wet-blanket lecture, so best just to accept the wine and carry it around for the duration of my stay to look like I was drinking.

"Looking for me?" came a voice from behind me.

I turned and faced Aaron. "Nope," I said quickly. I felt my breath catch in my throat as I breathed in his scent. Even though it was a little beer-ish, he still smelled fantastic. Was that Givenchy cologne?

“Then what are you looking for?” he asked, cutting into my thoughts.

I had no idea. What could I say? Him wearing nothing but his cologne on a rotating bed? “The ladies’ room.”

Aaron frowned. “Haven’t you guys been coming here every month or so for the past five years?”

Way to go, Sadie. “Yeah, but would you believe I’ve never needed the ladies’ room when I’ve been here?”

“No.” He smiled in a way that let me know he knew my mind was elsewhere.

I shrugged. “I either don’t drink enough, or I find a way to hold it until I get back to the office.”

“Aaron, hey!” Neil said, turning to hand me my drink. I’d never been happier to be interrupted. “We were just wondering where you’ve been?”

“I was interviewing Derek Jeter, right here in this very pub,” Aaron announced proudly.

“I thought sports was Patrick’s beat?” I asked.

“It is, but because Derek was in town shooting a cameo for some movie, I argued that it fell under the guise of entertainment.”

Neil and I looked at him quizzically.

“OK, I begged him,” Aaron admitted.

“Aren’t you a Sox fan?” Neil asked.

“Yeah, but I have an infinite appreciation of the game. So when one of the greats comes to town, I make an effort, y’know?”

I looked across the room again and saw Martin and Tammy waving me over. “As fascinating as baseball talk is, I’m going to excuse myself to catch up with . . . someone else,” I said, offering a little wave as I cut across the room before anyone could say anything.

Five minutes into chatting with Tammy and Martin, it was becoming clear to me that our pub outing was going to be less about business and more about getting drunk.

I excused myself to go to the restroom and slid my wine glass onto an unused table before walking down the little hallway leading to the ladies'. I closed the door. What was I doing in there, anyway? I didn't really have to go. Maybe I just needed an escape. I sat on the toilet lid and fished in my purse for my cell phone.

I have reached a new low, I texted to Abby and Leigh. I am hiding out in a pub bathroom to avoid the cute boy that I work with. Clearly I need professional help.

I snapped my phone shut and slipped it back in my purse, then stood to look in the mirror again, smoothing out my hair from when Neil tugged on it. It was past 6:00—I was well within my rights to split for the day, especially seeing as we weren't really doing any business. I nodded at my reflection and opened the door to step out into the hallway, which I did—right smack into Aaron. I gasped and jumped backward.

"You startled me!" I snapped.

"You forgot this," he said with a smile, and handed me my wine glass.

I took it from him as he started walking toward me. I went to move to the side, thinking he wanted to get into the door for the men's room, but he followed. He got uncomfortably close, so I walked backwards until my back was pressed against the wall next to the other bathroom door. Aaron was millimeters away, smiling down at me as I looked up at him.

"Why are you avoiding me, Sadie?"

"I'm not," I said with conviction, even though it was false.

He nodded, planting his hands on the wall at either side of my head. "Yes you are. And you know you are."

I didn't know what to say, but I wasn't about to give in. So I stared him down, unconsciously gripping my glass in the small space between our torsos as if it were shielding me from him.

"Do you not want me anymore?" he asked, dipping his head closer to mine.

I held his gaze, determined not to waver. "Who said I wanted you in the first place?"

“Come on—you and I both know that you wonder what it would be like.”

I knew he was at least tipsy. On one hand it turned me off, but on the other . . .

“Do you think about it?” he pressed. “Do you think about what it would be like to kiss me?”

Unconsciously my lips parted as he dipped even closer, his mouth open and ready, but stopped just short. I could smell the beer on his breath. I wasn’t a fan of beer under most circumstances, but coupled with his Givenchy and the proximity of his body to mine . . . I didn’t even realize I’d closed my eyes until I felt him move away from me a little. I opened them to see he was no longer smiling—he was deadly serious.

“Do you know what I think about?” he asked me.

“No,” I told him in a low voice.

“I think about when you walk past my office—how you look all studious, all business. And I think about pulling you in and shutting the door behind us, and sitting you on my desk, where I start to lift your skirt.”

I searched his face for any indication that he might laugh. Nada. I let my hand holding the wine glass fall to my side as he moved a little bit closer.

“And when I think about this, you’re wearing stockings with garters and no underwear,” he continued, no break in his stride. “So I’d slide a finger under each garter where they connect to the stocking—sheer black with a seam up the back, of course—and follow them all the way up.”

I could feel my heart pounding away. My breath had become short and I could feel that mix of fear and anticipation in my chest as he leaned forward and brought his lips to my ear.

“And then my fingers travel,” he murmured. “And that’s when I find you’re already wet.”

As he said it, he lightly pressed his pelvis into me. My breath caught in my throat. It took every ounce of my strength to remain noncommittal, but every inch of me was fighting my instinct to wrap my arms around his neck, curl my leg around his

waist and kiss him more passionately than he'd ever been kissed before. But I didn't—I couldn't. I had to maintain some kind of—

“And I know you think about it too, Sadie,” Aaron growled in my ear. “I know you think about undoing my belt, unbuttoning my jeans and letting them fall to the floor, then reaching inside my underwear to feel how hard and thick I am before I slide right inside of you.”

I couldn't decide if I wanted to shove him or fuck him. His arrogance was both incredibly prickish and a horrible turn-on. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't deny the physical effect he was having on me. My body was tingling, and I'd be a liar if I said my panties didn't become damp the very second he backed me into the wall.

But I refused to submit. No way. He knew I was hot for him—he had me nailed. I had to maintain some kind of control. He might've been giving me the green light, but no way was I about to make the official First Move.

Just as I decided that, he drew back a little and traced his nose across my cheek until we were perfectly aligned for a kiss. I didn't budge an inch. It would've been so simple for me to lean forward just a little bit to meet his lips, but I was practically frozen to my spot. Our mouths were both poised and ready, we were breathing each other's breath, and yet—

“Ohhhhhhhh, hey guys!”

Aaron and I both whipped our heads around to see Neil opening the door to walk into the men's room. I had no choice but to stay rooted to my spot while Aaron jumped back a little.

“We were just talking,” Aaron mumbled.

“Hey, it's cool—I know,” Neil told him, then looked at me and winked before disappearing through the doorway. I turned to look back at Aaron. He'd already made it halfway down the hall leading back to the bar. I took a deep breath and composed myself, taking a little sip of my wine to soothe my frazzled nerves, counted to ten to give Aaron a reasonable cushion, then started to walk back out. I felt my phone buzz in

my purse. I stopped to unzip it and dig through until I found my cell, which I flipped open to see a text message from Abby.

Speaking of cute guys, guess who was asking about you today?

I snapped my phone shut without answering. I didn't want to know. Slipping the phone back into my purse, I walked down the rest of the hallway. Though Aaron and I had only disappeared for moments, the bar had become considerably more packed. I took that as a sign. Slipping my wine glass back on the formerly unoccupied table, I ducked into the crowd and made my way to the door. TV was definitely way safer for me than the pub. I couldn't wait to get home.

* * * *

When I kicked open the door I was greeted by a highly annoyed cat wailing for attention.

"Penelope, you have no idea what a weird day Mommy had," I told her, bending to pet her a little as she weaved in and out between my legs. I noticed something glowing in the den. I walked into the room to realize I'd left my computer on from the previous evening. I'd done enough work for the day—now was all about me and Oprah. Even still, I decided to check of my work e-mail one last time before I closed everything out for the evening. Penis pills, random questions from confused college kids, and then one that caught my eye:

From: Josh Kelly Sent: Monday, July 24, 2006 5:54 PM To: Naughty

Nicole Subject: Interview?

Nicole,

My name is Josh Kelly, and I write 'Back to Basics,' a column that's syndicated in newspapers nationwide. I'm currently working on a series about how public discussion of sexuality is tarnishing our country's image and would love the opportunity to speak with you to get your side of the story. Please let me know when your schedule

will allow for us to chat.

Many thanks,

Josh

This was *not* good.

Chapter Six

I looked at my cell phone to check the time. I wasn't necessarily in a rush, but I'd been waiting for two hours and was starting to wonder what the hold-up was. Plus, the lawn chair I was sitting on wasn't all that comfortable.

"I'm sorry about how long this is taking. If I'd have known they were running this far behind I wouldn't have arranged for you to be here this early," said Jackie, the publicist. "But you know how film sets are—hurry up and wait."

"Even porn sets?" I asked.

Jackie rolled her eyes. "*Especially* porn sets."

I laughed. There was something about the exasperation in her voice that hinted she was well over visiting sets by this point. As I stretched my legs out, I noticed the set—a booth with a table that you might find in some hip L.A. bar—suddenly had more people surrounding it. I spotted a petite brunette in a spangly dress and heels, looking like she was ready for a night on the town despite the fact that it was midafternoon, followed by a tall, muscular guy in a suit. It took me a few moments to realize it was Delilah Sinn and Justin Pistol. They looked completely different from when I'd interviewed them hours earlier, she in sweats with her hair bunched up on her head and her face completely devoid of makeup, he in a ball cap and jeans. It was like they'd transformed from caterpillars to butterflies.

"Looks like we're finally about to roll," Jackie said. "Are you sure you're still against playing waitress?"

I nodded. "It's nothing personal at all. It's just that certain aspects of my job require me to keep a low profile, and being on camera and writing about being on camera kind of blows my cover, you know?"

Jackie listened intently, but I could tell the wheels were turning. "I find it ironic that you encourage people to openly and honestly discuss their sexuality, and yet you're

not open and honest about who you are in the column,” she told me with a tinge of sadness in her voice, almost as if I was letting a movement down.

“Believe me, Jackie, I completely agree with you—I feel like a hypocrite too,” I sighed. “But think of it this way, it’s like doing porn under a stage name. Sometimes being anonymous gives you more freedom to say what needs to be said than if you weren’t undercover.”

“Well, I suppose something is better than nothing,” she said, then motioned for us to zip it as the director shot us with a disapproving look. I readied my notebook so I could record every movement. Recreating a PG version of this for the column was going to be a challenge.

After they got the setup out of the way—during which one of the crew played a waitress taking their drink order, playing the role I was supposed to play—they got down to business. The thing that surprised me was Justin and Delilah had chemistry. They’d been flirting and teasing one another leading up to their scene, which seemed to work wonders as it looked like they were ready to tear each other apart. The director had to tell them to slow down and let things unfold. I scribbled everything down as fast as I could, keeping one eye on the action.

Justin grabbed Delilah by the arms and kissed her passionately. As their tongues entwined, Delilah eased one of her breasts out from the confines of her spangly dress, guiding his head down to suck on her nipple. His tongue encircled it, licking delicately, then nibbling, as Delilah dug her hands into the back of his head. Justin detached himself from her nipple and lifted her onto the table to kiss her again, then slid her dress up her thighs slowly, deliberately, until it was high enough to reveal she was pantiless. He smiled as if he’d discovered the holy grail.

Delilah leaned back a little as he wasted no time and dove between her legs. I couldn’t see his exact movements, but Delilah was responding with deep, throaty moans loud enough for the entire building to hear. Justin slid two fingers into her mouth and dropped them back down to where he’d been tonguing. Within moments her legs

began to shake almost violently as her moans subsided, catching in her throat as she came.

As her shudders subsided, Justin stood and kissed her passionately again, then asked, “Do you want to suck my cock?” Delilah needed no encouragement. Pushing him down into the booth, she shoved the table aside and unbuttoned his shirt, revealing his muscular chest and six-pack abs, then tore off his pants, revealing he, too, was going commando. That, and his equipment was quite sizeable. I started to feel a little self-conscious, like I shouldn’t have been there. Even though they were professionals, the attraction between them was so electric that it was starting to feel like they were really people who met at a club and found each other irresistible.

Undeterred by the girth of his member, Delilah devoured him, licking from the base of his rod to the tip before descending on it to tease his head, running her tongue around the ridge, holding his gaze as she taunted him . . . but she wouldn’t take him all the way yet. Instead, she wrapped her breasts around him, sliding up and down teasingly until he couldn’t take it anymore. In one fell swoop, she leaned down and swallowed him whole. Justin threw his head back and moaned as she spit on his length and started working her hands in tandem, gripping and curling their way up and down, up and down, up and down. Even when the cameras stopped, they kept going.

Finally, Justin reached his boiling point. He reached down and cupped her face, pulling back a little so his cock was just out of reach of her mouth, and bent to kiss her. As she pulled back and licked her lips, he looked her right in the eye and said, “I really want to fuck you.” She smiled wickedly. Without warning, Justin stood up and picked her up with him, then laid her back on the table and positioned her ass so it was right at the edge. Then, cruelly, he started teasing her—tracing his cock around the outside, playing like he was going to slide it in, then pulling back out. When she started to beg, he finally slid deep inside her. Delilah gasped audibly as Justin started pounding in earnest. They got going so hard that at one point Delilah clasped the table with her hands and hovered above it as Justin holds her legs in the air, thrusting wildly. Delilah’s

legs start to shake again, making it hard for Justin to hang on as her orgasmic howls start to echo through the room. When Delilah lowers herself back on the table, Justin lifts her up and holds her to him, still slowly sliding in and out of her. She clings to him as if she's lost every ounce of her strength from her orgasm.

They switched positions again with Delilah climbing atop him, grinding and twisting away as Justin finally tore the rest of her dress off. They went for another table-top position again, but it was too much for Justin to take.

"Are you ready?" he asked, and she nodded, dropping to her knees and sliding him inside her mouth once more. She worked him over—her mouth sucking, her hand sliding up and down his shaft, over and over until Justin let out a guttural growl. Delilah pulled back and jacked him off. As he finished, Justin collapsed back into the booth.

"Goddamn," he muttered, looking at Delilah like he couldn't believe what she'd done to him.

"Was I worth the wait?" she asked.

He nodded. "More than," he told her, then pulled her to him to kiss again.

As someone tossed them each a towel and crewmembers started to scatter again, I looked at my cell phone and realized it'd taken two hours to shoot the scene. I was so swallowed up in the action that I'd barely noticed when the director had interjected with comments and breaks. Jackie motioned for me to follow her over to them.

"That looked like fun," I commented.

"It was," Delilah said, giggling as Justin pinched her behind.

"What did you mean when you asked if you were worth the wait? It seemed like there was something behind that."

"We've been wanting to work together for ages," Justin explained. "And our schedules just wouldn't mesh, but now . . ."

They looked at each other coyly, then Justin grabbed her in a hug as Delilah started giggling again. I found it fascinating that she was fine with standing there in front of me wearing nothing but heels, and he in his unbuttoned shirt and nothing else.

“Thanks, guys,” I said, and allowed Jackie to lead me back down the hall to the room they’d designated as the office.

“So when will this run?” she asked.

I fussed with putting my notebook and cell phone back in my bag. “I’m hoping for the next issue, but I might have something more time-sensitive for that one, so if not this than the next. I’ll keep you posted.”

Jackie offered her hand. “Thanks, and let me know if you need anything else.”

“You got it,” I told her, and shook hands, then weaved my way out of the office, down the hall, toward the exit. I’d been to those studios about a million times before for cover shoots, so I was well familiar with the layout. Even still, it was hard to navigate with my brain still processing Justin and Delilah’s sex scene. It was unlike anything I’d ever seen before—even on video. Most performers I’d seen always seemed bored with one another. It was refreshing to know that even professionals could still get genuinely turned on and have sexual tension with someone.

I walked out into the parking lot and started toward my car when I spotted someone walking in the direction of the studio. I squinted. Something about him looked familiar.

Oh shit—Josh!

Immediately I hit the ground, ducking between two cars and praying he hadn’t seen me.

“Sadie?”

I was busted. *Dammit!*

“Sadie, is that you?” he asked again as his footsteps got nearer.

“Yeah, hi,” I said, standing.

“What are you doing?”

“I dropped my keys,” I explained, holding them up as if that offered proof that I wasn’t lying.

“No, I mean here—what are you doing here?”

I thought fast. “Oh, the magazine sets up shoots here all the time, so I was meeting with the guy who owns the place to figure out our cover schedule over the next few issues.”

Josh nodded. “Did you know there’s a porn shoot going on here today?”

I feigned ignorance. “What?”

“Yeah,” he said, slipping his sunglasses off and hanging them off his shirt collar. “I’m finally working on that piece I was telling you about—the one about sexuality saturation. I figured a good angle would be going to a porn set. You know, get the behind-the-scenes feel for it, and talk to the principals on how they feel about helping to destroy America’s moral fiber.”

I nodded, making a mental note to call Jackie and tell her I needed to come to another set. I couldn’t very well write about this one anymore.

“Wanna come in for a second?” Josh asked.

“Oh, no,” I said, trying to escape his ice-blue gaze. “I’m on deadline, so I have to get back to the office. But you enjoy yourself.”

“I doubt it,” he laughed. “But I’ll see you at Abby’s party tomorrow night, right?”

I nodded. “Right.”

“Oh, and by the way, I tried contacting Nicole for an interview a few weeks ago, but she hasn’t gotten back to me yet.”

“She’s been out of town, from what I understand,” I said quickly. “I’m not sure when she’s coming back.”

“Ah, must be nice. Well can you pass word along to her that I’m looking to speak with her?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, sure,” I said, wishing the ground would swallow me whole like Delilah had done to Justin about an hour ago.

“Great,” Josh said, and squeezed my arm. “Nice to see you again.”

“Yeah, you too,” I told him, and made a beeline for my car. I unlocked the door

and hopped in, slamming it shut behind me and staring into the rear view mirror to make sure Josh went into the building. When he did, I rifled through my bag for my cell phone and called Abby. No answer. I tried Leigh next.

“I’m doomed,” I wailed when she answered.

“What are you talking about?”

“You know how I wanted to go to a porn set for the magazine? Well I did, and guess who I ran into on the way out?”

“Who?” Leigh asked, with that tone in her voice that suggested I was panicking for nothing.

“Josh Kelly!”

She let out a low whistle. “Wow, that’s not good.”

“Ya think?” I looked in my rear view to make sure he hadn’t walked out of the studio again.

“So what did you tell him?” Leigh asked.

“That I was there for cover scheduling,” I told her. “And then he asked me why Nicole isn’t answering e-mail. Leigh, he’s going to be at Abby’s party tomorrow night. What am I going to do?”

“Avoid him like the plague,” she advised.

“Well, obviously, but don’t you think that’ll be . . . you know, obvious?” I started picking at my fingernails nervously. “I mean, he thinks we’re friendly enough that he can ask me to rat out a coworker to him, never mind that said coworker is me. Avoiding him would be like wearing a neon sign that screams, ‘I’m Naughty Nicole!’”

“Yeah, I see your point,” Leigh said, then thought for a moment. “OK, I’ll tell you what—I’ll be your wingman on this one.”

“How?”

“I’ll keep you busy all night. If he comes around, I’ll lead you off to go meet someone else. And we’ll get Abby in on it, too, that way it won’t look so contrived.”

I chewed my lip. “Do you think she’ll do it? She’s been campaigning to get us

together.”

“Relax—I’ll talk to her.”

“OK. But I have another problem.”

Leigh sighed. “What’s that?”

“It’s been too long since I’ve had a date, and if I’m gonna win that bet I need to shore up my numbers,” I whined.

“You’re hilarious. I love how seamlessly you can move from one panic to the other.”

I shrugged as if she could see me. “Entertainment is in my blood.”

“Have I talked you off the ledge enough?” she asked with a snicker.

I frowned. “It’s not funny, Leigh, this is a serious problem!”

“I know, I know. Relax, it’ll be fine. Do you know what you’re wearing tomorrow night?”

“Not a clue. I kind of have bigger stuff on my mind right now, you know?”

I’m almost positive I heard Leigh roll her eyes. “What does one wear to the launch of a new brand of vodka?”

“One of those hats that has a beverage holder on either side of it with straws running into your mouth?” I suggested.

“I’m so glad you don’t write about fashion,” she snarked. “I’ve gotta roll, can we catch up more tomorrow?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure? You’re OK to drive?” she deadpanned.

“Yes, I’m OK to drive,” I said, mocking her tone.

“Seriously, Says, it’s gonna be fine.”

“I’m holding you personally responsible if it’s not,” I told her, and snapped my phone shut. Looking into the rear view one more time, I started the car and pulled out of the lot. Despite my best efforts, Josh was getting closer to figuring out the truth . . . which meant I had to start getting craftier about shielding him from it. But how? I

mulled it over as I pulled onto the freeway and headed back to the office, where I knew I'd feel safer once I shut myself away behind my computer. If only I could drag a laptop around and use it as a shield everywhere I go, which would be horribly cumbersome, never mind unstylish.

I shook my head to regain focus. My main goal was figuring out how to survive Abby's party. And considering I knew Aaron was going, I was pretty sure I knew exactly how to make it through the night.

* * * *

I handed a bill to the cab driver and took a receipt from his outstretched hand, then stepped out onto the street to see a line of people running down the sidewalk. I went to the opposite side of the door where Abby was holding a clipboard and spoke with staccato tones into a headset.

"Abs," I said, alerting her to my presence as she finished what she was saying. She turned and looked the other way. I tried again. "Abby."

"I'm Abby," she shrieked, turning to face me.

"I know," I laughed. "Are you OK?"

"I'm sorry," she said, unclipping the rope and letting me in, then handing me a wristband. "This is crazier than I thought it would be. Go inside—Leigh is already in there. That wristband gets you open bar."

"Thanks!"

"Josh is there too," she added.

I pretended I didn't hear her and continued into the club, which was almost as packed as it was outside. Large ice sculptures manned by cute girls in vodka-branded tank tops lined one wall. When I got closer I realized the sculptures were functional. The tank top girls would mix a drink for you, then pour it into the sculpture, which had a little trail running through it that spit out your drink at the bottom, where you could either position a glass or your mouth, if you were feeling saucy. I wasn't, so I opted for a sour appletini. I knew it was beyond gauche, but I also knew they got me drunk fast—

and, ultimately, that was the goal.

I grabbed my glass and raised it in thanks to the perky redhead who mixed my drink, then went in search of a safe haven as I took my first sip. I couldn't hide the wince that painted itself across my face—the drink was stronger than I was used to. While I knew it would get the job done quicker, I still wanted my throat to be intact by the end of the night. I spotted some people from the magazine, but oddly, saw no sign of Aaron. A quick scan of the room helped me find Leigh, sitting at a table with the boys. I cut through the crowd to join her.

“You still haven't learned that thing about having the boys be your escort to every event, have you?” I teased, taking a seat next to her.

She smiled and threw her arms around me. “I'm drunk.”

I laughed. “How long have you been here?”

“Like, forty-five minutes, but I've had two kir royales,” she explained.

“Great, you're in fine form to save me tonight.”

“Don't worry, I told the boys what the game plan is, and they're going to help you.”

I took another sip of my drink. It still wasn't going down any easier. “That's great, Leigh. Why don't you skywrite it?”

“The boys are cool, it's all good,” she told me. “They know how to play it. And it's just in case I'm out of commission or otherwise engaged.”

“Otherwise engaged, huh? On the prowl for more actors?”

“Actually, I'm aiming for athletes now,” she said, allowing her eyes to wander.

I snickered. “Leigh, you're probably the least active girl I know. What makes you think an athlete is the way to go?”

“Better bodies,” she said, accepting another kir royale from one of the boys and taking a sip.

“And what do you tell them when they want to go do something other than lay on the couch and watch reality TV?”

“Carry me?”

I laughed as she raised her glass. I tipped mine to her, and we both sipped. Before I knew it, my ’tini was already gone.

“They’re small portions,” Leigh explained.

“Then how did you get drunk so fast?” I asked her.

“I’m a lightweight.”

I stood from the table, depositing my empty glass next to the two she had sitting in front of her. “C’mon, let’s go get me another one so I can catch up.”

I started toward the ice sculptures with Leigh in tow. We cut around the dance floor, which was so crowded that some people were cutting into the table space. Past the bathrooms, around the bar—

“Sadie!”

I looked to my right. It was Josh.

“Hey, Josh,” I said, loud enough for Leigh to hear. “How are you?”

“Great! Abby sure knows how to throw a party, doesn’t she?”

I nodded. He looked better than ever in dark jeans that hugged him in all the right places, a white button-down shirt, and black dress jacket.

“Let me introduce you to my friends,” he said.

“Says, I want a drink,” Leigh whined. “Can’t we do this later?”

I looked to Josh and shrugged. “Can I catch you on the way back? We have an emergency.”

“No worries, I’ll be here,” he said. “Nice to see you too, Leigh.”

Leigh smiled a greeting as I led her away and wrapped my arm around her shoulder. “That was perfect,” I said.

“Yes, but now you have to do a shot with me for making me act so rudely,” she sniffed.

Against my better judgment—probably because my appletini was starting to course through my veins—I agreed. So when it came to be our turn at the ice sculptures

and Leigh ordered us lemon drop shots, I thought nothing of ducking my head under the frozen shape of a funnel to accept one right down my throat. I'd barely even swallowed before Leigh ordered us follow-ups.

"What's this?" I asked when she handed me a drink that looked like window cleaner.

"Just drink it," she said, and clinked her glass to mine before taking a sip. I did the same. Whatever it was, it was delicious. Although I was looking for a buzz, I didn't want to be completely wasted in record time, so I also asked for a bottle of water before stepping aside to let someone else get their order in.

"How should we get back to the table?" I asked Leigh.

She looked around, trying to see a clear path. "He's still over there, so if we take the long way we should be fine."

"Lead the way," I told her, starting to feel a little wobbly. Even though Leigh was further gone than I was, somehow she always managed to steadily navigate her way through anything, even when she was drunk. I kept glancing in Josh's general direction and was pleased to find his attention wasn't directed anywhere near me. Leigh ducked back into the booth and pulled me in next to her. We were surprised to find the boys had ordered us another round of drinks, which were sitting there waiting for us.

An hour later, I was officially dippy.

"I wanna dance," Leigh wailed.

"I can barely even speak and you want to dance?" I said, feeling like my mouth was full of molasses.

"I love this song!"

I couldn't hear anything. My ears were ringing, and I was suddenly aware of an intense need to pee. I made a motion for something to drink. Leigh handed me my Windex drink, but I shook my head. I'd had enough for the moment—I didn't want to be fall-down so much as I wanted to be silly-fun tipsy-bordering-on-drunk, and the dinner I'd eaten before hitting the party was insuring my success on that front. One of

the boys handed me a bottle of water. I tore the cap off and took a healthy swig in an attempt to dilute the alcohol swimming through me, hoping it would give me the right amount of coordination I needed to walk to the bathroom. I wasn't sure if it was going to work or not, but at that point I had no choice—I had to pee come hell or high water.

“Bathroom,” I blurted. It was all I could muster for fear of relieving myself right there at the table. Leigh waved me off and threw her arms around one of the boys while I made my way through the club to the ladies' loo. I was pleased to discover that somehow, I was less dizzy walking than I was sitting. I tottered into the bathroom, did my business, retouched my lip gloss and double-checked my hair. Feeling ten pounds lighter, I walked out of the bathroom intent on finding out where Abby had disappeared to . . . and walked smack into Aaron.

“Hey,” he said, and caught me by the arms.

“What is it with you and bathrooms?” I asked, smacking him in the arm.

He smiled. “You're a little sauced, aren't you?”

I searched his face for a moment and leaned in. “Maybe, but so are you!”

“How do you know?”

I laughed. “Oh, I know,” I told him. “I know plenty.” I attempted to pull my arms out of his grasp, but it wasn't working out very well.

“Where are you going?”

“Away,” I said, looking past him. I didn't have the sort of courage that tequila provided flowing through me. I wasn't ready to play bar games again with Aaron.

“No, you're not.” He pulled me closer.

“I'm not?”

He shook his head. I looked around and noticed the hallway getting progressively more packed with revelers needing to drain their bladders.

“We can't really stay here, though,” I said.

Aaron looked at the pile of people milling about waiting to gain entry to the bathroom. “Then come with me.” He grabbed my hand and led me through the crowd.

I spotted Josh and turned my head the other way so he wouldn't notice me, and we passed by without incident. Aaron stopped me just short of the table where his friends sat.

"What's going on," he said, more like a statement than a question.

I didn't know how to answer. "With our nation's government?" I asked.

"No, you know what I mean."

I did, but I was feeling nervous. "I can assure you, I don't."

"You're hot," he blurted with absolutely zero finesse.

I didn't know what to say. I suddenly felt completely vulnerable now that it was coming down to brass tacks. I'd become so accustomed to playing come here/go away that I didn't know what to do at this point. I felt my face flush and instinctively drew my hands up to my cheeks.

"Sadie?" Aaron asked, smiling amusedly.

"Yeah," I said weakly.

"Are you OK?"

I nodded.

"Do you think I'm hot too?"

I nodded again and looked away, almost too nervous to speak.

Aaron laughed again. "I've never seen you like this!"

"Well, of course not," I said, throwing my hands in the air. "I'm not going to let on that I find you attractive when we're at the office! That would be suicide! And I can't say things like that when I don't know that you're attracted to me!"

"Of course I'm attracted to you! I can't keep my eyes off you in the office!"

I wrinkled my nose. "I thought it was all for show—that you were just playing a game."

"No, it's not all for show," he said, and drew me closer to him. "C'mere."

He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tight, lifting me off the ground as he let a pleased moan escape his lips. My vulnerability briefly turned to terror, but as

I hugged him back and felt his arms beneath his shirt and felt his breath on my neck, it slowly turned to excitement. Was I finally about to get laid by someone I really, really liked? As Aaron lowered me back down to the ground, I could feel him turning serious. He pulled back from me a little as he slid a hand into my hair and gently tugged, then started the slow approach. I closed my eyes and parted my lips, my heart pounding with anticipation.

Then I froze.

“Wait,” I said, pulling my arm from his waist and holding my hand to his chest to stop him.

He frowned. “What?”

There was something about the moment that just felt wrong. I’d spent so much time cultivating that moment—that build up—that I didn’t want to waste it in a club in front of a billion witnesses, some of whom we worked with. I looked around and spotted some of our coworkers milling about the bar and jerked my head in their direction.

“Not here,” I said, and fixed him with a suggestive smile.

He followed my head jerk. Realization dawned on him as his eyes focused on our coworkers. He folded me in a hug again, then stepped back a little and grinned.

“How am I going to concentrate on work tomorrow?” I wailed.

Aaron laughed. “This is crazy, Sadie, I’ve never seen you like this!”

I didn’t say anything. I was worried that letting more words out of my mouth would implicate me as an idiot. Then I felt hands covering my eyes, followed by a slight swaying back and forth against me, as if the person who owned said hands couldn’t get their balance.

“Where have you been?”

It was Abby, clearly in drunk, I-love-you-man mode. I pulled her hands off my eyes and turned around to hug her.

“Am I OK to interrupt?” she muttered into my ear.

“Yeah, it’s best that you do for now,” I told her. I pulled back and turned to Aaron. “We’re going to go catch up.”

“Fuck that, we’re going to dance,” Abby crowed, and led me off to the dance floor. Except when we got there, she pulled me to the edge of it.

“Spill,” she demanded.

“What?”

She wagged her finger in my face. “Don’t you play coy with me! What was that about?”

I couldn’t fake it. “I’m gonna get la-aid! I’m gonna get la-aid,” I sing-songed.

Abby clapped her hands together with glee. “I’m going to take a picture of this moment so you can remember it always,” she said, fishing in her pocket for her camera, then held it at arm’s length to get a shot of us. I looked ridiculous thanks to the angle—it had given me a double chin and I looked slightly manic. Then again, it had been longer than I cared to admit since I’d been laid, so perhaps the facial expression was warranted.

Abby and I danced for so long that my feet were starting to hurt. As I saw Josh and his friends join Abby’s coworkers, I took that as a sign and sidled off to the bar, where I grabbed a stool and sat down to watch. The crowd had started to thin considerably, likely because it was still a school night, so to speak, and most people had to go to work the next day. I felt an arm curl around my shoulder and turned to see who its owner was. Aaron.

“I’m outta here,” he said, nuzzling my ear with his nose.

“OK,” I said tentatively, that scared/vulnerable/excited feeling coming back.

“I’ll see you at work tomorrow?”

I nodded. “Oh yeah. You will.”

He hugged me again and let a little moan slip while I buried my head in his neck. I didn’t want to let go, but the timing wasn’t right. We’d waited for quite a while—another night wouldn’t kill us. He pulled back from me and shot me a look that

said what I'd just thought was way wrong. I laughed as he backed away, then turned my attention back to the dance floor, where Abby and Josh were dancing. They appeared to be having fun, mocking each others' abilities. I glanced around the room to see if I could spot Leigh and let my mind drift to Aaron and wondered how things would play out. Would we be able to work tomorrow, or would we sneak off to the broom closet, unable to keep our hands off one another now that we'd admitted our mutual attraction? I couldn't decide which route would be better.

I felt a hand on top of mine. It was Josh's.

"Come dance," he said, attempting to lead me off my chair.

"No, no," I said, attempting to root down. "I'm tired."

"No, come dance," he insisted.

"My feet hurt," I explained.

"OK, come dance," he repeated.

I knew he wasn't going to let me get away without at least one song, so I relented and hopped off my barstool, allowing him to lead me to the dance floor. I didn't know what to expect out of him, but admittedly I was surprised to find he was a pretty good dancer. As we moved through song after song he drew in closer to me. I pulled back. He drew closer again, so I turned my back to him, thinking that would fend him off. Nope. He danced up behind me, not so much that he was grinding against me, but close enough that I could feel him . . . and I didn't want to.

He pushed right up against me, his hands sliding up the outside of my thighs, his mouth at my ear. My heart began to race in a way it hadn't since the night Aaron cornered me at the pub. As Josh moved with me, I allowed myself to get carried away in the moment and tilted my head back into him a little, raising an arm above my head and curling it behind me to put my hand on the back of his neck and allow it to trail down to his shoulder. I could feel his muscles beneath his shirt, taut and toned, as he curled his arms around my waist, allowing his head to dip a little closer to my collarbone. I could feel his breath traveling down my décolletage, giving me chills all

over.

I didn't want to think about how good he looked. Or that he was trying to get to Nicole. Besides, I'd finally broken ground with Aaron—I wasn't about to let anything distract me from that. I mentally willed myself out of the feelings I was having and turned to face him.

"I'm sorry, my feet are totally killing me," I said, shrugging.

He swooped in for a hug. "It's OK. Did you have fun?"

"Of course." I let him hug me for a moment before pulling away again. "Did you see where Abby went?"

He pointed over to the bar, where she stood, snapping pictures with her camera.

"Thanks," I told him. "Have a good night."

I walked over to Abby, who was beaming like a proud mother at a spelling bee.

"What are you doing?" I asked her, trying to keep my voice even.

"Taking pictures." She put the camera up to my face and snapped another just to emphasize her point.

"I see that. Why are you taking pictures of me and Josh dancing?"

"Because you look cute together," she said. "Look."

She flipped her camera around and clicked a few buttons to show me the shots she'd taken. In almost every single one, neither of us were looking at each other, choosing to focus instead on the floor with little smiles playing at our lips. I didn't recall doing that. Not intentionally, anyway.

"That's great, Abs, but I told you what happened yesterday at the set."

"Yeah, he'd mentioned he'd seen you there."

There was something about the way she said that . . . I wasn't sure I wanted to know where she was going with it. I blinked, debating whether or not I should say something.

"So, he mentioned to me that he saw you there," she continued.

"And I trust you kept up the story?"

“Yes, yes, I did,” she said. “But . . . well. You know.”

I felt my face harden. “No, Abby. I don’t know. What should I know?”

She futzed with her camera, unable to meet my eyes. “Well, tonight he and I sorta got to talking, and we were talking about you, and I might’ve kind of hinted by accident that you and Nicole were really close.”

I waited for her to say she was joking. To say that she told him she was joking. Anything to indicate that what she had hinted to him was nothing more than a misunderstanding. But instead she looked at me doe-eyed like she realized she’d overstepped her bounds and wasn’t necessarily saying she was sorry so much as she was warning me. I tried to keep my fury contained. I didn’t know where Josh went to, but I didn’t need him seeing me flipping out on Abby—that would just make things too obvious.

She smiled and put a hand on my shoulder. “Look, will you relax? Everything will be fine.”

I hopped off the barstool.

“Where are you going?”

“Home,” I said. “Before I hear anything else I don’t want to. I can’t believe you—alcohol is your truth serum. Remind me never to get you drunk before you have to testify for me in court if I ever do something really, really wrong.”

“Says, you’re blowing this way out of proportion.”

I leaned in to hug her. “Bye, Abs. Tell Leigh I’ll catch up with her this weekend if I don’t find her on my way out.”

I made a beeline for the door before Abby could say anything else, and before Josh could track me down one more time before I left. I stepped outside and took a deep breath, then flagged down a cab and hopped in the back, giving the cabbie my address. I finally felt safe. The whole evening was just . . . weird. First the thing with Aaron, and then dancing with Josh. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. I knew logically why I’d distanced myself from Aaron, but rarely did my logic play into my actions when I was

attracted to someone.

My cell rang. I dug into my purse to find it. It was Aaron.

“Hello?”

“What are you doing?” he asked huskily.

“I’m heading home, what are you doing?”

“Nothing, but my cell phone is about to die, can I give you my buddy’s number?”

“Why don’t you just call me from it if it dies?”

“I could do that,” he said. “So . . . what are you doing?”

I laughed. “Well, like I told you, I’m headed home—tomorrow is a work day.”

“Yeah, I know.”

There was something about his voice . . . “Are you going to tell me why you’re calling?”

“I was wondering if maybe you wanted to continue our little party. Tonight.”

I leaned forward and looked at the clock on the cabbie’s dashboard. It was way late for a weekday. Had it have been a weekend . . . “I’m not so sure about that, but we should continue our little party.”

“Tonight,” he insisted.

I didn’t want to argue. “I tell you what—I’ll call you when I get home, and if I’m still awake by then, we’ll work out a plan.”

“All right, but my phone is almost dead,” he reminded me.

“So if it is, I’ll leave you a voice mail and you can check it with your buddy’s phone.”

“Good thinking,” he said. “Good night.”

“G’night, Aaron.” I snapped my phone shut. And when I was sure the call had disconnected, I opened it again and turned it off. I didn’t want to be too eager and give in that easily. What was it Abby had said . . . be desireless, be excellent, be gone. And at the moment that’s what I wanted to be—gone, asleep in my bed, a million miles away

from worrying about Josh or Aaron or anything else. There would still be time for me and Aaron—I was sure about that.

I looked out the window and realized we were at least twenty minutes away from my place. I leaned my head against the window and allowed myself to drift off into a light sleep, a self-satisfied smile on my face.

Chapter Seven

“So what do you want to do?” Martin asked.

I sat across from him and chewed my lip. Somehow I’d managed to avoid the issue of Josh’s request for an interview for weeks, but since Nicole wasn’t answering his e-mails he’d taken to calling Martin nearly every day to harass him. Martin now wanted to force me into a course of action.

“I’m waiting,” he said.

I put my head in my hands. “Martin, I don’t know. I thought he’d get bored and move on, and it’s just not happening. I don’t know why he’s so intent on seeking me out.”

“Because you’ve presented him with a challenge, Sadie. He thinks you’ve got something to hide, so now he wants to prove something to himself.”

“I do have something to hide,” I whined.

“So why not come clean?”

I raised my head to make eye contact so that he knew I was deadly serious. “Martin, I’d love to, but I can’t. My parents hate the fact that I work for you. Period. If they knew I was writing a sex column . . . Look, let me put it to you this way: The only reason they accept me working here at all is because I have them convinced I’m actually working undercover to gain knowledge that will eventually become a tell-all book exposing the seamy underbelly of men’s magazines.”

Martin laughed. “How’s your research into that seamy underbelly coming?”

“Considering I create most of it, smashing,” I said with a little smile.

“Look, I sympathize with your plight—I really do. But I can’t have this guy calling me anymore.”

I thought for a moment. “OK, how about this. How about we set up a voice mail box for Nicole on the phone system.”

Martin frowned. “But I thought you told him she’s freelance and doesn’t work in the office.”

“Yes, and that deflection worked so well,” I reminded him.

“Good point. Won’t he know your voice?” Martin asked, twisting in his chair.

I shook my head. “Not if we have one of the interns record the outgoing message.”

“That’s only going to hold him off for so long.”

“I know. I’ll also shoot him an e-mail from my Nicole account telling him . . .” I trailed off. I was drawing a blank. Where could I be that would be far enough away but still sound feasible? Oh wait—lightbulb! “I know, I’ll tell him I’m in London and that’s why I haven’t been responding, because I’ve been doing an in-depth analysis of the differences between sexual culture in the UK versus America. And I’ll be working out of the London office for the month.”

Martin pursed his lips. “And how are you going to explain what the deal is when that article doesn’t materialize in the magazine?”

“Well, this is where you tell me you’re going to send me to London—”

“Fat chance.”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “I’ll figure it out later. This is just a stop-gap solution until I can think of something more clever.”

“All right, I leave it in your capable hands,” he said. “Just one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

“You really need to get a date or hook up with someone quick—your blog is dying a slow death, and I can’t imagine you’re winning your bet with the cold streak you’re on.”

“Gee, thanks, Martin,” I said with a bitter laugh. “Why don’t you just cut to the chase and call me a spinster?”

“Hey, you wanted to write about it!”

I nodded. “I know, I know. I’m working on it. This Josh thing has been taking

up my energy, though.”

Martin turned back to his computer. “Keep me posted. And by the way, happy birthday.”

“Thanks,” I said, and rose from my chair feeling slightly sick to my stomach. I knew my little diversionary tactics wouldn’t work for long, but I didn’t know what else to do. I was praying for some kind of celebrity sex tape to come out and take the heat off of me for a while. Or maybe I could call up some of the publicists I knew that dealt in porn or sex toys to divert his attention. If there was just some way I could keep him off my trail long enough to train his brain into thinking in another direction, I’d be golden.

I stopped by Babs’s desk on the way back to my office and explained the plan to her, advising her to be extra diligent about screening any calls that came in for my alter ego.

“Like I don’t always?” she asked from behind a magazine. In the two years she’d worked for us, I’d never seen her face without something obstructing it, almost like a shield. I wondered if she wasn’t on to something—or on something, for that matter.

“No, you do,” I told her. “You’re always awesome about telling me who’s who and what’s what. Just make sure that if a Josh Kelly calls, you send him straight to the phantom voice mail, and insist that Nicole is in London.”

“What if he calls London?”

I bit my lip. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Clearly.” She sighed. “Don’t worry, I’ll coordinate something with Darlene, who handles their phones.”

“Thanks, Babs,” I said, making a mental note to buy her something nice for putting up with all my incognito bullshit. I walked the short way to my office, taking no notice of who was around doing what. After my blunder with Aaron we’d pretty much avoided one another, me never taking the long way around the office,

him communicating by IM and e-mail only when absolutely necessary. I was still embarrassed by my behavior the night of the party, after Aaron and I confessed we were hot for each other.

I sat down at my desk and checked e-mail, sifting through some happy birthday messages from press contacts and family. An instant message popped up.

So I hear you're having a party tonight.

I reread the user name about ten times to ensure I wasn't seeing things. Nope, I wasn't—it was from Aaron. I debated answering, then finally wrote back:

Yeah, Abby set it up at Republic.

I'd mostly forgotten about it amid all the Josh drama, but really, I needed a night of cutting loose with friends. I'd decided not to drink considering it was a Thursday and I still had to be in some kind of clear mental state to function in the office the next morning—something I'd learned the hard way the night I did tequila shots with Nick, or at the vodka party, for that matter. Almost as if he'd known I'd started thinking about that night, he responded.

Maybe I'll drop by.

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head. After ages of nonaction, now he wanted to make an appearance? Intriguing.

You're more than welcome to. I'll have Abby add you to the list.

I waited to see if he'd say anything. His reply came almost immediately.

Cool.

OK. That was enough—I didn't want to appear overly eager, or nosy about why he'd suddenly changed his mind, or anything else that could sink me. Instead I closed the window and tried to concentrate on work while having an inner debate on whether or not I should wear my sheer, low-cut pink top or my black bustier. Decisions, decisions . . .

* * * *

Many hours later I knew the black bustier was the right choice. I always had

fears of falling out of the pink top at inopportune times, and the bustier was easier to move in, even though the evening's agenda wasn't much more than a delicious dinner with those near and dear to me. Of course Abby was there, and Leigh arrived with the boys in tow. A bunch of people I knew from media circles were there, as well as some of the cooler publicists I worked with and could trust with my double life. Even a couple coworkers showed up. Abby seated me at the head of the table and placed a rhinestone tiara on my head.

"Is that really necessary?" I asked, reaching up to feel how ridiculous I was sure it looked.

She swatted my hands away as she arranged my hair around the combs holding the crown in place. "You're the birthday girl—of course it is. Oh, and that reminds me! I forgot something."

I watched as Abby took off, rounding the corner out of sight. I looked at Leigh and frowned. She shrugged a response. Just then Abby rounded the corner with my mom and dad. My jaw hit the floor.

"What on earth are you guys doing here?" I squealed, leaping from my seat to hug them.

"When Abby called to talk us into surprising you, we couldn't resist," Mom said, planting a mushy kiss on my cheek. "Plus, she bribed us with tickets to a show tomorrow night."

"Oh sure, now the truth comes out," I teased, then turned to my dad. "Hi, Daddy. Did you do OK on the flight?"

"I was fine," he blurted, scooping me up in a bear hug.

"You were not," Mom chided. "You were white-knuckled from the time we took off to when we landed! Had it not have been for your sedatives you would've been climbing the walls!"

"I was fine!" he said again. "Your mother exaggerates."

I looked to Mom, who rolled her eyes. "I know, Dad. Here, have a seat next to

me.”

As they got settled, I walked over to Abby and pulled her in for a hug.

“I know what you’re going to say, and I want to tell you something before you say it,” Abby muttered into my ear.

“What’s that?”

“You’re going to say that having your parents here with your coworkers is way too close for comfort and blah, blah, blah about your secret identity, but don’t worry—I’ve already talked to everyone to make sure they know to be on their best behavior with them in town. It’s all good.”

I squeezed her tighter. “You’re the best.”

“I know—and don’t you forget it.”

I untangled myself from her grasp and took my seat at the head of the table again, with my mom on one side of me and Dad on the other, and watched as everyone pored over their menus, cocktails in hand. Having everyone I adored gathered for dinner was probably the best gift I could have gotten.

After two hours of eating, drinking, and laughing, we vacated the table so someone else could finally use it and transferred to the lounge, where Abby and Leigh started rounding up people for shots as my mom and dad made an effort to get to know my coworkers, even though I could sense an undertone of sourness in their body language. I gave them bonus points for trying, though. But as the night drew on, I knew it was becoming less and less likely that Aaron was going to show up.

“What’s on your mind?” Leigh asked, plunking herself down next to me on the couch. Apparently I hadn’t done a good job of faking like my brain wasn’t churning about anything other than watching everyone celebrating in my honor.

I sighed, still keeping an eye on my parents. “It’s dumb. And I know it’s dumb because I’m happy as hell that I just had a fabulous dinner with fabulous people, not to mention my parents. But—”

“But you’re baffled by the fact that after he made an overture, Aaron has not

materialized,” she interjected.

“Sort of.”

“Can I ask you a question?”

“That’s one right there,” I pointed out.

Leigh rolled her eyes. “Another one, then.”

“Sure.”

“Why do you devalue yourself so much that you get fixated on guys who clearly don’t believe they’re worth what you have to offer?”

I blinked, digesting what she’d said. “I’m sorry?”

“Look, some silly behavior aside, you’re a catch. And any guy who doesn’t fall all over himself about that isn’t worth your time, but for whatever reason, you get wrapped up in mulling behavior and debating actions and what have you. What’s the point?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” I stammered. “I mean, I’m so used to doing it with work.”

“Well maybe it’s time to take work out of your personal life just a little bit,”

Leigh instructed. “You don’t have to be Nicole all the time.”

I nodded. I wasn’t sure what to say.

“Am I freaking you out?” she asked.

“I just never thought of it that way, is all. I don’t see myself as being better than anyone else.”

“It’s not that you’re better or worse than anyone—it’s your worth,” Leigh corrected. “And what you’re worth is a guy who calls when he says he’s gonna call, and shows up when he says he’s gonna show up, and doesn’t freak out because the sex writer doesn’t want to get down and dirty the exact moment he decides all systems are go.”

I absorbed her words. “You’re right,” I said. “Thank you.”

Leigh hugged me. “That’s your gift because I forgot to buy you one.”

I laughed until Leigh’s embrace became a little overzealous.

“I’d like to breathe,” I told her.

“Josh is here,” she hissed as if anyone could hear us over the din.

I froze. “What?!”

“Josh just walked in with a couple of his friends, and Abby is leading him this way,” Leigh warned. “What do you want me to do?”

My brain went on fast forward. “If you keep hugging me to keep me from turning around, it’s going to look suspect, not to mention make people think we’re closer than we actually are,” I joked, trying to alleviate my heart palpitations. “I’m still mostly safe for the moment. If he asks me anything work related, I’ll just deflect it using my birthday as an excuse to not talk business.”

“What about your parents?”

“Are you kidding? This will be perfect,” I said. “My parents love his work, not to mention they have no knowledge of what I do at the magazine, so this will totally throw him off my scent. Just as long as Abby doesn’t start in about us dating again.”

“Shoot me a look if you need me to cut in and save you,” she advised.

I detached myself from her and turned around just as Abby led Josh right up to us. Though she didn’t say anything, her smirk spoke volumes. I fought the urge to give her a death glare.

“Birthday girl,” he crowed, folding me into a hug. “Here, I got you something.”

I took the small envelope from him and opened it to see a Bloomingdale’s gift card. “You didn’t have to do that!”

“I know, I wanted to,” he told me. “And I would’ve been here earlier but I had a work thing to go to, hence why I’m already looped.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. If he was loopy enough to admit he was loopy, it was unlikely he’d pressure me for work talk.

“Can I ask your opinion on something?” Josh said.

I nodded, still unable to speak. He pulled the collar of his shirt aside, exposing tanned skin and part of his trapezius—which I was instantly tempted to nibble on

despite my better judgment—and leaned toward me.

“Smell,” he demanded.

I leaned the rest of the way in and inhaled deeply, drinking in a mixture of musky, woody smells and inexplicably, the ocean. I caught myself taking another breath and pulled myself away from him. He let his collar return to its normal resting place.

Josh smiled. “What do you think?”

“It’s nice,” I said tightly.

“It’s Aqua Di Gio. I’m trying it out in place of my regular. So you think it’s good?”

I nodded, and noticed my parents watching us intently. “Uh-huh. Listen, you should totally meet my parents.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Isn’t it a little early in our relationship for that?”

“What?” I demanded, then stared at him stone-faced until he started to laugh.

“It was a joke, Sadie.”

“Oh, gotcha,” I said, returning my breathing to normal. “Well, they’re big fans of your work. I’m sure it would make their trip to meet one of their favorite writers.”

I motioned for Mom and Dad to come over to us, which I’m sure they were glad to do considering they’d been chatting with one of the publicists for a sex toy company. It was all high-end stuff and had a huge celebrity following, but that didn’t really matter to my parents—sin was sin as far as they were concerned.

“Are you getting along with all my friends?” I asked once they’d made their way over.

“They’re very nice people, but they have some . . . interesting jobs,” Mom said carefully.

“That’s very diplomatic of you, Mom,” I teased.

She leaned in closer to me. “You still go to church on Sundays, right?”

“Mom, please—let’s talk about that later. I want you to meet someone.” I gestured to Josh. Mom stood back up and smoothed her skirt out of nervousness, as if

having a wrinkled skirt would make her unsavory.

“Is this a new boy you’re dating?” Dad blurted.

“No, Dad,” I said, cutting that train of thought off at the pass. “This is Josh Kelly.”

Mom’s face lit up like a Christmas tree as Josh shook my dad’s hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson.”

“Oh my, we love your column,” Mom crowed as Dad kept a grip on him. “You are so on target about the moralistic backslide this country has taken. We need more people like you out there!”

“Well, thank you,” Josh said, puffing slightly.

Dad finally let go of Josh’s hand to pat him on the shoulder. “We read your column every week.”

“Really? Well tell me then—what did you think of the piece I did about how to effectively inject more values into our oversexed media?”

As Dad started to wax poetic on one of his favorite subjects, I slipped away to rejoin Leigh, who had taken to doing tequila shots with the boys.

“I can’t believe you’re staying sober tonight,” Leigh said once she was able to wipe the pained look off her face from sucking on a lime.

“You guys are drinking more than enough for me,” I told her. “Besides, all the better to keep my wits about me now that my parents are here.”

Leigh turned to watch my parents in impassioned discussion with Josh. “True. How is that going?”

“Fantastic. They’re all focused on discussing how the country is going to hell in an amoral hand basket. It should give them more than enough fodder to work with until the night is over.”

“Attention, everyone!” came a voice cutting through the crowd. I turned to see Tammy standing on one of the lounge tables, giving her just enough leverage to be head and shoulders above the crowd. The slight sway in her suggested she’d had more than

her fair share of cocktails.

“Tammy, what are you doing?” I asked.

“I’d like to present a toast,” she said, the sway threatening to spill her drink down her arm as she raised it high above her head. “C’mon, everyone, glasses raised!”

I covered my face with my hands as everyone raised their glasses. Leigh pulled at my wrist to keep me from shielding myself.

“I can’t take all this attention,” I told her.

“Oh, shut up, it’s just for one night,” she said.

“Shoosh,” Tammy commanded drunkenly, waiting for everyone to quiet down.

“OK, so clearly we’re all here to pay tribute to you, so I figure we should do this the right way.”

I looked at Leigh and frowned. What the hell was she talking about?

Tammy took a swig from her drink and continued. “I would just like to say that I’m amazed that you’ve made it this far, not just in age, but in longevity in the magazine.”

I exchanged a look with my other coworkers standing off to the side. What was she getting at? I wondered.

“I mean, not that you don’t work hard, but seriously . . . exactly how many dildos can a girl play with before she starts sounding like a wind tunnel when she walks? And haven’t you seen enough of this?”

Tammy turned her back to me and bent over, pulling her skirt up with a flourish to give me a flash of cheek. My stomach sank as my eyes flashed over to my parents and Josh, who looked confused.

“Clearly Tammy has had too much to drink,” Leigh said, stepping up to the table next to Tammy and ushering her off into her boyfriend’s waiting arms. “What I’m sure she meant to say is we all love you, Sadie, and we wish you all the best despite the fact that you’re slowly but surely getting old and wrinkly. To Sadie!”

Leigh raised her glass and everyone followed suit, clinking glasses together.

As Leigh came down off the table, my head started swimming as if I'd just downed a couple shots. I knew that if I ran or did anything that suggested I was freaked out by what Tammy had said, it would raise huge red flags. Instead, I chose to stay rooted to my spot and clung to the belief that everyone would either be too drunk to remember what was said, or accept that Tammy was too drunk to know what she was saying or doing.

"You OK?" Leigh asked me.

"Fine," I said as Abby joined us, displaying the same sway Tammy had. I turned to her. "I thought you said everyone was cool?"

"Hey, she's your coworker. Not to mention it's not my fault she can't hold her liquor," she reasoned.

"True. Do you think it was played off OK?"

"We're about to find out," Leigh said as my parents joined us.

"That was a lovely toast, Leigh," Mom said. "Even if you did say she was getting old and wrinkly."

"It was meant with love," Leigh said, smiling. "But you know that."

"Who is Nicole?" my dad asked.

Leigh and Abby exchanged confused glances. "I have no idea, Dad," I said. "I think Tammy thought she was somewhere else."

"Yes, at a strip club," mom sniffed.

"Mom, she was loaded."

"That doesn't matter," she said. "Young ladies shouldn't be behaving in that manner. Certainly you don't, but then you were raised with morals and values."

If you only knew, I thought, but kept my mouth shut.

"That Josh is such a lovely man," she continued. "You should be dating him, Sadie. He'd be good for you."

Abby elbowed me in the ribs. I stepped back and crushed her toes under the heel of my boot. "Mom, isn't it getting late?"

Dad looked at his watch. "It is. We should be getting back to the hotel, Mother."

"Don't think you're going to get out of visiting with us, young lady," Mom said.

"Of course not. When are the tickets for your show?"

"Tomorrow," Abby said. "I set them up with front row."

"Yes, but we have the weekend free until we leave on Sunday," Dad said.

"All right, we'll make a plan tomorrow morning," I told him, and hugged him good-bye. "Does that sound good?"

"Of course," he said.

"Sleep well, dear," Mom told me as I kissed her on the cheek. "And say your prayers before bed."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes as I watched them walk away, then breathed a sigh of relief. My parents had bought it. And judging from Josh's movements, Tammy's blunder hadn't resonated with him enough to make him race over to me with a list of probing questions. It seemed the birthday gods had granted me a continuance.

The celebration continued for a while until slowly but surely, everyone started begging off for bed so they could make it to work on time Friday. I hugged everyone good-bye and thanked them for coming. Before I knew it, Abby, one of her coworkers, Josh and his friends, and me were pretty much the last ones in the lounge. The group of us walked out to the valet, where I handed my ticket to the attendant to get my car.

"I don't want to go home," Abby wailed. "I have the day off tomorrow!"

"We can go hang out at my place," Josh suggested. "Everyone in?"

"Not me," I said. "I've got a meeting first thing in the morning that I can't be late for."

Abby pouted. "Party pooper. Who's sober enough to drive?"

All eyes rested on me. I took a head count.

"Six extra people are not going to fit in my car," I warned.

"Sure they will," Josh said. "Watch."

As the valet pulled my car up, I tipped him and got in the driver's seat. Josh's

friends got in the back seat and pulled Abby and her coworker on top of them, then Josh climbed in the passenger seat. I twisted to look at the pile of bodies obliterating the view out my rear window.

“Are you guys OK back there?” I asked, laughing. They looked like sardines.

“Just hurry,” Abby urged. “I have to pee.”

I pulled out into the street and took Josh’s directions to his place, which were incredibly hard to hear over the collection of voices in the back seat. Luckily he was only ten minutes away from the club. I pulled up out front of his place.

“All right, last stop,” I warned. “Everybody out.”

I rolled down my window as Josh got out first to open the rear doors, helping everyone out of the back. His friends waved and thanked me, wishing me a happy birthday. Abby leaned in my window as Josh shut the doors.

“Happy birthday, girl,” she said, and planted a kiss on my cheek. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Thanks, Abs,” I said.

As she walked away, Josh walked up.

“Yeah, happy birthday, girl,” he said, and leaned in, lightly brushing my lips with a kiss. It was only a split second long, but there was something about his intent—the look on his face as he leaned into me, the way he pressed his lips softly but insistently into mine, how he stayed there just long enough to drink in the scent of his cologne again . . . Just as my heart leapt into my throat, he pulled back and smiled, offered me a wink, and walked away. I didn’t want to sit there and give myself the luxury of recovery time lest he think he had an effect on me. Rolling up my window, I pulled a three-point turn and drove off down the street, eager to get home.

Try as I might, I couldn’t wipe the memory of the kiss—or the feeling that went along with it—out of my head.

* * * *

The next morning as I got settled in at my desk, I took a cursory glance at the

time on my computer. 9:18. It was time to call Abby.

“Hello,” she croaked.

“Good morning,” I crowed. “And how is your hangover!”

Abby coughed. “I hate you. Why are you calling me so early?”

“To thank you for a wonderful birthday!”

“You thanked me last night. What time is it?”

“A little after nine. Time to get up!”

I could hear her rustling around. “I took the day off so I could sleep in!”

“Nonsense, it’s a beautiful day,” I reasoned. “You don’t want to miss that, do you?”

She sighed. “I suppose I should get home.”

I furrowed my brow. “Where are you?”

“Still at Josh’s,” she told me. “We were too drunk to drive home, so we all just stayed at his place last night.”

For whatever reason, I found myself at a loss for words. Finally I drummed some up. “Well, good.”

“Yeah, guess who he couldn’t stop talking about?”

“Nicole?” I asked.

“Close,” Abby said, clearing her throat. “Oh god, remind me not to hang out with smokers. They’re killing me.”

“Who smokes?”

“A couple of Josh’s friends,” she said. “So yes, you were a hot topic of conversation last night. Who you are, what you’re all about . . .”

“It’s all a ploy,” I said, determined not to sound interested. “It’s just a way to get to me to get to Nicole.”

“Oh, I’ve so *had* it with this,” Abby snapped. “Will you just accept that the guy is into you?”

“The guy is into me because of the information he thinks he can get out of me,”

I snapped back.

“All right, new bet—I bet you ten bucks that if you make a little effort and flirt with him, he’ll prove his genuine interest in you.”

“And I bet that if I turn up the heat, he’ll buckle and run because I’m just a source to him.”

“What’s your bet?” Abby pressed.

I thought for a moment. “I’m so sure that I’m right that if I’m wrong, I’ll eat a sombrero.”

“That’s a lot of fiber,” she laughed. “You sure you’re ready for that?”

“Whatever,” I said dismissively. “It’s time this was put to bed once and for all. I’m sick of you pushing me on him, so it’s time to expose him for the opportunist he really is. The next time I see him, I’m turning on the charm.”

“Fine. Now can I go back to sleep?”

I looked at the clock. “Yeah, it’s almost time for my staff meeting anyway. You’re off the hook.”

“Good night,” she said. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Bye,” I said, and hung up the phone. I grabbed my notebook and headed for the break room to get some water to take into the meeting with me. There, standing at the fridge, was Aaron. I didn’t say anything, choosing instead to focus on my objective of getting water. He turned around.

“Hey,” he said. “Going to the meeting?”

“Yup,” I said cheerily. “Just getting something to drink.”

“Listen, I’m sorry I didn’t make it to your birthday thing last night. It’s just—”

“Aaron, it’s cool,” I interjected. Honestly, I wasn’t interested in his explanation—it didn’t matter. Not any more, anyway.

“But I—”

I rested my hand on his arm. “Really,” I said as pointedly as I could. “It’s cool.”

I turned on my heel with glass in hand and walked back into the hall, feeling

satisfied that Aaron's reign of terror over my libido and judgment was over. I settled into a chair in the conference room and opened my notebook so I could scribble doodles in it while I waited for us to get started. And I didn't even notice that Aaron took a seat across from me until halfway through the meeting.

Success. I was free.

Two hours later I was back at my desk putting the finishing touches on my backup piece to substitute for the porn on-set I had been planning to write. I'd yet to reschedule a time to visit a new set after I'd been busted in the parking lot by Josh that day.

"Sadie," barked Babs's voice.

"What's up? You sound irritated."

"That's because this guy is making me crazy," she said. "It's some idiot from some dildo company and he really wants to talk to you—or rather, Nicole. I keep trying to tell him you're busy and send him to voice mail, but he keeps calling back. He says he wants to send you some stuff so I gave him the address, but he's insisting on giving you the sales pitch, too, and I'm about to climb through the phone and kill him. Should I just tell him you're in London?"

"Nah, that's just in case Josh Kelly calls," I told her. "I'm mostly done with my piece, so I can take a break. Send him through."

"Hallelujah," she said.

The phone rang. I picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Nicole?" said a male voice. A male voice that sounded incredibly familiar.

"Who is this?"

"This is Josh Kelly."

Oh shit! "Josh, it's Sadie—reception must've put you through to the wrong extension," I said, thinking quickly and saying a silent prayer that he didn't see through the fib.

“Sadie! Oh man, I should’ve followed your lead last night and stayed sober—my head feels like I have a train running through it.”

Relief washed over me—he’d bought it. “That’ll learn ya,” I told him. “Are you drinking lots of water to flush out your system?”

“So much that I’m about to float away,” he sighed. “That, and I’ve been eating breadlike things to soak up the excess. I should be fine in another hour or so.”

I was determined to keep him from asking about Nicole, and knew the best way to do that was to take control of the conversation. “Got big plans for this weekend?”

“Nothing major. In fact, I was thinking about meeting up with some friends at the Grafton for drinks tonight. Have you ever been to Boa Lounge?”

“It’s been a while, but if I remember correctly they have a tasty drink or two,” I said.

“That they do. Why don’t you join us?”

Here it was, my big chance to prove Abby wrong. “Sounds like fun.”

“Great,” he said. “Give me your cell number and I’ll call you when I know what time we’re heading over there. It’ll probably be after ten sometime.”

I rattled off my number. He repeated it to make sure he had it down correctly.

“I’d better get back to work,” I told him. “But I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Oh, hey,” Josh said, catching me before I could hang up. “Can you put me through to Nicole?”

“I can send you to her voice mail,” I said. “She’s in London right now.”

“Your receptionist didn’t seem to think so,” he pressed.

Dammit! “She’s a temp—our regular girl is out.”

“Really? Because she sounds exactly like your regular.”

I smacked my forehead. “I know, isn’t it strange? Here, I’ll transfer you now. See you tonight!”

I put him on hold and put his call through to the fake voice mail, then watched as the little red light indicating his line was in use went off. Clearly he’d hung up rather

than leave a message. Regardless, I knew I now had the opportunity to try and talk him out of talking to Nicole. A few drinks, and he'd be eating out of my hand.

* * * *

It was official—I was drunk. Not fall-down sloppy drunk, but drunk enough on two vodka and berry contraptions to gain some liquid courage—and a slight sway. Out of nervousness I'd avoided eating anything, and now I was paying the price. Stupid low tolerance on an empty stomach. Luckily, I was having a great time.

"You're not even drunk," I teased as Josh sipped another Greyhound. "How is that fair?"

"I'm not entirely sober either, but you should be at least tipsy this time considering you weren't on your birthday," he reasoned.

"Not with my parents in town. I can't be loaded in front of them, that's just bad form."

"Aren't they out on the town tonight? You said something earlier about them going out for dinner and seeing something at the Pantages Theatre."

Dammit. I'd forgotten I told him that. There goes my excuse. "Yes, but it's the principle of the thing."

"You're grasping at straws," he said, laughing.

I shook my head. "I think you should do a shot."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, that's so."

"All right," he said, setting his glass down on the table and stopping the waitress to order something. When she finished scribbling on her pad and walked away, he turned back to me. "So tell me something nobody else knows."

I leaned back in my seat. "What kind of question is that?"

"Well, we've already run down the basics," he reasoned. "I know what kinds of movies you like, the books you loved to read as a kid, how you started working at the magazine. But those are things you tell everyone. I want to know something you tell no

one.”

“So you want to know a secret,” I said.

“That’s correct.”

“Hmmm,” I said. “All right, I can tell you something only a few people know.”

“Go,” he said, watching me intently.

“I have an identical twin sister, and every so often we trade places when we get bored with our lives.”

His eyes widened. “Seriously? That’s cool.”

“No, but it sounded good, didn’t it?”

“That’s not fair,” he said with a laugh. “I wanted something bonafide. Something real.”

I shrugged. “I guess I’m just an open book—I don’t really have anything to hide.”

“Everyone has one secret, don’t they?”

“Maybe not,” I told him.

“Or maybe you just don’t want to tell me,” he said.

“Well, what’s yours, then?”

The waitress walked up with his shot and placed it in front of him, then told him how much he owed. “Saved by the bell,” he said, winking, and fished out his wallet to hand her a bill. He turned back to me and raised his shot glass.

“I have to drink too?”

He nodded. “You can’t expect me to go it alone.”

I sat up and grabbed what was left of my vodka thingie off the table, and raised my glass. “What are we toasting?”

“How about me finally landing my interview with Nicole?” he asked, and clinked his glass to mine. I watched him tip his head back and took a wimpy sip of my drink before setting it back down on the table. He made a face as he swallowed, then

turned to me again. “By the way, what was up with that toast your coworker gave you?”

Crap, crap, crap. I’d thought he was too tipsy to remember. I shrugged. “She was loaded. She doesn’t even remember flashing her ass to everyone.”

“Apparently,” Josh said.

Feeling liquored enough to be good-naturedly combative, I decided to go on the offensive and change the subject back again. “Why are you being so aggressive about interviewing Nicole?” I asked.

“Because I feel like she’s running from me, and usually people who run have something to hide,” he said. “Why, do you think it’s wrong of me to hunt out a story?”

I nodded. “It is when I think you’re going to hold her up as a bad example.”

“Sadie, you have me all wrong. I’m not interested in vilifying anyone so much as I’m interested in having a discussion.”

“I’ve read your column. You’re mean to people who don’t share your views.”

Josh shook his head as he chased his shot with a sip from his drink. “I think you’re mistaking a passionate viewpoint for anger. I’m not mad at the people who don’t agree with me, but, by the same token, I’m going to challenge them on their views. It’s not my fault if they buckle under the pressure. Is Nicole not strong enough to stand up to me?”

“No, she is,” I said, trying to sift through the fog in my brain to ensure I didn’t reveal too much in my slightly inebriated state. “But she’s very careful about who she speaks to in the press.”

“Why?”

“Because she understands that what she writes can be misconstrued. She’s not all that different from you, you know. She believes in open and honest communication about sexuality, and all her column does is further that agenda. She’s not looking to make America depraved, she’s looking to get it talking about likes and dislikes—so people can figure out what works for them and what doesn’t.”

“I’d just like to hear that from her instead of you,” he said. “Look, I think we’ve

spent enough time together to prove I'm not as satanic as my column makes me appear. Can you put in a good word with her for me? Maybe I can meet her for coffee when she comes back from London? Or at least get her to return one of my e-mails?"

I found myself lost in the sincerity in his eyes, momentarily wondering if I couldn't change my mind about becoming a housewife. "Yeah. Yeah, I can do that for you. I can't promise she'll change her mind, though."

"Tell her that it's just best to give in at this point. Hang on, phone ringing," he said, and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He had a quick conversation and hung up. "So, that was my friends—they're bailing tonight."

"That's a shame," I said.

"What do you want to do? Do you want to stay here, or do you want to go somewhere else?"

I looked around at the lounge. It was getting too packed for my liking. "I think it's time to move on. Actually, I think I might go home."

"How come?"

"It's been a long week, and two nights of partying is too much for me now that I'm a year older," I joked.

"Oh, come on now. The night is still young. What if we watched a movie?"

"It's too late to do the theatre thing," I told him.

"Right, so how about we watch one at my place? I'm just right around the corner from here, and that way you can sober up a little before cabbing back home."

I didn't even think before I responded. "OK, sure. But I get to pick the movie."

"Deal," he said, and stood from our table, offering me a hand up. "Oh wait, I think that shot is hitting me now."

I laughed. We walked outside into the cool night air and started down Sunset Boulevard, watching people try to argue their way past long lines into clubs and traffic pile up as people searched for parking. I knew I was traveling into dangerous territory. The combination of liquor and Josh's cologne was making me make poor decisions,

but in that moment I just didn't care. I wasn't satisfied with how things had been left in regards to Nicole. I wasn't convinced that leaving it in my hands would be the end of it . . . Or maybe I was and I just wanted to see what happened next.

I followed him up the walkway to his house. He unlocked the door and flicked on a light, revealing some typical guy mess in the foyer—discarded ball caps, a couple pairs of sneakers and dress shoes, and a bag of sports gear shoved off to the side.

"I suppose I should make the entryway slightly more presentable," he said apologetically.

"It's fine," I assured him. "Do you own the property?"

"This is one of them, yeah," he told me. "I bought it years and years ago when the area was still scummy. Best investment I ever made."

He stepped into the front room and turned on the light and adjusted the dimmer so it wasn't horrifyingly bright, revealing a sectional sofa positioned perfectly across from his AV setup. He flicked on the TV and handed me the remote.

"Be forewarned that if there's any kind of crappy eighties movie on, that's what we'll wind up watching," I warned.

"That's fine," he said, heading off down the hall. "Want some water?"

"Please." I slipped my shoes off and nestled into the corner of his couch, sinking in to the cushions. When Josh walked back in carrying two glasses of water, he laughed.

"That's my spot!"

"Tough," I told him defiantly. "I'm the guest!"

"Fine, fine," he said, settling in next to me and propping his feet up on the coffee table. "Have you picked a movie yet?"

I pointed to the screen. "*Top Gun*!"

"Oh god! Let me guess. You're obsessed with the volleyball scene."

I laughed. The Nicole part of me would've said yes, but I silenced her in favor of Sadie. "Shh, it's starting!"

He smiled and raised his water glass to mine, which I clinked before taking a sip

and curling up in the corner. Before I knew it, I was fast asleep.

I had no idea how long I'd been snoozing for when I pried my eyes open and turned my head to the television to see an infomercial for *Girls Gone Wild*. Fearing that would present debate fodder, I turned it off and gave my eyes a minute to adjust to the dim light in the room. I turned over and saw Josh, who had curled in behind me and fallen asleep with his head resting on a pillow.

"Josh," I said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He stirred slightly, but didn't wake. I tried again. "Josh?"

This time he opened his eyes and looked around, then looked up at me. He smiled and stretched. "Did I fall asleep?"

"Yeah, we both did," I said. "I'm going to head home, thanks for the movie."

"You don't have to run away, you know," he said. "You can stay here if you want to."

The smile disappeared from his face, leaving a serious expression instead. I felt the same thing happen to me as I attempted to say something in return, but couldn't find the words. And when he reached up and put his hand behind my ear to guide me down to him, I didn't resist. His lips pressed into mine once, twice, then gently urged mine to open further to allow his tongue inside. I was almost positive my heart exploded in my chest.

He rolled over on top of me and kissed me tenderly, slowly, our tongues entwined, our lips light but insistent. His hands traveled my body, caressed my face, pulled through my hair, then worked down to my top, which he started unbuttoning, followed by my jeans, which I somehow managed to shimmy out of with minimal kissing disruption.

I rolled him over into my position and did the same, unbuttoning his shirt as his hands started at my shoulder blades and traveled down to the small of my back as he kissed me, then curled around to my front where he helped pull my sleeves down my arms, leaving me in my bra and panties. I unbuckled his belt and jeans, sliding them

down his strong, toned legs, and straddled him again, kissing him, digging my hands into his hair, feeling my thighs quiver with anticipation as I did.

He moved to turn me over again, but I stopped him—I wanted to be in control for as long as I possibly could. I traced my tongue around his ear and down his neck to his collarbone, where I kissed my way down his chest, his strong, taut stomach, all the way to the waistband of his underwear, which I was pleased to discover were a pair of Calvin Klein boxer briefs that outlined his package perfectly, giving me a hint of what was to come. He was growing harder by the second. I teasingly traced my tongue along the inside of the waistband of his underwear and felt his stomach quiver.

Hooking my fingers just inside the waistband, I traveled lower, my tongue tracing his hardness through the cotton, stopping to wrap my lips over the top of it, then licking my way from the base to the tip. He dug his hands in the back of my head and moaned. When I was sure I'd whipped him into a froth, I sat up a little and met his eyes.

"I should probably go," I whispered teasingly, and made a move like I was going to get off the couch. Gripping handfuls of my hair he attempted to get me under him again, but I resisted and pulled his underwear off, tracing my tongue around his belly button before letting it run alongside his cock, which I was pleased to find was thick, slightly curved, and deliciously framed by the muscular cuts in his hips. I felt his breath catch in his throat as I got nearer and nearer to taking him into my mouth. I hovered just above him, breathing hot breath on him, wondering how long I could torture him for before his impatience would force my hand.

My impatience trumped his. I couldn't wait any longer. Giving him one, long, slow lick from base to tip—punctuated with a relieved and pleased moan from Josh—I welcomed him into my mouth and slid down as far as I could, wrapping my tongue around his thickness, my lips offering soft and gentle pressure as I moved. As I picked up my pace I added my hands, enveloping him, twisting them up and down, up and down. His breathing became more labored. I didn't want to send him over the edge

yet, so I dove down once more and held him in my mouth for a moment before slowly and excruciatingly pulling back. I looked up at him and smiled wickedly.

“C’mere,” he said breathlessly, and pulled me up to him, kissing me passionately as he negotiated his way back on top of me and started maneuvering me out of my bra. As he flung it behind him, he bent to tongue my nipple, taking me into his mouth and nibbling gently as his hand cupped between my legs, his fingers searching past the elastic in my panties. I was beyond wet and ready. I gasped as he slowly eased his finger inside me just a little bit, then pulled back. He raised his head to kiss me again, but I pulled back, trying to maintain some kind of control. Mouths open, breathing heavily into each other, moving in to kiss him but pulling away, his fingers still stroking me just enough to get me hot but not enough to make me come, I brushed my lips lightly against his and pulled back as he went for more, teasing him with my tongue tracing his mouth, tasting the sweat on his lips.

Josh pushed me back into the couch and tore off my panties, then curled his arms under then over my thighs so his face was perfectly positioned between my legs. He pulled me to him roughly, then slowly descended on me, his tongue slowly entering my wetness. I couldn’t keep a moan from escaping my lips as he licked, his tongue warm against my clit, and then he removed his hands from my thighs and slipped a finger inside me, probing gently as his tongue worked. I gripped the couch beneath me as he added another finger and slid in and out, hitting my G-spot, rubbing slow as he sucked and lapped. The faster his fingers moved, the more I could feel it—the tingle turning into the throb. The more frenzied his tongue, the more I was losing control . . . until he slowed down and pulled back from me.

I struggled to sit up, fearing I’d lost my basic motor skills. But he pressed me back again, and before I knew it, I felt him slowly push inside me. I gasped as he stretched me, leaning down to kiss me as he pressed deeper inside.

“Wait,” I protested, but he brought an empty condom wrapper up to my face to show me he’d put on a condom. I didn’t have the mental capacity to determine where

he'd found the time to do that. Taking advantage of my near-orgasmic state, Josh teased me, pulling out and threatening to re-enter me, tempting my wetness with his hardness. He didn't have to ask me—he knew internally I was begging for it. Just when I didn't think I could take it anymore, he pushed inside me so deep that it made me gasp with pain and delight.

I clamped my legs around his waist and clung to his shoulders as he thrust, pushing up into him gently but firmly as he was pushing into me. I moved my hips with his, feeling his heart thumping against mine, his breath in my ear, the muscles in his back tense. When his pelvic bone put just the right amount of pressure on my clit, I knew I was done for. I hung on as my legs began to shake and waves of pleasure washed through me, rendering me both speechless and breathless. I hung on to him even harder as my body rocked. When it subsided he pulled back a little and swept the hair off my face, kissing me with a mixture of desperation and desire.

I responded by grinding my hips against him, taking him deep inside me as he fought to hang on just a little longer. I pulled back, then took him deep inside again. He tried to fight me to make it last longer, but I wouldn't let him, coaxing him to move with me with fevered intensity. I could feel him tense and stiffen, nearing his ultimate end. With a final deep thrust he began to throb inside me, letting out a low, guttural moan as he came. Hard. I could feel him throbbing inside me as he released, his heart racing in his chest, his sweat dripping all over me.

When he'd regained some composure he kissed me again, but I turned on my side, feeling exhausted. I could hear him remove the condom and felt him curl up behind me again as our breathing returned to normal. And then I allowed myself to drift off to sleep again.

I was awakened by a bird chirping in the window behind me. I blinked for a few moments, trying to gain some sense of where I was, then realized when I looked down at the masculine arm curled around my waist. I was still at Josh's. I peeled his arm off me and eased myself off the couch so as to not wake him, then busily went about

finding my clothes. My jeans and top were a rumpled mess on the floor, my bra hung from the corner of the TV, my panties in a ficus plant next to the living room entryway. I grabbed my purse off the coffee table and fished out my cell phone. It was just after 7:00. Definitely time to leave.

I snuck down the hallway and closed myself into the bathroom, where I pulled on my panties and bra, yanked up my jeans, and hastily buttoned my shirt. I attempted to smooth my hair down and try to make my makeup look not so demolished, but I didn't want to waste time. Tiptoeing down the hallway, I looked into the living room again and saw Josh curled up on the couch, his perfectly chiseled chest rising and falling with his breath. I decided against waking him to say good-bye. Grabbing my shoes, I quietly opened the door and stepped out into the sunshine, closing it behind me while padding down the walkway to the street, where I called a cab. I didn't put my shoes on for fear that the sound of my heels on the sidewalk would awaken him.

I met the cab three houses down. As I gave the driver my address and settled into the back seat, I wondered if this feeling of panic was going to let up by the time I got home.

Chapter Eight

For the first time in . . . well, forever, I had my office door shut and most of my lights turned off, except for a small desk lamp. I didn't like being in a windowless crypt enslaved to my computer, but I also didn't want to be bothered. I didn't want to see anyone walking down the hall, or have anyone wander in to play with whatever sex toy came in my latest shipment as they guardedly asked me questions to help a "friend" of theirs. I didn't want to deal with any of it. I just wanted to be alone with my thoughts.

As I typed away on my keyboard my mind drifted back to the moment where Josh pulled me in to kiss him. I shook my head to rid myself of it. I didn't want to dwell on it at all or turn it into anything it wasn't, and as far as I was concerned, it was just a one-night stand. A fling. Maybe I'd see him again, maybe I wouldn't—I had no expectations. The only thing I really had to worry about was my next step with the whole Nicole issue. I hadn't heard from him in the week that followed our movie-watching excursion, but I knew at some point he'd likely get in touch with me to ask if I'd heard from her. I'd just have to blow up that bridge when I got to it.

"Sadie," came Babs's voice on the intercom.

"Yeah."

"Are you taking calls?"

I stopped typing and leaned back in my chair, stretching my hands out to relieve them a little. "It depends who it is."

"Abby."

"Yeah, I'll take Abby's call," I said, and picked up the phone when it buzzed with the transfer.

"Are you avoiding me?" she asked as soon as I answered the phone.

"No, of course not," I assured her. "What makes you think that?"

"Because you haven't called me since you and Josh went out for drinks."

I kicked my feet up on my desk and sighed. “I’ve been busy.”

“Busy avoiding me,” Abby insisted. “Are you going to tell me what happened? Or are you trying to prolong eating a sombrero?”

I didn’t want to tell her. And I didn’t know why I didn’t want to tell her. Actually, scratch that—I did know. From day one she’d been acting as a double agent for Josh, and I didn’t feel like I could trust her. And I hated not feeling trust for one of my closest friends.

“You know, I saw Josh a couple days ago at a press conference, and he was pretty smiley,” Abby pressed.

“What did he tell you?” I blurted.

“Ah-ha, so something did happen! Spill.”

“We kissed,” I allowed.

“Uh-huh, now do you believe that he’s not in love with me?”

“It’s more that you were in love with him,” I countered.

“Whatever. Either way, you kissed. So now what?”

I started picking at my nails again. “Now nothing. Now we continue on with our lives.”

“He hasn’t called?”

“Not lately.”

“You’re not disappointed?”

I got the distinct feeling she was digging for something. “No, actually. The less he calls me, the better, because it means he’s moved on from the whole Nicole nonsense.”

“Yeah, I have something to tell you about that.”

My stomach sank. I didn’t like the sounds of that.

“I kinda told him that you and Nicole were close,” she continued. “Really close.”

I threw my head back. “Oh my fucking god, Abby, when did you say this and

what, exactly, did you say?”

“When I saw him at the press conference. He was all smiley and glowing and all that, so I asked him if he’d finally landed his interview with Nicole, and he said no and talked about how you were going to help him, and then I—”

“Stop, I don’t want to hear any more,” I said, cutting her off. “You’re being a manipulative, meddlesome jerk and you’ve been trying to set me up since day one.”

“I have not!”

“Sadie,” Babs’s voice said from the intercom. “You have another call.”

“Hang on, Abby,” I said into the phone, then leaned toward the intercom speaker. “From who?”

“Josh Kelly.”

Great. “For me or Nicole?”

“He asked specifically for you,” Babs said. “Voice mail?”

“No, best I deal with this sooner rather than later,” I said, and brought the phone to my ear again. “Bye, Abby.”

“We’re not finished discussing this,” she said.

“Oh yes we are,” I told her, and hung up on her to take the other line. “Hello?”

“What’s up, bad girl?” Josh asked.

I smacked my forehead and slid my feet off my desk, leaning forward to cradle my head in my hand. I couldn’t help but smile when he said that. “Hi,” I said. “I’m sorry, I haven’t had a chance to call Nicole yet—I’ve been swamped.”

“What are you working on?”

I was actually working on an article about infiltrating underground orgy parties, but I couldn’t very well tell him that. “I’m trying to wrap up a couple months’ worth of content before I leave town on assignment,” I explained vaguely.

“Well, I won’t keep you, then—I know how that can be,” he said sympathetically.

“Thanks.” I prepared to hang up.

“But call me when you get back into town, maybe we can see a movie or something.”

“Sure, that’d be fun,” I said dismissively. Either this was a post-sex courtesy call, or it was a further attempt to unravel the Nicole mystery—especially with whatever it was that Abby told him.

“Great, then have a fantastic trip.”

“I will, enjoy your weekend,” I told him, and hung up the phone, relieved to be sitting in the silence of my office once more. I started typing again, determined to focus and wipe my mind clear of any other thought pertaining to Josh, or Abby, or anyone. I’d debated calling Leigh to get her opinion, but decided I didn’t need to involve anyone else in this ridiculousness. I just needed to get through the day and get home to pack, then have a good, restful night’s sleep before I hopped a plane to Chicago. It wasn’t far enough away from all this junk, but at least it was far enough that I could disconnect from it for a while.

I drove home from the office, distracted. Did I get everything done at the office? I hoped so. The last thing I wanted to do was take my laptop with me, though maybe that wasn’t a bad idea. That way I could record my immediate thoughts on the event rather than the ones that rose long after I’d returned home.

I’m so done with Abby. Done. I’m sick and tired of her meddling in my life for her own perverse entertainment purposes. Can’t she just watch reruns of *Melrose Place* on SoapNet like most normal people do?

* * * *

The phone rang. It was Leigh. I fumbled with my keys as I balanced my phone between my ear and shoulder. “I talked to Abby this afternoon.”

“Ah,” I said, nudging the door open with my knee and nearly smacking Penelope in the head as she sat in the entryway, desperately waiting for me to come in so she could tell me what a horrible cat-mother I was.

Leigh snickered. “Ah? That’s all you have to say?”

I dropped my purse and keys on the floor, then flopped down on the couch, allowing Penelope to crawl all over me. “What else should I say? Clearly you have her version of what’s going on.”

“Exactly. I have her version.”

“I slept with Josh last Friday night and she all but outed me to him a couple days ago when she ran into him at a press conference,” I explained.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line. “Wait—slept with?”

Damn. I’d told Abby we’d only kissed. “Yes, and that’s not to be repeated,” I told her sternly. “You’re the only one who knows. I haven’t told Abby because I don’t want to be a part of her sick little game-playing anymore.”

“Look, I’m not going to get in the middle of you two scrapping—especially when neither of you are behaving rationally,” Leigh said.

“Excuse me, but I’m being perfectly rational!”

“By sleeping with the enemy?”

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out.

“Seriously, Sadie, all you’ve done is complain about how this guy is out to destroy you, and you sleep with him! At this point I’m thinking you should make an appointment with your therapist.”

“There was a new bet,” I wailed. “I was convinced he only wanted to use me for information and I didn’t think flirting with him would take it that far! We just got carried away!”

“Hey,” she said gently, “I’m not going to judge you. It’s OK—things happen in the heat of the moment. But are you sure your secret is still safe?”

“Mostly, but it would’ve been more so if Abby had kept her fool mouth shut,” I seethed.

“Look, I’m not condoning her behavior, but both of you need to get a grip.”

I sulked.

“You’ve been friends for ages,” Leigh continued. “Are you really going to have

a stupid, friendship-ending fight over some boy?”

“That depends on her actions from here on in,” I reasoned.

“Maybe you should think about it while you’re away.”

“Maybe. What time is it?”

“Almost midnight,” Leigh said.

“Shit, I’ve gotta get packing,” I said. “Can I call you when I get back?”

“Of course, and have a fantastic time.”

“I will,” I said, hopping off the couch and flicking on the hall light on my way to my bedroom. “Just let me get through this weekend and sort out my feelings about all this other junk.”

“OK. I’ll talk to you later.”

I snapped my phone shut and pulled open my closet, grabbing my suitcase off the top shelf and swinging it up on top of my bed. I pulled it open and was surprised to see the toiletries rollout already had nearly everything I needed in it. I guess I forgot to unpack my travel goodies from the last trip I took, which was . . . with Carter. I shook my head free of the memory. I had enough flitting around in my head.—the last thing I needed to do was delve back into those issues.

I walked over to my dresser and started selecting undies and bras out of the top drawer. I knew a weekend of partying in Chicago was going to do a lot to take me away from my internal drama, but I wanted something to erase it completely. I sat on my bed, fistfuls of lingerie in either hand, and brainstormed.

I had the answer. I tossed the lingerie in my suitcase and picked up my cell phone and dialed, even though I knew it was late. Dammit. Voice mail.

“Hey, it’s Sadie,” I said after the beep sounded. “Guess who’s going to be in your neck of the woods tomorrow? Well, OK, a couple hours away from your neck of the woods, but it’s a lot closer than L.A. I know it’s short notice, but maybe you can hook something up and meet me? I’ll forward you my flight and hotel info. C’mon. You know you want to.”

I hung up and went to my computer in my office, waited for it to boot up, and checked my web mail for my itinerary, pleased that I'd had the foresight to forward it to myself in case of emergency. I entered the e-mail address I wanted it forwarded to and pressed send.

If there was one thing that could take my mind off of everything, it was a weekend with Jeff.

* * * *

Chicago was way colder than I wanted it to be. I could feel the air threatening to freeze my blood as I exited the plane, pulling my roller suitcase along with me. After feeling annoyed at dragging along a winter coat I hadn't worn in ages through the halls of LAX, I switched to feeling grateful. I couldn't imagine navigating through this kind of weather without it.

I took the escalator down to baggage claim where I was supposed to meet Tommy, the club promoter who arranged my flight and hotel. Though pimp 'n' ho parties had been all the rage for a while, he'd managed to build his into mythic events with the help of celebrity and porn star guest hosts. He'd approached me to write about it, and when I told Martin my travel expenses would be paid, I got the green light.

I looked around the baggage carousels and finally spotted a guy built like a linebacker holding a sign that said "Naughty Nicole" on it. I laughed.

"That would be me, and can you please put that down?" I said, pushing his hand to hide the sign.

"It's very nice to meet you in person, Nicole," he said, offering his hand for a shake. "I didn't know how else to track you down, seeing as you wouldn't send a picture."

"I like being invisible," I told him.

He looked at my bag. "Is this all you have?"

"Yep, I pack light."

He grabbed my bag and headed for the door, guiding me along with him. "You

didn't forget your ho costume, did you?"

I fixed him with my best "I'm Insulted" look. "Excuse me? I, dear sir, am a pimp."

"Nice! We need more lady pimps at these things," he said, and led me up to a yellow Humvee stretch limo. I laughed.

"What, you couldn't find anything more ostentatious?"

"I have a small penis," he joked. "Actually, this company is providing transportation for all the key players this weekend, so I figured why not give you the star treatment too?"

Tommy opened the door for me and helped me up into the limo. Inside was a bar, plush leather seats lining either side of the interior, party lights, and little flat-screen TVs . . . all it needed was a bed, and it would be easy to live inside it.

As we drove away from the airport Tommy explained the history of the event, how he'd come to promote it, and details I already knew about some of the hosts, one of whom was Delilah Sinn. I was interested to catch up with her again and see how work had been since I visited her on set. What I really wanted to know was if she and Justin ever got together outside of work—if they had to deal with office romances like everyone else, or if it was just business as usual, all day every day.

"We're here," Tommy said a while later. I didn't even realize that we'd stopped talking, I was so inside my own head. Tommy hopped out of the limo and helped me out, taking my suitcase from the driver and extending the handle to offer it to me.

"Thanks, and I'm sorry if I drifted off—I was up at the crack of dawn to catch my flight," I explained.

"No need to apologize, just make sure you rest up for tonight," Tommy told me. "I'll be back here with a party bus around ten to meet you and some other friends that will be joining us, and then we'll head for the club. You have my cell number, yes?"

I nodded.

"Excellent. Call me if you need anything, otherwise, enjoy yourself," he said,

and leaned forward to kiss me on the cheek. “If you head straight up that way, you’ll find shopping.”

“What makes you think I’d be interested in that?”

He laughed. “I can tell by your boots.”

Tommy pulled the door shut and left me standing in front of the hotel, shaking my head. If it were a different time and place, and not for a work thing, I might’ve been interested in him . . . but I had enough fish to fry as it was.

I checked in at the front desk and took the elevator up to my room, rolled my suitcase down the hall, and slipped my card into the door. Pushing it open, I flicked on the light and saw a bouquet of white roses sitting on the table in front of the window, which looked out onto the water. I hoisted my suitcase up on the bed and dropped my coat and handbag on top of it, then approached the roses. There was a card sticking out of the bouquet. I figured they were a thank-you from Tommy for agreeing to cover his event. I pulled the envelope out of the little plastic fork holding it in the vase and opened it up.

I’ll be here by the time you’re done with your party. Put my name on the room . . . and don’t wear panties.

xx

J

I smiled devilishly. I wasn’t convinced that Jeff would actually hop a plane to come see me on such short notice, regardless of how many air miles he had access to. But apparently I was worth rearranging his schedule for. Feeling inspired, I grabbed my coat and scarf and slipped them back on, then pulled my purse onto my shoulder and made sure I had my room key. It was time to go shopping.

Three pairs of shoes, four tops, and a pair of jeans later, I still wasn’t finding what I wanted to wear that night for Jeff. I found myself wandering up and down Michigan Avenue until I stumbled upon Bloomingdales. I took a moment to rifle through my purse and came up with Josh’s birthday gift card. No time like the present

to spend it. I flipped it over, looking for a denomination. Nothing. Looks like I'd have to get a cashier to tell me what it was worth. Probably something like \$20—I couldn't see it being more than that.

I headed for the first available cashier in the makeup department and handed her the card.

"Happy birthday," she told me.

"Oh thank you, but it's well past," I said. "I just haven't had a chance to use the card until now."

She scanned it and waited, then looked up at me. "It's worth fifty dollars."

I blinked. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, it says right here," she said, pulling a receipt from the till and handing it to me.

I read it. Sure enough, \$50.

"Thank you," I said, and walked to the shoe department, where I sat on one of the couches and hunted through my purse for my cell phone. I flipped it open and hunted through my contacts list for Leigh's number.

"Shouldn't you be pimping and hoing?" she asked when she answered.

"That's later tonight," I said. "Tell me something—if you bought a gift card for a guy you knew who wasn't much more than an acquaintance or a work colleague, how much would you spend on it?"

"Like a secret Santa thing?"

"Sure."

"No more than twenty."

I looked at the card again as if it held all the answers. "So let's say you were on the receiving end of said card, and it was worth fifty. What would you think?"

"I would think that either the gifter was interested in me and testing the waters, or he was trying to butter me up for something," she said.

"Thank you, that's all I needed to know."

“Are you going to tell me what this is about?” Leigh asked.

“Later. I’ve got shopping to do,” I told her, and hung up the phone.

I picked up my bags and lugged them up the escalator to lingerie, where I picked out a lacy black bra and thong set accented with pink ribbons. When the cashier asked me for payment, I handed her the gift card.

“Is this a gift for someone special?” she asked.

“Yes—me,” I told her, and she laughed.

Damned if Josh was going to bribe me for information with a Bloomingdales card. It may have been only to make a point to myself, but I couldn’t think of a better way to make a statement than to buy lingerie to wear for Jeff that night. Go to a movie when I get back indeed . . . so he could continue to work on outing me? Fat chance. I took my bag from the nice saleslady and headed back toward the escalator. It was time to go back to the hotel and get ready.

* * * *

There was something about the black lingerie that didn’t work with my outfit, nor did the concept of being a complete pimp. So after hours of agonizing I decided on a pimp/ho hybrid: a black fedora, black fitted suit jacket, short black skirt, then a white bra paired with a white garter hooked to black thigh-highs, and my black boots. A rhinestone collar completed the look. I was ready to go.

When I landed in the lobby I wished I had brought my camera. Earlier in the day the hotel bar had been filled with affluent blue bloods, but now it was overrun with rowdy revelers dressed in their Huggy Bear finest, if they weren’t in barely-there ho gear. It was easy to spot Tommy in the crowd—he stood nearly head and shoulders above everyone, and was decked out in a yellow suit with a red shirt, wearing a yellow bowler with a red band, and carried a pimp stick.

“You look more Kentucky Derby than pimp,” I said as I joined him.

He hugged me hello. “I prefer to be classy in my pimpage,” he explained.

“Come with me, let me introduce you to some people.”

Tommy started pointing out everyone I should know in Chicago, but the names were coming at me so fast I could barely keep track. There was the girl who was dressed as a ho cop—I think her name was Nancy—and her boyfriend, whose pimp inspiration of choice was Kevin Federline. I met a writer for a rock magazine who took pimp to goth extremes, a woman who produced the local NBC news dressed in thigh-high, lipstick-red, shiny boots, and a radio host with his silk shirt unbuttoned to his belly button to show off yards of ropey gold chains. It was easy to see why Tommy's parties were such a success—everyone got into the spirit.

Before I knew what was happening, we were all ushered out to meet the party bus, where about twenty of us packed inside and continued the party all the way to the club. As the mock K. Fed mixed everyone drinks, some of the girls took to the stripper pole as Tommy turned on the strobe light. The music was so loud that you could barely hear yourself think, let alone talk, so everyone opted to dance instead. I watched as one girl, dressed in a white lacy number in an attempt to be an innocent ho, give her pimp a seductive lap dance despite the mayhem going on around them.

Holding his gaze, she teasingly swung her hips from side to side, her arms high in the air, and shimmied down between his legs before sliding up his front, rubbing her breasts in his face before turning around to press her backside in his lap. She planted her hands on her knees and slowly worked her hips in a figure eight, looking over her shoulder to see the expression on his face. When he reached forward to cup her ass cheek with his hand, she smacked it away scoldingly and continued her slow grind in his lap. He bit his bottom lip. Then she turned around and slowly straddled him, holding the seat back behind him, and continued to grind while holding his gaze, bringing her breasts within a fraction of an inch from his face, then pulling away. Finally he grabbed her and stood up, planting a passionate kiss on her lips. Secretly, my inner voyeur hoped I'd see more of them to help get me ready for my eventual rendezvous with Jeff.

The party bus came to a stop, but people kept dancing away.

"Everybody ready?" Tommy asked.

A cheer went up in the crowd. Tommy opened the doors to the bus and led everyone off, cut past the line, and ushered us into the VIP area. The club was already packed to the walls. After everyone from the bus got situated in the VIP area, they continued what they'd started on the bus and in the hotel, grabbing any spare surface they could to dance—couches, table tops, wherever the spirit moved them. One of Tommy's friends, wearing a gold sparkly jacket and carrying a scepter from a Malificent costume in place of a pimp stick, grabbed me and started dancing with me. I allowed myself to be swept into the action. It was hard not to be—it was infectious.

An hour later when the DJ took a break to make way for a live band and go-go dancers on strip poles, I decided I needed a breather and sat down on the couch. That's when I spotted Delilah. Or rather, she spotted me.

"Nicole!" she shrieked so loud that I was actually able to hear her above all the noise.

"How are you?" I asked, and allowed myself to be pulled up for a hug. When she let go of me she plunked herself down on the table in front of where I was sitting.

"I'm great, what do you think of my ho outfit?"

She stood and twirled, showing off a black bustier, sheer black tutu and tiny black panties, twisting her ponytail in her hand as she circled around and around.

"Very nice," I said. "I'm impressed. Are you having fun?"

"Are you kidding? I'm getting paid to party, what's not fun about that?"

I laughed. "Good point."

"So when are you running that story you came to the set for?"

"I'm not sure. I'm still waiting for approval," I lied. The truth was I wasn't sure if it was ever going to run considering I'd run into my arch-nemesis there and I'd yet to schedule a visit to a different set.

"You know, it was kind of funny. There was this other reporter there that Jackie warned me about. She said he might try and tear me down for wanting to do porn. but he was actually really nice," she said. "He was some conservative columnist guy. I

forget his name. I mean, he asked me some hard questions, but he wasn't a dick like other people have been."

I wasn't about to remind her what his name was. Instead, I changed the subject. "How is Justin?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Who?"

"The guy you had your scene with that day," I said.

"Oh, him! Fine, I guess. It was kind of funny, because he kept calling me after we did our scene—he wanted to date. But I don't want to be tied down while I'm working, you know? It just makes things so complicated."

I cocked my head to one side. "Really? I'd think working in the sex industry would make it easier because it's all out in the open."

"Oh no," she said, shaking her head. "If anything it makes it harder. I mean, I'm sure there are some people who make it work. But I find most guys still have their jealous streak and only want you to do girls while you're with them, or whatever. I'm just not into being tied down, you know? I want to have fun."

"Refresh my memory—how old are you?"

"Twenty-two," she said.

"Oh god, you're so young!"

"Right? I don't need to be tied down," she said, and raised her hand for a high five, which I granted. As I did I felt my purse vibrate in my lap.

"Hold that thought," I said, and fished out my cell phone, buzzing to tell me I had a new text message.

Did u wear panties?

Jeff. I smiled and texted him back:

I guess you're going to have to find out.

I closed my phone and wondered where he was, then looked around to see where Delilah had taken off to. I finally spotted her at the velvet rope to the VIP area, seductively slow dancing with a guy who had been on the bus. I found it amusing that

she'd found a way to slow dance to "Funky Cold Medina."

My phone buzzed again.

I want to find out now.

I replied:

I guess it depends on when you make it into town, doesn't it?

I snapped my phone shut again and wondered why a crowd was forming at one of the strip poles. Suddenly, a go-go dancer in Day-Glo green lingerie launched herself at the pole and hung upside down, clinging to it with her thighs, shaking a mane of brown hair wildly as the band played on and the crowd erupted into cheers. She gripped the pole with her thighs, and—using her admirable stomach muscles—pulled herself back up and hung on to the pole, then detached her legs from it, stretching them out to either side in a perfect split. No amount of Pilates and yoga could give her the ability to do that—it was genetics. I was admittedly jealous.

Just when I was about to slip my phone back in my purse, it buzzed again. I flipped it open.

I'm here. And I want to slide my fingers inside u and lick u until u cum b4 I show u how hard I am. NOW.

I snapped my phone shut without answering, and—despite my now-weak knees—stood to find Tommy to tell him I was headed back to the hotel. I'd spent several hours partying with them, which was more than enough for my column, but I didn't want to be rude. But when I realized he wasn't in the VIP section, I decided I wasn't about to go traipsing all over the club to find him. I let myself out of the confines of the velvet rope and headed outside, where I flagged down a cab and told the driver which hotel to take me to.

By the time I got to the elevator again I was shaking, and I couldn't figure out why—it wasn't a normal reaction for me when I was hooking up with Jeff. I chalked it up to anticipation and silently talked myself into calming down as I approached my suite. I slipped my card in the door and opened it. When I walked in, the lights were

low. Jeff was sitting at the table that held my roses, wearing his jeans but no shirt, showing off his broad shoulders and barrel chest.

I walked in and let the door shut silently behind me, then unbuttoned my jacket. He got up from his chair and walked toward me, then stopped in his tracks when we were toe to toe. Silently, he curled his arms around my shoulders and slid his hands up the back of my head, bent me over backwards and licked from my mid-torso up to my neck before kissing me furiously and intensely. My knees almost buckled as the shaking began again.

“Nice ho outfit,” he said quietly when he broke away from me.

“That’s pimp to you,” I corrected. “And if you want a piece of this you’ll play by my rules.”

Jeff smiled widely, his tongue playing at the tip of his tooth. “Is that so?”

“Yeah, that’s so. Come with me,” I said, and hooked a finger into his belt loop, leading him into the bathroom, where I positioned him with his back to the bathtub.

“What are you up to?” he asked.

“Don’t ask questions,” I told him sternly. “Now hold your arms up with your wrists together.”

As Jeff raised his arms, I slid off my boots and unhooked one of my thigh-highs from my garter and slid it down my leg, then stood on the side of the tub and bound his wrists together before securing them to the shower rod. I hopped off the tub and looked for a dimmer switch in the bathroom—the Hollywood makeup lights were too bright. No luck. I skipped into the bedroom and rifled through my suitcase for my travel candle and matches, then brought them back to the bathroom where I sparked a match and lit the candle before turning off the lights, making sure to bend over as I placed the candle where I wanted it on the bathroom counter. Jeff moaned softly but appreciatively.

I stood back and surveyed my handiwork. Jeff’s hands curled around the shower rod to give him more comfort while he was bound, and I’d positioned him directly in front of the mirror. The candle was giving off the perfect amount of light.

“Sadie,” he said playfully, but I silenced him with a kiss, sliding my jacket the rest of the way off so that all I was wearing was the hat, skirt, and bra along with the garter now holding up only one stocking. As I kissed him I ran my nails down his chest, soft enough that I didn’t draw blood, but hard enough that he knew I meant business. I found my way to the button on his jeans and unbuttoned them, then slid my hands inside to feel him. He was already hard. I pulled back from his lips and smiled at him, holding his gaze as I slid to my knees and took his pants down with me.

I reached for a towel from the shelf and spread it out on the floor so I had cushioning for my knees. Then I slid his underwear down, smiling up at him when I was greeted with his hardness. I looked up at him and held his gaze as I began to tease him, kissing his thighs, around the base, then pulling back to lightly flick the head with my tongue. I traced a fingernail up the underside and stopped when I hit the ridge, then swirled my tongue around the head, planting my hands on his thighs as I opened my mouth to take him in, then hovered there, breathing down on him. I pulled back.

“Do you want in?” I asked, then extended my tongue as if I were going to lick him.

“God yes,” he breathed.

“Too bad,” I told him, and opted to lick him instead. I gifted him with short bursts of tongue here and there—up one side, down the other—then traced along the ridge of the head so slowly that I thought he might burst. Finally I opened my mouth and slowly descended on him, but didn’t close it around him so that what he felt was more of a hint of being inside my mouth than actually being there. I did it over and over again until he groaned.

“Sadie, you’re killing me.”

I decided to take pity on him. I pulled back again, gave him a little smile, then wrapped my lips around the head and slowly, steadily took him as far into my mouth as I could manage, feeling him press against my throat as he sighed out of a combination of lust and relief. Slowly I drew back, curling my tongue around his thickness, then

descended again, my eyes holding his gaze the entire time. I made sure to get him really wet before adding my hands to the mix, slowly and excruciatingly twisting and turning them up his shaft. I could feel that I was bringing him to the brink, so I stopped—my hands gripping him, my mouth holding him, feeling in complete control. Jeff looked at me pleadingly as I felt him throb a little, but said nothing. He knew I'd just make it worse if he did.

I'd been teasing him for so long that I was getting lockjaw, so I decided it was time to let him loose. I continued with my slow attack for a few strokes, then slowly picked up the pace, adding a bit more suction as I went. Jeff was breathing so heavily that I momentarily wondered if he was going to hyperventilate, but I kept going, sliding my mouth up and down as I pressured him with my lips, jacking him with my hands as I went.

“Oh god, I'm—”

He didn't even finish his sentence before he started to explode in my mouth. I held him firmly as he thrust slightly, pulsating so much that I almost couldn't keep my mouth on him. As his tremors subsided I swallowed and let him fall from my mouth, kissing his tip as I marveled at how he was still mostly hard.

“You're fucking amazing,” he panted.

“You forgot?”

“Of course not,” he said. “It's just nice to have the refresher course.”

I smiled appreciatively and stood to untie him from the shower curtain rod, then padded into the bedroom and sat at the table where he'd been sitting when I walked in, looking out at the water.

“What's on your mind?” he asked. I didn't even hear him walk in the room.

“Nothing,” I said.

“You're a liar. I've known you for long enough to know when you're not present in a situation.”

I sighed. I couldn't deny it—Jeff and I were close enough that he could read

right through my bullshit when he wanted to. But if there was anyone I could talk to about what was going on in my head, it was Jeff.

“I’m conflicted,” I told him

“I can see that.” He took a seat across from me on the bed.

I turned to face him. “There’s a guy I kind of met through work. Through Abby, actually, and he’s really hot and I’m attracted to him, but the problem is he’s sort of against the stuff I write for the magazine as Nicole and it’s threatening to expose me. And we sorta slept together.”

Jeff smiled ruefully. “Sorta?”

“OK, we totally slept together. But now I’m kind of torn. I mean, I want to keep my identity secret. But despite my best efforts and the fact that I think some of his views are completely and utterly retarded, I’m drawn to him. I can’t help it. And I don’t know if he’s just using me to get to my alter ego or if he actually likes me. Meanwhile, Abby has been trying to force him on me all this time, and it’s really pissing me off.”

“May I interject?”

“Please do,” I told him. “I’m tired of hearing myself think about this over and over.”

“Just speaking from a guy’s perspective, unless he’s a complete and total slimeball, I don’t know many guys who would sleep with a girl just to get information out of them. And I’m thinking you’re smart enough to know in your gut when a guy is a complete and total slimeball.”

I nodded.

Jeff leaned forward and took my hands in his. “And in the years that you’ve been playing the part of Nicole, have you ever had someone react badly when you told them how the whole thing worked?”

“No,” I said. “But this is different—he kind of wants to expose me. It’s complicated.”

“Only as complicated as you want to make it,” he reasoned. “How did you leave

things?”

“He called me just before I left and asked me to call him when I got back from my trip. He suggested we go to a movie or something.”

“So I say call him, and go for dinner or something so you can talk this whole thing out.”

“Oh god,” I groaned. “I can’t be the where-is-this-going girl after the first time we slept together!”

He laughed, shaking his head. “I’m not saying do that, I’m saying talk to him about the Nicole situation and see where it goes from there. What have you got to lose?”

“My sanity and my secrecy,” I shot back.

“You lost your sanity ages ago, and you never know—maybe the guy is reasonable.” Jeff let go of my hands and leaned back on the bed. “Besides, if he threatens to expose you, you can always sic Abby on him. Though it might not always seem like it, she’s got your back.”

Reluctantly, I nodded again. Despite her stupid little games I was pretty sure she wouldn’t deliberately try to destroy me.

“Feel better?” Jeff asked, cutting into my thoughts.

“Mostly, but I feel slightly guilty for talking you into flying out here to hook up with me when I’m hung up on someone else,” I said sheepishly.

“Are you kidding me? That blow job alone was worth it.” He patted the space beside him in bed. “Now come to bed and let’s watch crappy late-night television and order room service.”

I did as I was told, lifting myself out of the chair and crawling on to the bed next to him, where I snuggled into the crook of his arm as he grabbed the remote and started to channel surf. I decided he was right—it was time to find out if Josh was worth it or not. And all I had to do to find out was take that first step and call him when I got home.

Chapter Nine

I picked up the phone for the fifth time in a row and stared at the keypad, then thought better of it and hung up again. I'd been home for three days and had been trying to find the courage to call Josh from the minute my plane landed in L.A. Why was this so bloody hard? He'd told me to call him when I got home so we could see a movie, so why couldn't just pick up the phone and dial his number?

Who was I trying to kid? I knew damn well why it was so hard. I was just hoping I could find another way to sweep it under the carpet so I could pretend everything was just fine the way it was.

"Screw this—I've got to do it sooner or later," I muttered. I picked up the phone and stamped out his number on the keypad, then rocked back and forth nervously in my chair as it rang.

"This is Kelly," came his voice.

"Hey," I said softly. "It's Sadie."

"Hello, world traveler," he said. I could hear the smile in his voice, which made my stomach sink and flutter all at the same time. "How was your trip?"

"Tiring. And work-filled."

"Yeah? What happened?"

"I'll have to fill you in on that later," I said, dodging the question.

He laughed as if he were in on the joke. "Well, what are you doing this weekend?"

I took a deep breath. "No plans. In fact, I figured I'd check in with you on that offer you made before I left."

"A movie?"

"Maybe."

"Tell you what," he said. "How about we grab dinner somewhere, and if we

don't wind up doing shots all night, then we'll go to a movie. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I repeated. "How about tomorrow night?"

"That would be perfect, actually. My schedule just cleared up."

Suddenly I felt horribly nauseous, as though I'd eaten bad seafood. I pulled my knees up and hugged them to my chest, partially for comfort, partially because it was taking my mind off of vomiting. I couldn't believe I was really about to do this. I was really about to sit across from Josh and tell him who I really was, and I wasn't sure I was ready to be that vulnerable.

"Should I pick you up?" he asked, distracting me from my inner dialogue.

"No," I said quickly, then figured I should soften my response. "I've got a bunch of errands I have to run beforehand, so it's probably best I meet you somewhere."

"What did you have in mind?"

I chewed the inside of my lip. "Something casual."

"McDonalds?"

I allowed myself a laugh. "That's a little too casual."

"OK, better idea. Do you like Thai?"

"Sure," I said, nodding as if he could see me.

"How about we go to Toi—it's cheap but good. There's one on Sunset, and then we can skip over to that obnoxious tourist-trap mall on Hollywood and see if there's anything good playing at the Chinese Theatre."

"Deal," I said. "Eight OK?"

"Yep, I'll see you then," he said. "Enjoy the rest of your day."

"You too," I told him, and hung up the phone. And stared at it until I was sure that I was close to melting it with the sheer force of my eyeballs. I couldn't decide what was perplexing me more—what to wear, or what to say. And I only had just over twenty-four hours to figure out both.

* * * *

What to wear came easiest. I decided to go with a simple pair of my most

figure-flattering Seven jeans and a black V-neck Armani T-shirt I adored, then some low-heeled black boots and a black leather jacket. I suppose it looked like I was ready to go to a funeral, and in a way I was—I just wasn't sure what for. My anonymity? My relationship with my parents? Or maybe my singledom . . . No, that was the most unlikely possibility of the three. I took a quick glance at the time and decided to call a cab. I was running early, but I'd planned it that way. I wanted some time to get a drink or two in my system so liquid courage could pick up where my guts would most definitely leave off.

The entire cab ride over I attempted to rehearse what it is that I wanted to say. No matter what I tried, it just wasn't coming out right—not to mention each scenario ended with some variation of Josh laughing maniacally as he told me how he was going to ruin my life. I started feeling queasy all over again. I knew I was doing it to myself and I could easily stop, but I wanted to be prepared for the worst. And naturally, that also meant figuring out what to tell my parents before the inevitable exposé hit Josh's column. Maybe I could claim that he was just an imaginative liar? No, Dad would see through that in a heartbeat—he was an excellent judge of character, not to mention he always knew when I was fibbing. Would they buy a story like the one I'd told them about why I was working for the magazine in the first place? Maybe . . .

“Miss?”

I looked up at the cab driver, who had turned to face me, then looked out the window to see we'd pulled up in front of Toi. How did we get there so fast? Wasn't it just five minutes ago that I got into the cab?

“So, uh, if you want to sit here for a while I'm going to have to turn the meter back on,” he said.

“No, no,” I told him, reaching for my purse. “I'm sorry, I'm just spacing.”

He fixed me with an amused look that was begging to make some kind of smart-alecky comment.

“I know what you're thinking,” I said, handing him some cash. “No blonde

jokes. And keep the change.”

He laughed as I stepped out of the cab and walked into Toi, where I was relieved to find Josh didn’t have the same plan I did. I asked the hostess for a table for two, pulling my jacket off and draping it around the back of my chair before taking a seat. The waitress popped up immediately and asked if I wanted something to drink. I asked for a large sake and began to fidget—an activity that lasted until she came back with my drink order. About halfway through the bottle, my cell rang.

“Yep,” I answered nonchalantly.

“Sadie, it’s Josh.”

I whipped my head around to see if he was calling me from inside the restaurant. “Oh, hey!”

“Listen, I’m running a little behind. There’s, uh, some kind of construction going on and it’s causing a bit of traffic. Are you there already?”

“Yeah, would you like me to order something for you so we don’t run too late?”

“They’re usually pretty fast, but I’m starving, so some appetizers would be great,” he said. “How about dumplings and mee grob?”

“I’m on it,” I said. “See you soon.”

I hung up my phone and poured myself another shot of sake. And another. And when the waitress came by to take the appetizer order, I asked for another bottle. Just in case.

By the time Josh walked into the restaurant and spotted me sitting alone, two things had come to pass: our appetizers were sitting on the table piping hot and ready, and I was a little more saucy than usual thanks to lack of sleep, lack of food, and maybe a little too much sake.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” Josh said, sliding his hand from my shoulder down my arm as he sat, sending tingles through me. Or was that the sake? “You’d think I’d be used to the traffic considering I’ve been here for how many years now?”

“You never get used to it, and it’s always getting worse,” I said, taking another

swig of sake for good measure.

“Looks like I have some catching up to do,” Josh said, gesturing to my sake glass.

I shook my head. “Not much. I am so not drunk.”

“I didn’t say you were, I just notice you have a bottle of sake and I don’t.”

He waved down the waitress and ordered a bottle of what I was drinking, then picked up his chopsticks and gestured for me to do the same. I wasn’t the best with chopsticks under the best of circumstances, but after sake, I was even less coordinated than I wanted to admit. After several attempts at maneuvering a dumpling off the plate I gave up and stabbed it with one of my chopsticks and deposited it in front of me. Josh laughed.

“That’s a more straightforward way to deal with it,” he enthused.

Speaking of straightforward, I thought, but focused instead on chewing.

“So I’ve had one hell of a week,” Josh continued. “I got targeted for hate mail from NOW, and it’s been taking up all of my energy. At least it’s been giving me good column fodder. I mean . . . it’s fun pushing people’s buttons, don’t you think?”

Is he baiting me? I thought, but nodded instead.

The waitress plunked down a bottle of sake in front of Josh, who immediately opened it and began to pour. “Then again, I guess you don’t really piss a lot of people off with stories like an idiot’s guide to wine.”

“Not usually,” I said, figuring I should probably say something at some point. *I am not going to bring it up*, I thought. *But if he asks me about Chicago, then that’s my cue to make a segue. I can’t drag this on any more.* I fought to find something else to say to keep the conversation going, and though about a million things jumped to mind, I couldn’t spit any of them out. Josh downed a shot of sake and frowned a little.

“Something on your mind?”

I shook my head again, watching as he poured himself another shot. “No, no. It’s just been a hell of a week, just like you said.”

“I understand.” He sipped. “Especially when you just got back from a business trip. So how was Chicago, anyway? You said you were going to fill me in.”

I dropped my chopsticks to my plate and put my head in my hands.

“What—what did I say,” he demanded.

“Nothing,” I told him, lifting my head so I could look at him. “Nothing. It’s not you, it’s me.”

His expression suggested a mix of confusion and amusement. “Is this the part where you tell me we can’t see each other anymore?”

I sighed. “Maybe. I’m not sure.”

His face blanched slightly as the amusement gave over to total confusion, but he said nothing.

“Look—the thing of it is, I haven’t been completely honest with you,” I said, suddenly unable to look him in the eye and choosing to focus on my sake bottle instead. “The truth is . . . oh god, I can’t believe I have to say this. The truth is, I’m Nicole. And I couldn’t tell you because . . . well, obviously, because you want to shred me in your column, and you now know that my parents are total Jesus freaks and can’t possibly know about the kind of writing I really do, so for the most part I’ve been avoiding you like the plague so that you don’t destroy my relationship with them or my livelihood. Well, except for that night that we slept together. But that was totally not planned and I didn’t completely mean for that to happen. Not that I didn’t enjoy it. I mean . . . oh god, I have to stop talking.”

I looked up to see Josh staring at me. My heart leapt into my throat and started pounding furiously. He held my gaze for a moment, then poured himself another sake shot and downed it. I didn’t know what else to do, so I kept talking.

“I understand if you don’t want to talk to me anymore or anything like that,” I continued. “But I beg of you, please—please keep my identity quiet. I know this is probably a coup for you and it’d be great to expose me as a religious girl gone wrong and all of that, but there are other people in this situation that you’re going to wind up

hurting, and I just don't want to see that happen. My parents think I'm working at the magazine for research on a book to expose it, so if they knew I actually wrote about sex they'd seriously disown me. Or have me committed. So I'm begging you to at least consider some kind of alternative to wrecking my life."

He looked away, studying some artwork on the walls, then looked back at me. I waited for him to say something, but he looked away again and poured himself another shot.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" I asked.

He downed the shot and winced a little, then took a breath before focusing his eyes on me once more. "I'm not sure where to start."

"How about, 'Sadie, I don't hate you'?"

"Sadie, I don't hate you," he said with a little smile.

I breathed an involuntary sigh of relief.

"But I do have to say something," he continued.

I braced myself again—clearly the worst wasn't over.

Josh cracked his knuckles and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table as he wrung his hands. "I haven't been completely honest with you either."

"You're married," I blurted.

"No."

I frowned. "You're gay?"

He laughed a little bitterly. "No! Will you let me explain?"

"Sorry," I said, and clamped my mouth shut.

"My name isn't really Josh Kelly," he said. "It's Alex Miller. And I kind of don't really write my column with the utmost sincerity."

My heart dropped from my throat to the bottom of my stomach where it continued to thump. "I . . . I don't understand."

He chewed on his bottom lip. "Well, you know how your parents think you're writing an exposé about working at a lad mag?"

I nodded.

“I actually *am* writing an exposé. Except it’s about what it’s like to work as a right-wing zealot columnist when I’m actually firmly on the left wing and don’t really agree with a word that I’m writing.”

My head started to ring, and I couldn’t be positive, but it felt like the room was starting to spin.

“So it’s kind of the same thing,” he finished.

I felt anger well up inside of me. “Kind of the same thing? It’s in no way the same thing!”

“What? It is too!”

“It so is not,” I insisted. “Do you know how much I had at stake? And you were toying with it!”

“And I don’t have the same at stake?” he countered. “Do you know what would happen to me if that information got out before my contract was up with the paper? I could be sued for everything I’m worth!”

“Oh please—the paper would love it. It would be more press for them and you know it. You’d be another Jayson Blair, and everyone would go laughing off to the bank—the paper, your publisher, and you—whereas in my instance, the entire fabric of my family would be destroyed.”

“If Abby had given me any indication—”

“Wait,” I said, cutting him off. “Abby knew about this? She knew that you weren’t who you said you were?”

“Yes, though I have to admit I’m somewhat pissed that she didn’t tell me the truth about you,” he grumbled.

“Good fucking god,” I wailed. “So you’re actually a left-wing writer named Alex pretending to be a right-wing writer named Josh, and Abby knew about it all along despite pretending to be my friend. Is anyone who they say they are anymore? Who are my friends and who are my enemies? At this point it looks like they’re one in the

same!”

“Hey, you’re not completely innocent in this whole scenario either, you know. I didn’t see you wearing a ‘Hi My Name Is’ badge.”

I couldn’t sit across from him anymore—I had to leave. I stood from the table and yanked my jacket from the back of my chair.

“Where are you going?” Josh—I mean Alex—demanded.

“Away from here.” I pulled on my jacket and fished through my purse for my wallet.

“Wait—we’re both a little shocked by what we’ve just admitted, and understandably so, but we should take a moment to talk this out, don’t you think?”

He reached for my wrist. I jumped back as if he were going to burn me and tossed some bills on the table to cover my sake and half-eaten dumpling. “No, I don’t think. What I do think is I need to get the hell out of here and get my head screwed on straight.”

I turned on my heel and stomped out of the restaurant. Wisely, Josh—dammit, *Alex*—let me go. I briefly contemplated calling Abby to bitch her out, but couldn’t muster the energy to do that and hunt down a cab. What I needed more than anything was to get someplace quiet so I could sort out the thoughts swirling around my brain like a tornado. And the only place I was going to be able to do that effectively was at home, with no ringing phones, no e-mail, and no visitors. And maybe the help of a carton of rocky road.

I jumped in a cab and settled into the back seat, trying to focus on some deep breathing techniques to undo the knots in my stomach.

* * * *

I stared at my computer and watched the cursor blink. I couldn’t even muster the wherewithal to care that it was taunting me to write something—anything. It had been a week since I’d gone out with whatever his name was and I couldn’t get the experience out of my head. I didn’t know what to make of it. On one hand, he had a point—we

were both deceiving each other. But by the same token, I felt like I'd been duped on too many levels. I wasn't sure it was something I could overcome.

"Sadie?" said Babs's voice.

"Uh-huh."

"It's Leigh. Don't you think it's about time to take her call?"

I sighed. "I guess. Send her through."

"She lives," Leigh said when I answered.

I picked up a pencil and started drawing doodles on a penis-shaped notepad sitting on my desk. "And breathes, like all humans do."

"I was starting to wonder, seeing as I hadn't heard from you in a week. How are things?"

"Fine."

Leigh laughed. "That sounded convincing."

"Come on, Leigh," I moaned. "It's not like you don't know what's going on. I'm sure you heard from Abby, who heard from Josh."

"Alex," she corrected.

"Whatever."

"So what, you're just going to hide in your office forever?"

I pouted. "Maybe."

"Don't be ridiculous. In fact, what you're going to do is you're going to wrap up your day and head over to Sushi Roku to meet me for dinner."

I looked at the time, then back to the blinking cursor taunting me. I suppose staring at it until blood droplets formed on my forehead wasn't necessarily the most productive thing to do.

"Don't even think of an excuse, because I won't hear it," she warned.

"All right, all right," I relented. "I'll shut down and head over."

"If you're any later than ten minutes from now I'm sending a search party."

"I get an additional ten just in case of traffic."

Leigh sighed. “OK, but no more. Get going!”

She hung up. I looked at the phone for a minute and momentarily debated whether or not it’d be a better idea to go home and channel surf for the eighth night in a row, then decided against it and put the receiver back in the cradle before shutting down my computer. I slipped on my coat, looked in the mirror and tamed an errant lock of hair, smoothed down my skirt, then re-rumpled it when I realized I was behaving too much like my mother. I grabbed my purse from the chair by the door and turned off the light on my way out.

Arriving at the restaurant, I gave Leigh’s name to the hostess and she led me through the main dining area to the table where Leigh sat. With Abby. I froze.

“Why are you winded?” Leigh asked, standing up from the table and gripping me by the arm.

“Because I parked at the top of the parking structure and the elevator is broken, so I had to run all the way down,” I said, then jerked my thumb in Abby’s direction.

“What’s *she* doing here?”

Leigh tightened her grip on my arm to keep me from moving. “I know you want to sprint, but you should at least hear her out.”

I looked at Leigh, then at Abby, who wore a hopeful expression. I looked back at Leigh and removed my arm from her viselike grip. “You have five minutes,” I told Abby as I took a seat at the table. “And I’m keeping my coat on.”

“Come on, Says,” she started.

I took my cell phone from my purse and set it on the table. “Do you really want to waste time?”

“All right, all right,” she said. “I know you think I was being a jerk about the whole foisting Alex on you thing—”

“No, I didn’t think you were being a jerk,” I corrected. “I know you were.”

“Look, if all I have is five minutes, I should be allowed to talk,” Abby snapped.

I nodded. She was right. I gestured for her to continue.

“Yes, I knew that Alex wasn’t who he said he was, just like I knew you weren’t who you said you were, either. But I didn’t sell either of you out to one another because I promised both of you that I wouldn’t. It wasn’t easy for me to be the man in the middle, you know.”

“Yeah, but you put yourself there,” I protested.

“A little,” she admitted. “But only because I knew you’d make a great couple. And not just because you both had secret identities.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek and pressed a button on the side of my phone to see how much time had elapsed. She still had a little ways to go.

“I was trying to drop teeny, tiny hints to both of you so that you both knew what the deal was. I guess my hints were too tiny, because apparently it came as a shock to the both of you when you discussed the whole thing.”

“You could say that again,” I said.

Abby nodded. “But Says, admit it. You liked him. You still do.”

I stared at her for a moment, then looked away.

“And he likes you too,” she continued. “Is this whole double life thing on both your parts really something you can’t work through?”

I fiddled with my phone for a moment, then slipped it back in my purse. I guess she had a point. Now that the shock had worn off, I could see that our situations weren’t really that much different. And clearly I could trust him to keep my secret considering the one he was harboring.

“Believe it or not, I do have your best interests at heart—even when I have a ham-handed way of showing it,” Abby interjected.

I sighed. “You couldn’t have given me a better hint that he had an alter ego too?”

“Would you not have flipped out had I done the same for him?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. “He did mention that he was pissed you didn’t tell him about me.”

Abby rolled her eyes. “Believe me, I heard all about it. After he finished lamenting the fact that he was pretty sure he was never going to hear from you again.”

I raised an eyebrow. “He said that?”

“He’s smitten, Says.”

I smiled. “Well. Maybe I’ll have to give him a call.”

“Yes, but let’s wait until after dinner,” Leigh said, pouring me a glass of wine.

“And take off your coat, because you’re staying a while.”

I laughed and did as I was told.

Dinner drew to a close and Leigh snatched up the check as Abby returned from the bathroom. I took my calendar from my purse.

“I’d say it’s time to tally up the dating project, wouldn’t you?” I said, looking at Abby.

“If you’re ready to lose,” she countered.

“Oh, now, wait a minute—a month ago you said you were at five. With Josh-slash-Alex followed by Jeff in Chicago, that puts us at a tie.”

“Bollocks,” Abby cried. “Jeff was a booty call!”

“He took me out for dinner while he was there!”

Abby looked at Leigh. “Judges?”

“It counts—he was a new opportunity because he was in a new city,” Leigh said. “I still say Jeff has more potential than you give him credit for, Sadie.”

I stuck my tongue out at Abby.

“It doesn’t matter,” Abby said. “I still win.”

Leigh frowned. “How do you figure?”

“You mean aside from the fact that Sadie totally broke the rules by falling for one of her suitors?”

“That was so not a rule,” I yelled.

“It is now,” she teased. “Anyway, I landed another date before the cutoff.”

Leigh nodded as if she knew exactly what Abby was talking about. “With

who?" I demanded.

"Mick, one of Alex's friends," she said smugly. "So you'd better start planning that Bahamas trip, lady, because I am not letting that bet slide. You're lucky I'm going to give you a free pass on the sombrero eating."

I laughed as Leigh looked at both of us like we were crazy. "I do not want to know how that came about," she said.

We stood from the table and walked out to the valet stand. I hugged Leigh goodbye.

"I don't get why you don't valet here," Leigh said.

"Sadie never valets here," Abby told her.

I shrugged. "Why would I when there's a perfectly good parking garage just down the street?"

Leigh frowned. "But you valet in Hollywood."

"Because there's—"

"Never anyplace to park, and when there is, it costs twenty bucks," Abby finished for me. "Leigh, I can't believe in all the years you've known her that you don't know this speech."

"I must have blocked it out," she said.

Abby hugged me, then handed her ticket to the valet. "Enjoy your drive home," she said, and winked.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I asked, but she turned her back to me and started chatting with Leigh. I shook my head in bewilderment and headed toward the parking garage, climbing my way all the way to the roof with a bellyful of sushi. When I rounded the last corner and walked out underneath the stars again, I looked toward my car to see someone standing by it. As I got closer I realized it was Alex.

"I'd ask what you're doing here, but I suspect I know," I said once I reached him.

"Abby called me from the restaurant to let me know where you were parked,"

he admitted.

I leaned back against the passenger side of my car. “So that’s why she took so many bathroom breaks.”

“Either that, or her bladder is weaker than she wants to admit.”

I laughed a little.

“So,” he continued, stepping a little closer to me.

I breathed deeply and caught a whiff of Aqua Di Gio. “Yeah,” I said. “Now what?”

“I’m thinking we should start over,” he suggested. “And maybe do things a little differently.”

I turned to face him. “What, you mean like actually be honest with one another? I don’t know if that’s going to work for me.”

“Here, let’s try it.” Alex cupped my face with his hands. “Hi. I’m Alex. But sometimes I write under a pseudonym, Josh, about things that aren’t really me.”

I looked into his eyes and smiled. “Hi. I’m Sadie. But sometimes I write under a pseudonym, Nicole, about things that both are and aren’t really me.”

Alex looked a bit surprised. “Oh really? Which is which?”

“I guess you’re going to have to find out,” I teased.

Alex brushed a stray hair from my eyes and slid his hands from my face around to the back of my head, where he entangled them in my hair, and leaned in, kissing me slowly and softly. He kissed my nose, he kissed each eyelid, and as he kissed my forehead, I stuck out my tongue to touch his neck, tasting the salty sweetness of his skin, inhaling his musky scent. I unzipped his jacket and traced my fingertips around his waist, allowing them to move under his shirt so I could feel his skin. Alex sucked in his breath, then took me by surprise by picking me up and putting me on the hood of my car, positioning himself between my legs as he teased his fingers up my skirt.

“Wait,” I said, “we’re going to get caught.”

“Do you see anyone around? I don’t,” he said in between planting kisses on my

neck. “Besides, isn’t that part of the fun? Getting caught, or the threat of it? Don’t tell me you don’t get a kick out of that aspect of having a dual personality.”

I pulled back from him to look him in the eyes, which were gleaming mischievously. Suddenly, nothing mattered—not the secrets we’d kept from one another, nor the chance that someone could drive or walk by. Alex dove in and kissed me roughly but passionately, his tongue probing my mouth as his hands worked all the way up my skirt with renewed determination. I mentally cursed when he encountered my pantyhose—*why hadn’t I worn thigh-highs that day!*—and wondered how I’d struggle out of them . . . until his hands found their way into the waistband and ripped them to shreds. Shocked and immediately incredibly wet, I tore myself away from his lips to say something.

“Not a word,” he whispered before I could speak. “Lie back.”

I wanted to challenge him—I didn’t want him to think he could gain control of me that easily. But when I went to make a move on him, he planted a hand on my shoulder to force me back as his other hand started working my panties to the side, lightly brushing against my clit. I couldn’t help but moan.

“I mean it,” he growled, pushing me the rest of the way back on my hood before grabbing me behind the knees to slide my ass to the edge of the car. I was ready, and he knew it. He crouched down and wasted no time burying his face between my legs, his tongue twisting around my clit as his fingers worked their way inside of me. I arched my back as much as I could, driving my mound into him, and felt my heart race . . . though I wasn’t sure how much of it was for fear of getting caught, nearing orgasm, or the fact that Alex was completely in charge of me.

As I looked up into the night sky I started imagining what it looked like from his perspective—how I glistened from the mixture of me and him, his fingers working as feverishly as his tongue, until he pressed down on my belly with his free hand as the fingers inside of me pressed into my G-spot. I came almost instantly. I could feel the wave crashing through me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Alex didn’t

let up on me until he felt my body relax again.

I heard the rustling of clothing coming undone, the crinkling of a wrapper . . . I struggled to sit up, but before I could get very far, Alex stood up and wrapped my legs around his waist, then gripped me by the wrists to pin my arms down by my side. His lips hovered over mine threatening to kiss me as I felt the tip of his cock press against my pussy. I closed my eyes and concentrated on the feel of his breath on my face, urging his cock to press into me and stretch me open so I could feel every inch of him. The waiting was agony, but I didn't dare say anything because I knew he'd just make me wait that much longer.

I felt his lips draw nearer to mine and moved my head to the side defiantly, then thought better of it and attempted to kiss him, only to have him do the same to me. I started to open my eyes. Slowly, powerfully, Alex slid the tip of his cock into my wetness. I moaned and threw my legs open wide to welcome him in. He fed me inch by inch by inch until I felt pained . . . but I liked it.

Clamping my legs around his waist once more, Alex began to fuck me—hard. With my nipples safely encased in my bra, my inability to move, and pretty much everything else covered, I became acutely aware of how heightened my sensitivity was down below. With every thrust Alex gave me I could feel how swollen my pussy was from the orgasm he'd given me, how sensitive my clit was with every ounce of pressure put on it, jumping every time he pressed the fullness of his erection in me. I felt his lips on my earlobe, and then there was sucking, his tongue playing the tip of it as if he were back down between my legs using the very same tongue to negotiate me into orgasm.

"You are wrapped so tightly around my cock," he murmured dirtily in my ear. "And you're about to make me come."

That was all I needed. I wrapped my legs around him even tighter and swiveled my hips in time with his thrusts so that I could come again. This time I didn't care who might hear me moan. I howled as it happened, Alex's pelvic bone adding pressure against my clit as he pumped deeply. I felt delirious with pleasure—like I could die in

that moment and never have a single regret. And then I felt him pulsating inside me, his body stiffening as he slowed his thrusts into long strokes as his orgasm intensified. When he slowed I allowed my legs to slacken. He let go of my wrists and planted his hands on either side of me to hold himself up. I leaned back on my elbows and looked up at the stars again, taking a moment to catch my breath.

“So is this going to make the column?” Alex asked breathlessly.

“If it does I promise I’ll give you a good pseudonym,” I joked. “And maybe I’ll let you interview Nicole after all.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “If you play your cards right.”

He smiled wickedly. “Be careful—I’m a betting man, and I rarely lose.”

I curled my legs tighter around his waist again and pulled him down to me, planting a warm kiss on his lips. “So am I,” I told him. “And you know what?”

“What’s that?” he asked.

I winked. “Even when I lose, I win.”

THE END

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