



# RECEPTION

A KANE NOVELETTE

STYLO FANTÔME

Reception

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# **Dedication**

To a friend of a friend who simply asked -

“is there going to be a Jameson summer barbecue story?”

It took me a couple years to actually think about it, but here you go.

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Reception  
The Kane Series

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# 1

Jameson Kane rolled his head to one side, then sharply jerked it in the opposite direction.

*Crack!*

“Ah, *thank god*. I've been trying to do that since yesterday,” he grumbled, rubbing at the back of his neck.

“I told you I could book you a massage. *Several* times,” Sanders pointed out.

“Why pay money for something Tate will do for free? I swear, first thing when I get home, I'm going to lay down, then have her walk up and down my spine in a pair of five inch heels,” Jameson stated.

“Sounds painful.”

“Sounds *delightful*.”

The car they were waiting for pulled up and he slid into the back seat, quickly followed by his sometimes-assistant. Jameson didn't think he would ever get used to it, sharing a back seat with Sanders. The young man had been driving him around for so many years, it was bizarre to suddenly shift.

Sanders had resisted at first, when they met up in Switzerland for a business meeting and Jameson insisted on renting a car *and* a driver. The assistant could either sit in the back, or walk.

After four days of walking, Sanders gave up and got in the backseat.

“Why didn't Tatum meet us at the airport?” he asked, smoothing his tie as the car pulled away from the curb.

“Because *Tatum* doesn't know we're here,” Jameson replied.

“Pardon me?”

“We're three days early. I wanted to surprise her.”

“Forgive me, sir, but she hates surprises.”

“I know.”

“So why do you do this? It will just make everyone miserable.”

“That's part of the fun,” Jameson grinned.

It was a lengthy drive. Sanders made an attempt to work on his phone, but Jameson took it away, knowing the other man well enough to figure he'd try to warn Tate.

“I can only stay for a week,” Sanders reminded him when they finally pulled onto the pebble lined driveway.

“Yes, yes, you keep reminding me,” Jameson said.

“Well, whenever you two want me to visit, it always turns into more. Hong Kong was only a year ago and it turned into a huge fiasco. I was gone for almost three weeks in the end,” Sanders reminded him.

“Never gonna shut up about that, are you?”

“Most likely not.”

“Just enjoy the vacation,” Jameson snapped.

The car came to a stop and the men climbed out. Sanders tipped the driver while Jameson went ahead and unloaded their bags. They had done so much traveling that they were now excellent packers – one suitcase a piece was more than enough for short business trips.

“I don't see any cars, are you sure she's here?” Sanders asked, looking around as they climbed the steps to the house.

“I'm sure. We sold the Bentley.”

Sanders stopped moving.

“You sold *my car*?”

Jameson smiled.

“*Your* car? Funny, I'm pretty sure *I* bought it. Besides, it's not like you're ever around to drive it anymore,” he pointed out, taking out his keys to unlock the front door.

“But ... but ... that car ...” Sanders stammered.

“*I'm joking*. It's getting detailed, they'll deliver your precious baby later today.”

“Forgive me for saying, sir, but *you are not funny*.”

The house was quiet, which surprised Jameson. Usually when he got home from work, if Tate was already home, there was some sort of noise filling the house. The woman simply couldn't keep quiet. A TV blaring, music blasting, or even her just talking to herself while she attempted to cook.

“Tate?” he called out, jogging up the stairs. Their bedroom was empty, as were the two guest rooms that flanked it. The bathroom was vacant, as well. Downstairs he found the gym, kitchen, and library in the same state.

“In the back,” Sanders stated, meeting up with him in the living room. Jameson nodded and led the way. A door at the back of the room gave way to the conservatory, beyond which lay the backyard and, of course, the swimming pool.

When he walked outside, the first thing he saw was Tate. She was at the other end of the pool, walking in his direction, her head bent down as she looked at a magazine. Closer to the house sat a lounge chair, and fair skinned girl with carrot colored hair was stretched on it. Jameson's grin turned wolfish.

He loved it whenever Tate invited Rusty over. He liked Rusty a lot, and it wasn't because he harbored any sexual feelings towards the girl – it was because he made her *nervous*. Scared. He *loved* that, and always made it a point to really live up to his satanic nickname in front of her.

But before he could say anything, another person entered the picture. Jameson stood completely still as he watched a man walk across the lawn. The younger guy was wearing board shorts and flip flops, no shirt. He shouted something to Tate, and Jameson recognized his voice.

“Do you know him, sir?” Sanders asked in a steely voice. Normally, Sanders getting all protective would've made Jameson laugh, but at that moment, he was too busy thinking of the different places on his property where he could hide a body.

“Yes.”

The man was a junior broker, Richard Klimas, and he had started at Kraven Brokerage the previous fall. He and Tate had met at the company Christmas party, and it had been obvious from the start that Rich liked her. They were close in age and were both energetic. Add to the mix that Tate pretty much embodied sexuality in general, and boom. The man was in love.

Or rather, the man was in *lust*.

“Why are you reading!? It's gorgeous out, you're by a pool, you're in a bikini! You should be swimming!” Rich was laughing loudly. Tate laughed as well.

“Eh, today is more of a sun tan day,” she replied, nothing bother to look up as she spoke.

“Oh, I think it's a swimming day,” he teased. She shook her head.

“Not for me, but you can totally feel free to -”

As Jameson watched through narrowed eyes, the younger man suddenly rushed at Tate. She barely had time to look up from her magazine before Rich ran into her, wrapping his arms around her waist while throwing them both into the pool. Tate managed one good shriek before they hit the water.



“I am going to hope that he is a friend of yours,” Sanders added, and his voice almost sounded angry.

Well, angry for him.

“No, he's not,” Jameson answered.

When the pair finally broke the surface, Jameson was pleased to note that Tate was well away from the other man.

“Not funny!” she told Rich, her voice full of annoyance as she threw her now soaking wet magazine to the side of the pool.

“Oh, c'mon, it was fun!” he yelled back.

Tate rolled her eyes and continued to swim away from him, and it was then she finally looked over and noticed the new arrivals. Jameson managed a curt smile, though he could see out the corner of his eye that Sanders wasn't smiling at all. In fact, he was standing completely still and stiff, not even blinking. Tate hesitated for a second, then began taking long strokes to reach them.

“I swear, this is not what it looks like,” she grumbled as she got close. Jameson squatted down.

“Isn't that what everyone says when their husband comes home to find them with another man?” he questioned.

“Please. If I was going to cheat on you, I'd make it spectacular. You'd find us having sex while hanging from the chandelier in the entry way. Help me out,” she snapped. He grabbed her by her upper arms and hauled her out of the water, standing her in front of him.

“Then what the fuck is going on?” he demanded. She noticed Sanders and smiled while she began wringing out her hair.

“Sandy! You came back with him? I didn't know that was the plan! And weren't you coming home in a couple days?” Tate asked, looking back at Jameson.

“No, I'm home *now*. Tatum. Explain.”

She glanced over her shoulder. Rich was waving and saying hello. Rusty was looking uncomfortable in her lounge chair, pulling a towel over her bikini clad body. Tate turned back around and gestured for her two guys to follow her into the conservatory.

“He just showed up!” she hissed, glancing out the windows. “Scared the shit out of me! I was cleaning shit out of the garage when he popped up. Said he was '*in the neighborhood*', and figured he'd '*see how I was doing*'.”

Then I couldn't get rid of him! So I called Rusty and made her come over, thought I could pawn him off on her.”

“Great friend,” Jameson snorted. She glared at him.

“Shut up. You'd rather I was here alone with him?” she pointed out.

“No, I'd rather he wasn't here *at all*. Just tell him to get the fuck out.”

“Not all of us can be as rude as you, Jameson.”

“I once heard you tell a man to go '*suck his mother's dick*' just for smacking your ass. I think you can tell Rich Klimas to get out of your house.”

“That's different, that was a stranger. This guy works for you! I didn't know if you knew he lived out here, or if you had told him he could stop by whenever, or if you'd come back and be pissed off that I'd offended a colleague or whatever. I figured I would just suffer through him for a couple hours, then shoo him away and hide inside for the next couple days,” she explained.

“Weak, Tate,” Jameson called her out.

“I have no problem informing him that it is time for him to go, and that in the future, calling before dropping by is a prerequisite,” Sanders interrupted. Tate beamed at him.

“*Thank you*, Sandy. At least *someone* is nice and understanding,” she turned to glare at Jameson.

“It would be my pleasure,” Sanders replied before heading outside. Tate turned to watch him go.

“I swear, he gets bigger every time I see him. Do you think he-” she started, but was cut off when Jameson roughly grabbed her upper arm and began dragging her out of the conservatory. She knew him well enough to keep her mouth shut till they were in the library and the door had been slammed shut.

“I wanted to surprise you by coming home early,” he stated, tossing his jacket onto the couch.

“I hate surprises. See what happens when you try to surprise somebody?” she told him, walking over to a cabinet which held towels. After enough times of Tate wandering into the library after a dip in the pool, Jameson had started keeping towels and robes for her in the room.

“Apparently what happens is I find another man in my home,” he replied. She rolled eyes and wrapped her hair up in one towel before wrapping another one around her waist.

“Oh good lord, you know nothing was happening. Don't be mad at me, be mad at him,” she instructed.

“How do I know this hasn't been going on the entire time I've been gone?” he snapped, yanking his tie loose and throwing it onto his desk.

“Is that a joke?” she laughed. He marched up to her, backing her into some shelves.

“Am I fucking laughing?”

“I certainly am.”

His hand went around her throat.

“I am not amused, Tatum. I don't like people in our house, *period*, and especially not random single men, and *particularly* not when I'm not at home,” he hissed. She glared up at him.

“Well, neither do I. I'm sorry if I handled the situation badly, but you're being a fucking baby about it. Do you honestly think I would do something? Do you honestly think I would fuck somebody else while you're gone?” she demanded, yanking at his wrist. He laughed, a low sound in the back of his throat, and he let her go, moving his palm to press down on top of her chest.

“No, baby girl. But that doesn't mean he wouldn't *try* to make something happen, and *that's* what pisses me off,” he explained.

“So go be pissed off at him.”

“It's more fun to be pissed off at *you*.”

“Ahhhh,” she laughed, letting go of his wrist. “That's what this is really about – you're mad because you came home and your favorite chew toy was indisposed.”

“Now you're understanding your role.”

“Shut up.”

“*You* shut up.”

“You shut up!”

Before things could go any further, they heard voices in the entry way. They listened as Rich said goodbye to Rusty and Sanders. Sanders said nothing in return, and soon enough they heard the heavy door slam shut. Then footsteps, lightly padding up the stairs. Rusty, heading to her room.

“Is she staying with us?” Jameson asked, his eyes on the ceiling. Tate nodded.

“I invited her to stay for the whole weekend, till you got back. Or rather, when you were *supposed* to get back.”

“Delightful,” Jameson chuckled, then pulled the towel away from her body before starting on her bikini bottoms. “I’m in a bad mood, baby girl, so make sure to be extra loud for me.”

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## 2

Jameson was heading out of the elevator, his head down as he read over the front page of the New York Times. He was only a couple yards from his office when he heard the sound of someone jumping out of a chair, then feet running after him.

“Mr. Kane!”

He groaned inwardly and kept walking, though he did look up when that someone caught up to his side.

“What is it?” he snapped, glaring down at the young man next to him.

Glaring at Rich Klimas.

“I just wanted to apologize,” Rich started. “If I overstepped any boundaries over the weekend. It's just that I live so close to you, and Tate is close to my age, and I don't know many people here yet. She's a really fun girl.”

Jameson narrowed his eyes.

“Yes. She is.”

“Have you two been together long?” Rich asked.

“Yes.”

“You got married recently, I heard,” he questioned.

“Yes.”

“So really, not that long.”

*Enough.*

“I'm sorry,” Jameson stopped walking and turned towards the other guy. “Is this an inquisition? I charge for private interviews.”

“I'm sorry,” Rich laughed. That laugh was beginning to make Jameson think of blunt force trauma and wonder how difficult it would be to get away with manslaughter. “I don't mean to pry. I just really admire you. You're sort of an idol of mine, it's been my dream to work for you. I tried, at your New York offices, but then you relocated here. And I really like Tate, you have quite a special wife.”

“I know. Look, I'm a very busy person, and if you want to keep working for your 'idol', then I suggest you stop interrupting me,” Jameson informed him.

“Of course! Of course, just trying to be helpful. I just felt bad for Tate, being all alone in that big house while you're at work every day,” Rich

sighed.

*What's this?*

"Tate loves that '*big house*', and I can assure you, it's a welcome break. She owns a thriving business and is in the process of opening a second one. This break is her choice, and she doesn't need *you* to entertain her," Jameson stated.

"Well, she doesn't *need* me, of course I just thought it would be fun, you know, for her to have someone her own age to talk to."

Jameson should've been boiling mad. He'd been insulted, several times over. He should've fired the other man, right on the spot. Should've ended his future career, that afternoon. A couple phone calls, and Jameson could make it so Richard Klimas would be working in fast food for the rest of his life.

But where was the fun in that?

"Yes, she does deserve some '*fun*', doesn't she?" Jameson asked in a soft voice, eyeing Rich up and down.

"Yes ..." the younger man replied slowly, looking nervous for the first time.

"Tell you what. I'll organize a party this weekend. Just for her, tell her it was your idea. We'll invite the other junior brokers, have a pool party. A barbecue," Jameson prattled off.

"I ... wait, a party? At your house?" Rich sounded flabbergasted.

"Yes. They don't happen very often, so I recommend you accept the invitation."

"Of course, I -"

"See you this weekend!" Jameson called out, continuing into the anteroom before his office. He slammed the door behind him, startling his secretary.

"Is everything alright, Mr. Kane?" she asked, standing up.

"No. Call Sanders, patch it through to my office," he snapped, moving into his private office.

"Is Mr. Dashkevich in the country?" she called out behind him.

"Yes, call my house phone. And whatever you do, don't talk to Tate."

"But what if Mrs. Kane -"

"Just get a hold of Sanders!"

Jameson went home early that day. He walked in the door and immediately heard a familiar thumping noise. He followed it towards the back of the house, where there was a small gym. Tate was running away on a treadmill, pumping her arms in time. She nodded her head at his entrance and turned down the volume on the music she had playing, but she didn't stop running.

"What's up? You're home early," she panted, glancing at her watch.

"I know. How many miles?" he asked, sliding his jacket off as he walked towards her.

"Almost three. Only a quarter mile to go, then I'll be done," she assured him.

"Only three? *Pussy.*"

"Hey, Mr. Five Miles, not all of us want to experience shin splints," she point out.

"I eat five miles before breakfast every day, and I've never had shin splints," he replied.

"If you only came home to make fun of my work out routine, then you can just go right back to work," she suggested.

"I didn't," he assured her, standing next to her machine.

"Then why are you here? Go be useful, or productive. Stop staring at me," she laughed, waving her hand at him, trying to shoo him away.

"I like staring at you."

"Why?"

"Because it makes you uncomfortable."

She crossed her eyes at him.

"No it doesn't."

Jameson let his eyes wander over her face. She wasn't wearing any makeup, but she didn't really need to – her eyes were very sharp and dark on their own, her skin smooth and clear. She had on a sports bra and a pair of skin tight leggings. Disappearing under the fabric of the bra was a large, fading bruise, low on her right breast. There were light red marks around the base of her neck, and he knew without looking that there were scratch marks down her back.

It had been a fun welcome home party, just between the two of them.

*She is so perfect.*

“*Liebe*,” he started, and she looked back at him. “We're going to have a party this weekend.”

She stumbled on the belt, almost losing her footing.

“I'm sorry, what did you just say?”

“Party. This weekend.”

“Here?”

“Yes. A barbecue.”

She nearly flew backwards off the treadmill and had to grab the arms to hold herself up. Jameson reached over and pulled the emergency stop chord while she braced her feet on either side of the belt.

“I'm sorry, a ... what?” she tried to catch her breath.

“Barbecue.”

“I didn't even know you knew that word.”

“Shut up,” he chuckled, pulling on her ponytail. She got down off the machine and grabbed a towel, blotting at the sheen of sweat that was all over her.

“Why?” she asked.

“Why not? It's been a beautiful summer, and our backyard was designed for entertaining,” he suggested.

“Which you never do. The only time you throw a party is when you want to prove a point. Or piss someone off,” she reminded him.

“Exactly.”

“Oh god. Who are we trying to piss off and prove a point to?” she groaned, pushing past him and walking out of the gym.

“Baby girl, would you please just be thankful that for one afternoon, we'll get to do something you actually like to do?” he asked, following her upstairs.

“This is true, we do usually only do your stuff,” she agreed.

“Yes, but that's because my stuff is better.”

“That's a matter of opinion.”

“I feel like I'm experiencing *deja vu*, only this is much, much stupider ...” he sighed. She threw the towel in his face.

“Remind me why I bother talking to you?” she asked, disappearing into their closet.

“Because I pay for everything,” he stated.

“Everything, ha! You never bought me a pony!” her voice called out. He chuckled and rubbed his hand down his face.



“Tate. You haven't ridden since you were seventeen – why the fuck would you want a pony?” he asked. There was a pause, then she leaned out the doorway.

“Alright then – you never got me a miniature donkey.”

“A miniature ... what?”

“Jack ass.”

“I'm regretting coming home,” he sighed. She laughed and finally walked over to him, coiling her arms around his neck.

“A party sounds fun, I don't even care who you're trying to piss off. Want me to organize it?” she asked, scratching her fingernails against the back of his neck.

“No, Sanders is taking care of everything.”

“That's nice. How long is he staying for this time?”

“Only through the weekend – and don't ask, I already tried to get him to stay longer.”

“He's no fun in his old age.”

“Tatum, he's only twenty-three.”

“Okay,” she pulled back. “So what exact day are we having this?”

“Sunday.”

“That's good, gives us today and Saturday to prep. What time?”

“Late, around five.”

“Weird time for a barbecue,” she told him.

“Dinner time, sunset, people won't stay too long,” he listed off his reasons.

“Gotcha. Dinner time barbecue. Who all is invited?” she kept on with the questions.

“Anyone you want. Some friends, partners, from New York. The junior staff over at Kraven,” he spoke while he walked away from her.

“Okay, so Rusty will be there, and I – wait, did you say the *junior* staff?” her voice was full of surprise as she followed behind him. He didn't bother looking up as he fiddled with his watch strap.

“Yes. Being a junior broker is hard, most of them put in eighty hour work weeks, and for little return. Sunday is the only day they have free, and I'm gonna pay everyone to take Monday morning off,” he explained.

“My god, Jameson Kane being thoughtful and generous. Be still my beating heart!”

“Shut up.”

“You can try to hide it all you want, Mr. Kane,” Tate teased as she stood on her toes behind him and kissed his earlobe. “But you're a good man.”

“And you, Mrs. Kane, are a very stupid woman if you really believe that.”

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### 3

Tate wasn't a stupid woman, though. She could even be smart when she put her mind to it, and she knew Jameson Kane better than anyone else on the planet. And while it was true that he was actually very thoughtful and quite generous, she knew that neither of those personality traits had anything to do with the little "party" he was planning.

She also knew that Richard Klimas was a junior broker. *That's* what the party was about – Jameson apparently still felt the need to prove he had the biggest dick of them all. It was ridiculous, but Tate did love to party, so if he wanted to show off his fancy house and his expensive toys and his new hot wife, she would oblige him.

"Have you ever been to a barbecue, Sandy?" Tate asked, hanging around the kitchen the next day while Sanders wrote down plans for the party.

"No," was his response. He didn't bother looking up from his notebook.

"Then how do you know what to get? I've been to lots of barbecues," she informed him.

"I am not surprised, but I assure you, I have this under control."

"Well, can I at least see what all you've got planned?" she whined. She loved to tease him, and since she so rarely got the chance anymore, she made the most of it whenever he was around.

"You don't trust me?" he asked, finally glancing at her. His eyes, more gray than blue, were always impassive at first glance. But Tate knew how to read their stormy depths – she spoke fluent Sanders. She smiled softly at him.

"I trust you in all things," she replied. "I'm just trying to be a pest."

"Well, you are succeeding wonderfully at it."

But he was smiling, as well, and he slid his notebook down the counter till it was in front of her.

He'd hired an event coordinator for a simple backyard barbecue! He'd also gotten a caterer who specialized in traditional Texan style barbecue. Her mouth watered as she looked over the menu he'd approved. Ribs and burgers and fish, oh my. There would be a fantastic selection of appetizers, followed by a casual stand-up meal that would come fresh from an

enormous grill the company would bring with them. And of course, as always, an open bar.

"This is really impressive," she finally said, handing his notes back to him.

"Thank you. I always thought I hated doing things of this nature, but you know, I've actually been enjoying it. It feels ... nostalgic," he told her.

"Awww, Sandy. You know, you could do stuff like this *all* the time if you just moved back in with us," she suggested. He cleared his throat.

"I'm sure I could, but I'm afraid I've grown accustomed to living in my own place."

She snorted.

"Well, I haven't. Why won't you stay longer than the weekend? Stay a week, we'll go up to New York, just like old times," she tried to tempt him. He adjusted his tie and just like that, she knew her attempts were futile.

"I would enjoy that, and we will be sure to go during another trip in the future, but I want to go home on Monday," he insisted. She sighed and propped her chin in her hands.

"You're no fun now," she said. The corner of his lips twitched and he looked at her again.

"I'm not entirely sure I was ever fun, but if you'd accept a compromise, we can bake some brownies if you'd like."

Sanders took off his jacket and tucked his tie into his dress shirt, then laughed a little as Tate tied a frilly apron on him. She put on a sensible one and they made desserts together. She did the mixing and he did the washing. As he scrubbed the mixing bowl, she made him turn pink when she managed to get the entire brownie-batter-covered-mixing spoon into her mouth. When the goodies were finally done and cool enough to eat, they took a plate out to the conservatory and sat amongst the flowers.

"The roses look well," he commented, leaning forward and rubbing a velvety petal between his fingertips. She watched his dress shirt stretch and strain across his broad shoulders. Amazing, Sanders with broad shoulders.

*Talk about a late bloomer.*

"Yeah," she finally answered. "Jameson hired a guy, he comes once a week and checks everything."

"Good. It makes me happy knowing my flowers are well taken care of," he sighed, sitting back in his seat. Tate had her feet propped up on the table in front of them and he copied her pose, crossing his legs at the ankle.

“I thought it would. Jameson talked about tearing down the conservatory, turning the space into a huge outdoor living room type area. I told him it would crush you if he did,” she said.

“Tear down the conservatory? He's gone insane,” Sanders muttered. She laughed and covered his feet with her own.

“It's possible. Has he explained this party to you?” she asked, tearing off a piece of brownie and offering it to him.

“Yes, he said he wants a barbecue, and that's he's inviting some of the junior staff from -”

“Sandy, don't repeat things we both already know – you know I hate that. This is about that Rich guy,” she stated. Sanders cleared his throat and stared straight ahead, not even looking as he took the piece of brownie.

“If it is, Jameson did not mention anything of it to me,” he said before eating the dessert.

“Really?” she asked, not believing him one bit. The blush creeping up his neck betrayed him.

“He never specifically said Mr. Klimas' name to me in regards to the reason for this party.”

“Ah.”

“He did, however, make sure to double and triple check that Mr. Klimas had received an invitation, and that he'd RSVPed that he'd be in attendance.”

“See!” Tate clapped her hands together. “It *is* about that – you don't think Jameson is actually upset about the other day, do you? I told the truth, the dude just showed up.”

Sanders relaxed and patted her affectionately on the knee.

“Of course he's not upset at you. He is mad at Mr. Klimas.”

“But ... it's just stupid. Why? It's not like I'm gonna run away with the guy. I don't even like him. He's not a threat, so why does Jameson care?”

“Because the man is offensive, and Jameson doesn't care for anything that offends. Mr. Klimas has apparently made inappropriate comments at work, in regards to yours and Jameson's relationship.”

“So big deal, just fire the guy.”

“And deny himself the pleasure, the fun, of showing Mr. Klimas just what he is up against?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It seems as though Mr. Klimas has gotten the idea that he might be better suited for you. I think this party is Jameson's way of proving him wrong,” Sanders explained.

Tate laughed, long and loud.

“That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard,” she gasped for air.

“Yes,” Sanders agreed, rubbing her back until she caught her breath.

“But it's also kind of sweet,” she admitted, and then she leaned back before he could move away, trapping his arm between her and her chair. She smiled and scooted over, snuggling into his side. He didn't hesitate to move his trapped arm and wrap it around her shoulders, hugging her close.

*Sometimes it's like a different person. Sanders 2.0. Stronger. Faster. Cuddlier.*

“He has an odd way of showing his love,” he stated. “But it is still love.”

“It is,” she agreed. “And I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.”

They stayed like that until the sun set and they heard Jameson get home. Then Sanders put his shoes back on and stood up, all with Tate still clinging to him. When he made his way back through the house, he had to lumber because he was practically dragging her form along behind him.

“Finally,” Jameson sighed as he glanced at them when they came into the kitchen. “Someone else gets to deal with her antics.”

“You loooooove my antics,” she teased.

He snorted.

“Everything is arranged for tomorrow. I have done my duty as party planner and baby-sitter,” Sanders started, pulling at her wrists while he spoke. “I would like to return to the guest house and make some phone calls.”

“No! You leave so soon, and we'll all be busy tomorrow, you can't leave me now!” Tate pleaded, locking her arms around him even tighter.

“Sir, if you'd please,” he sighed.

While he pulled and yanked at her arms, Jameson simply walked around behind them and picked her up. She was forced to let go and she laughed while Sanders walked briskly out of the room, straightening his clothing as he went.

“Why do you like torturing him?” Jameson asked, dropping her to the floor before turning away.

“Because he tolerates it so much better than you,” she replied, following him upstairs.

They moved into their bedroom and while Jameson went out into the sun room he'd had converted into an office, she walked into their closet. As she combed through hangers to find a suitable barbecue outfit, a phone rang from the next room. Jameson chattered away for a long time. She picked out multiple pieces of clothing, discarded most of them, then picked out some more all while he talked.

She finally got her day time outfit down – shorts and a plaid button down, keeping it authentic. But she wanted to change after sunset, and she couldn't decide whether or not to go silly or go sexy. She leaned against the dressing table, waiting for his phone call to end. When she realized over half an hour had passed, though, she decided enough was enough. She grabbed several hangers full of clothing and walked out of the closet.

“Jameson,” she hissed his name. He glanced at her as he slowly paced in front of their bed, but he didn't respond.

“No, no,” he was talking into the phone. “I'm talking court side. You'll be able to bullshit with the guys on the bench.”

Tate rolled her eyes. The Celtics, of course. Jameson gave exactly zero fucks about basketball, but he had friends and clients who enjoyed the sport, so he had season tickets, the best seats, everything.

“Just really quick, help me,” she whispered. That time, he didn't even bother glancing at her. Just completely ignored her as he kept pacing. There was a bowl of popcorn at the foot of the bed and every time he passed it, he took out a couple kernels and nibbled at them.

“We can do that ... maybe make a weekend of it ... I'll see what Tate's got planned.”

“Tate could tell you right now, if you'd give her a second,” she offered. He continued ignoring her and flicked a piece of popcorn into his mouth.

“No ... no ... I'll book the restaurant, your taste is shit ... remember that last dinner?”

“Jameson,” she whispered again, pacing alongside him and holding up her armful of clothing. “Just two seconds – which is better?” Nothing. It was like she wasn't in the room. “Jameson, I forgot to tell you – I signed up to be in Ang's new porn, I need a plane ticket to L.A.” Normally any mention of Ang got a reaction, but not that night. “Oh my god, Jameson!

Aliens! On the back lawn! And they're stomping through the rhododendrons!"

She'd gasped and pointed for that one, but still got zero reaction. She glared at him. Fine, he thought he could ignore her? She'd pull out the big guns. He finally paused in the conversation and shoved some more popcorn into his mouth. Tate seized the moment.

"Oh, and I forgot to tell you, I'm pregnant."

She had expected a reaction. Maybe a glare, or a snarky comment. What she got, though, was much more dramatic. Jameson sucked in so hard he inhaled popcorn. He dropped his cell phone as he hacked and coughed. He finally had to bend over and lean a hand against the mattress. While he pounded at his chest with his free hand, the bowl of popcorn fell to the floor, scattering kernels everywhere.

"Jesus, are you alright? Should I get Sanders to give you the Heimlich?" Tate asked, tossing her clothing onto the bed.

"No," he wheezed hoarsely. "What the fuck did you just say!?"

"I'm doing porn with Ang and there's aliens in the back yard."

"What?"

"Oh, and I'm pregnant."

If she'd ever thought about it, Tate would've figured that watching Jameson go pale would've been funny. Actually seeing it happen, though, was a different story. She almost felt bad.

"You're pregnant?" he demanded, staring hard at her.

"Yes, Jameson. With triplets. Eight months along – don't I look great?" she asked, turning to the side and showing off her flat stomach.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he asked.

"I'm not pregnant, you idiot, I just wanted your help picking out an outfit."

"I ... what?"

"You were ignoring me, I wanted to get your attention."

"And *that's* how you do it? Jesus fucking christ, Tate, I almost had a goddamn heart attack!" he snapped, finally standing upright.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know you'd react like that, I was just trying to be funny," she explained, holding up her hands.

"I'm not fucking laughing."

He was actually mad. She'd just blurted out the most ridiculous thing she could think of, something she'd felt sure would catch his attention, and



he was acting like she'd just shot his favorite dog.

"Clearly," she retorted. "And I'm sorry the idea of me carrying your child is enough to stop your heart."

"Tatum, I'm pretty sure the idea of you being in charge of a tiny human being's life would be enough to give *anyone* a heart attack."

"God, you're an asshole."

"That was a very important client you just embarrassed me in front of."

"Please, you embarrassed yourself. You do realize that babies are often a result of sex, right?" she informed him. He rolled his eyes and strode towards her, rolling up his sleeves as he went.

"Yes, and that's why all those brilliant doctors invented birth control."

"Which isn't 100% effective."

"Tate, are you actually trying to tell me something here, or are you just being annoying?" he asked, eyeing her carefully.

"Neither. I'm just pointing out that there is at least a 1% chance that I may someday have to tell you I'm pregnant, and that if I ever do, you had better not fucking react like that," she snapped.

"I make no promises."

"Sometimes I seriously think about hating you."

"Please," he snorted, hooking a finger into the top of her pants and yanking her close. "You couldn't stop loving me if you tried."

"Keep putting that to the test."

"Stop talking. I thought you wanted my opinion on what you should wear tomorrow," he reminded her as he plucked at her clothing.

"*Wanted*, as in past tense. Now I don't care what I wear to your stupid fucking party," she grumbled, not moving as he undid the button on her pants and pulled down the zipper.

"Pity," he sighed, shoving her pants over her hips, causing them to pool at her feet.

"Why?" she asked, raising her arms as he yanked and pulled her shirt over her head.

"Because I think this outfit is what looks best on you."

"Jameson."

"Yes?"

"I'm only wearing panties."

"Exactly. Now please stop talking."

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## 4

“So who all is going to be there?”

Tate glanced up. She was painting Rusty's toenails and they were sitting outside in the backyard. She'd turned on the pool lights and they cast an ethereal glow over everything.

“Some of his partners,” Tate replied, knowing her friend was asking about the barbecue. “People from his office downtown. I called Ang, but he's too busy this weekend to fly out here.”

“Probably a good thing,” Rusty sighed. It had been years since her one night stand with Angier, but she'd never fully gotten over it.

“You're totally welcome to invite anyone you want,” Tate suggested. The other girl snorted.

“Like who? All the old gang has moved on, and it's like I'm just ... still here. Same ol' Rusty,” she sighed.

“Hey, I like 'same ol' Rusty',” Tate pointed out.

“Still. Ang has moved off to L.A., your sister is way out in the country. All of our friends are getting married and having babies and getting careers. Even you, the craziest of us all, is a settled down married woman. And here I am, still working in a bar, still living alone.”

“I may be bias, but I think the bar you work in is pretty awesome. I hear the owner is the best boss ever.”

Rusty was the general manager for O'Shea's, Tate's first bar. Call it nepotism, she didn't care – she knew Rusty was a kick ass bartender, and she'd worked in the field for so long, she knew how to run a good bar. Plus, it felt good giving something back to the friend who'd helped her out for so long. Tate made sure that Rusty's paychecks kept her well in order – she may have been living alone, but her new apartment was a mansion compared to the piece of shit they'd rented together.

“She's pretty rad,” Rusty laughed. “But her silent partner is a little scary.”

Tate looked up again, but Rusty wasn't looking at her – she was staring back at the house. Tate glanced over her shoulder and smiled when she saw Jameson pacing around in the conservatory. He had his cell to his ear and with his free hand, he was making a lot of angry slashing motions. Someone on the other end of his phone call was getting the sharp end of his tongue.

*Lucky.*

“You just ...” Tate stopped herself before she could say something stupid like “have get to know him”, because in all honesty, Jameson was almost scarier when someone got to know him. “It's like learning a language, right? Once you learn how to speak fluent Satan, he's not so scary. Being a dick and snapping all the time, it's just the way he communicates.”

“I think that's one language class I'll pass on,” Rusty laughed. There was a long pause and Tate concentrated on her work for a while. Then she cleared her throat.

“So there's no one at all you want to invite? No one with, say, sandy blonde hair? Green eyes?”

“Who are you talking about?”

Tate rolled her eyes.

“Oh, c'mon. You have been making googly eyes at that beer distributor for weeks now. What's the big deal?” she demanded.

“Not all of us are like you, Tate. We can't all be slutty mcslutbags,” Rusty teased. “What do you want me to do? Just jump him next time he comes into the back room?”

“Ew, no. Jump him in the office, there's a couch in there.”

“Yeah, and I shudder to think what you and Satan probably used to do on it. No thanks. I'll continue my spinster existence.”

“You could just ask him out. Invite him to the party,” Tate suggested, leaning back and putting the polish away.

“How? Just lurk around work all morning tomorrow – which is a Sunday, BTW – and hope he happens to show up?” Rusty asked, looking over her new pedicure.

“Call him. He has a home office, he always has his cell. Just do it,” Tate urged. Rusty was quiet for a minute, but then she shook her head, her strawberry blonde curls flying around with the motion.

“No. We've barely even spoken, what would he think if I just called him? I'll come to this party where I don't know anyone and I'll stand against the wall like I always do and then I'll go to bed. And then you promised you'd let me go home on Monday,” Rusty reminded her. Tate held up her hands.

“Hey, you're not a prisoner here.”

“You said if I wanted a ride home, I'd have to ask Jameson personally, and then he'd have to drive me.”

“He's a wonderful conversationalist.”

“You're a brat. You know that, right?” Rusty laughed.

“Yeah, I'm getting spoiled in my old age. And I'll make you a promise – I won't let you be a wallflower. I'll take you around and introduce you to a whole bunch of future millionaires. Then we'll get knee walking drunk and you can have nasty sex with one of them in the pool,” Tate informed her.

“Oh god, just stop. I feel a headache coming on.”

“Just try and get out of it – I'll make Jameson carry you downstairs.”

“He wouldn't.”

“He'd *love* it.”

As if he'd known he was being talked about, the object of their conversation came striding across the lawn. Tate almost laughed at Rusty pulled back into herself, wrapping her arms around her knees.

“Is everyone a goddamn vegan nowadays?” Jameson demanded once he'd reached them.

“No, I think they're all just mostly gluten free,” Tate replied.

“Shut up.”

“You're the one who asked -”

“I keep getting calls about peoples fucking 'dietary needs' and what they want at this stupid fucking party. Did I miss something? Because I thought when you were invited to a party, you ate whatever was fucking served to you,” he growled.

“Jameson, I was at a party with you once where all they had was cod, and you wanted halibut. You made the woman who owned the catering company drive all over at midnight looking for halibut,” Tate pointed out. He glared at her, but she was rewarded with a snicker from Rusty.

“*I'm special*, remember? These people should just be glad they're getting to come to my house. Isn't that enough?” he asked, finally sitting in one of the lounge chairs next to the girls.

“Maybe it's a religious thing,” Tate suggested. “Maybe they're life long vegans. Maybe they're just fucking with you. Who cares? Call the caterer, tell them to have options.”

“And now you know why I never do these things,” he sighed, rubbing his hand across his forehead.

"This was all your idea, bro. You can call it off whenever you want," she told him.

"Might not be such a bad idea."

Tate frowned. Jameson, giving up on something? Where was the fun in that? She sighed dramatically and stood up, collecting the nail polish and files as she moved.

"Say Rusty, remember Thursday?" she asked. Rusty squeaked at first, as if she was shocked that they even knew she was there.

"Uh ... yes?"

"The day I invited you over."

"Yeah, I remember it."

"Remember the guy who stopped by, Rich?"

"Sure."

"What did you think of him?" Tate asked, absent mindedly filing one of her nails while she spoke.

"Um ... he seemed nice?" Rusty replied, sounding questioning. Her gaze flicked between Tate and Jameson.

"Yeah, he did, didn't he? He's our age, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I'd guess so."

"Gorgeous eyes. Did you see them? Deep blue."

"Tatum," Jameson said in a low voice, startling Rusty.

"Yeah, I thought they were brown at first, they were so dark," she finally replied. "He was pretty hot in general."

"He was, wasn't he? He was supposed to be at this party, I thought it would be perfect for you two to maybe get to know each other. But since Jameson is canceling it, I guess I'll have to call Rich up and arrange a coffee date for us all."

"*Tate*," Jameson's voice was sharp that time, full of warning. She waved her hand at him impatiently.

"Don't worry, we won't invite you. Just the three of us. Monday afternoon good for you, Rus?" she asked.

"Uh, no, actually. I have to open the bar," Rusty reminded her.

"Oh, poo, that's right. Well, I'll have coffee *alone* with Rich, and I'll put in some good words for you. He was so nice, wasn't he? And the way he looked in those shorts, I was – *ack!*" Tate let out a startled yelp when Jameson grabbed her by the waist of her pants and yanked her off her feet. She fell into his lap, her pedicure supplies flying all over the place.

“I know what you're trying to do,” Jameson growled in her ear as he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist. “And I get it, but enough is enough.”

“What? You said the party was canceled, and I think a good looking guy like that shouldn't be single. It's my duty to find him a nice girl,” Tate laughed, squirming against his hold. It didn't do any good, though, he just squeezed tighter and she found herself gasping for air.

“Rusty,” he suddenly said, directing his attention to the woman in the other lounge chair. She swallowed visibly and her eyes were so big, they seemed to take up half her face.

“Y-yes?” she stammered.

“Did I ever tell you that I was always partial to redheads?”

She went pale at that statement and Tate struggled to keep from bursting out laughing.

“I think I'll go inside now,” Rusty replied hastily as she stumbled to her feet.

“Yes, *thank you*, run along now,” he called after her.

“You're not very nice to her,” Tate snorted, pulling at his wrists.

“I'm not very nice to anybody. So, 'gorgeous deep blue eyes', huh? That's what does it for you?” he asked. He loosened his grip but didn't entirely let her go. Instead, he let his hands wander under her t-shirt.

“Maybe. Are you going to cancel the party?” she asked, then hissed through her teeth when he pinched sensitive flesh.

“No. I've already paid for everything. Are you going to flirt with Rich Klimas all evening?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“On how much trouble I'll get into if I do,” she breathed, leaning fully back against him, resting her head back on his shoulder.

“So much trouble,” he whispered back. “If I so much as catch you looking at him, you won't be able to walk right for a week. *That* much trouble.”

She shivered, then moaned when she felt his teeth against her earlobe.

“Then I am *definitely* going to flirt with him.”

## 5

Tate looked around the backyard. She could hardly believe she was at home. There were bales of hay stacked about for “ambiance” and a huge barbecue was back by the pool house. Amazing smells were wafting away from it.

A bevy of young men and women were walking around in matching outfits – jeans and gingham t-shirts. They carried appetizers and cocktails and, hilariously enough, PBR in tall-boy cans.

*Satan must be shitting himself.*

Jameson was actually mingling and chatting away. When she finally located him, he was laughing at something one of his partners said. Then he caught her staring at him and he glanced over his sunglasses, cocking up an eyebrow at her.

*Yup. He's definitely uncomfortable.*

Things were going pretty smoothly. At first, when everyone had shown up, things had been stiff and uneasy. A bunch of young brokers at *the* Jameson Kane's home – they hadn't known what to do with themselves. Luckily, Tate was a born partier, and Rusty wasn't too far behind her. They got everyone laughing and talking quickly enough, and pretty soon everyone was having a great time.

And bonus points for Tate, she hadn't spoken to Richard Klimas once. Several times she'd seen him making his way towards her and she'd taken evasive maneuvers. There were plenty of women at the party, he could find someone else to flirt with – she still couldn't figure out why he'd set his sights on her. Because of Jameson? Didn't he know better? There was only one outcome to a pissing contest with Jameson Kane.

She hoped Rich liked losing.

“Hey!” she said loudly as she sidled up to Rusty's side. The light was catching Rusty's hair, making it look like a fiery halo around her head. Combined with the flush in her cheeks and her wide, expressive eyes, she looked like a real life angel come to earth.

*The man she's talking to certainly seems to think so.*

“Hey, you!” Rusty squealed back, hugging Tate to her side.

“How're you two doing? Looking cozy,” she said.



“Great party, Mrs. Kane,” the guy said, toasting her with his can of PBR.

“Oh god, don't call me that, it just makes me sound like an old lady. Tate,” she introduced herself as she held out her hand. He shook it quickly.

“Howard Steele,” he replied.

“Wait wait wait,” Tate gasped. “Your name is *Steele!*?”

“Yeah. It's a weird kind of name,” he laughed.

“No, it's just ... Steele ... Rusty. *Rusty Steele!*” she practically yelled.

“Oh my god, Tate,” Rusty snorted, then she delicately hiccuped.

“Hey, I didn't even notice. I think this means we *have* to get married, Rusty,” Howard teased. She blushed even more and it suddenly hit Tate that her friend was just a tad bit drunk, and more than a tad bit infatuated.

“I think we should at least kiss first,” Rusty giggled. “I mean, can you imagine anything worse than marrying someone only to find out they're an awful kisser?”

“I can imagine a few things,” he replied in a low voice.

Rusty's cheeks practically caught on fire after that comment, so Tate excused herself. She knew her friend had been having a pretty long dry spell. But vodka plus sexual frustration multiplied by over the top flirty banter pretty much equaled Boomtown. She was willing to bet the dry spell would be over before the night was through.

*I'm like Cupid, only for sex. Way cooler.*

She spied Sanders standing at one end of the pool, finally alone. He'd been surrounded by people all afternoon – over the years, he'd changed. He was halfway decent at socializing now. Or at least at pretending to socialize.

On top of that, he'd become something of a legend. Everyone at Kraven Brokerage had heard stories about Jameson's former assistant, the quiet man who basically ran everything, and yet wasn't anywhere near as scary as his boss. So all the new brokers had been eager to make his acquaintance and get on his good side, and the female ones hadn't been immune to his classic good looks.

*Not to mention his new and improved physique. I better get over there before someone drags him away again.*

“Having fun?” he asked when she came up alongside him.

“I am,” she assured him, then she slipped her arm through his and hugged close to him. “Everything seems to be going well.”

"I'm not a fan of the hay," he said as he leaned over to brush some of the offending decoration off his pant leg. "But everything else seems to be going according to plan."

"The hay makes everything quaint, it's great. Are you really leaving me on Monday, Sandy?" she sighed, laying her head on his shoulder.

"Yes. My flight departs at three-thirty in the afternoon."

"It gets harder and harder every time," she mumbled. He was silent for a second, then she felt his cheek against the top of her head, and his arm was squeezing hers tightly.

"It is not easy," he agreed. "But I am only ever a phone call away."

"But I like you right here."

"Sometimes missing someone is what makes you love them more," he suggested. "If I were at home all the time, we would never get the opportunity to miss each other, and thus we wouldn't be able to love each other as much."

"I hate it when you make leaving seem like a good idea. Just let me hate you a little bit," she joked.

"Alright."

They stood in a companionable silence for a while, just people watching. When Sanders stiffened up, though, she knew something had caught his attention. Something that annoyed him. She glanced around and saw Rich heading in their direction. Before she could say a word, though, Sanders turned away and headed back into the house, forcing her to walk along next to him.

"I don't get it," she said as they moved through the rooms and into the kitchen. "Jameson threw this party to show Rich how awesome and rich he is, how he's totally the coolest guy ever and that's why I'm with him, yet I haven't seen him even talk to Rich once since he's gotten here."

"Knowing Jameson, I'm sure whatever it is he's planning is much more interesting than simply talking to Mr. Klimas," Sanders pointed out. She stayed by the door while he ignored the caterers and cooks in the kitchen, stepping around them smoothly till he reached the cupboard next to the fridge.

"Oh god, that just makes me nervous," Tate laughed, watching as Sanders took a bottle of Jack Daniels off a shelf. He grabbed two shot glasses as well, then walked back over to her.

“Really? I would think you are used to his antics by now,” he replied, leading the way into the library.

“I don't think anyone could ever get used to Satan's antics,” she snorted.

Sanders didn't reply, just went about pouring the whiskey into the glasses. Tate moved behind the desk and sat in the big chair while Sanders moved one of the wingback chairs over so it was next to her. Then he scooted the glasses across the desk until they each had one in front of them.

“Do you have something in mind?” Tate asked, picking up her shot. Sanders thought for a moment, then picked his up and stared at her over the rim.

“To good friends,” he offered, and they both took their shots. Then she poured another round.

“To soulmates,” she corrected him. A blush started creeping up his neck, but he nodded and they took their second shots.

“I have not had whiskey since the last time I visited,” he breathed as he shoved his empty glass away from him.

“Pussy,” she snickered, and she took a pull straight from the bottle. “You know, Sandy, sometimes I worry about life.”

“Why?” he asked, adjusting the knot in his tie.

“Because everything is so ... I was talking to Rusty last night, and the way she was talking, it was almost like she missed our old life together. And I was thinking about those days and about how weird it is to imagine my life without you guys in it. I mean, I feel like I've known you forever now,” she told him.

“Four years would be more accurate.”

“*Ug*, you know what I mean. You're a part of me, it almost seems weird that you weren't there the whole time. And Jameson ...”

She could never quite articulate her feelings for Jameson. With Sanders, it was easy enough. Love, soulmate, best friend. But with Jameson ... it was just feelings. No words. He was a fire that started in her chest and spread to her entire body. A sun at the center of her solar system. She'd been living off his light for most of her life. Sure, there'd been times when he'd been very far away, but he'd still been there. In the background, lighting her way to the person she was now.

“Yes, the three of us have a very unique relationship. I do not believe in destiny, but if I did, I would certainly think it had a hand in bringing us

together.”

“Such a romantic,” she snickered. He cleared his throat and adjusted his tie again.

“I do try. Shall we return?”

“If you insist.”

“I do.”

“And if I resist?” she teased, smiling at him as he climbed to his feet.

“I am not Jameson, I won't play your games.”

“Then how would you get me to return?”

He didn't say another word. He simply picked up her bottle of Jack and carried it out of the room with him.

*He knows me so well ...*

\*

Jameson glanced around, realizing he hadn't seen Tate in a while. The sun had long since set, but no one had left the barbecue yet. Pecan pie, hush puppies, and ambrosia were being passed around by waiters, and drinks were still flowing. Everyone seemed to be laughing and having a good time.

*Everyone except the host, because he can't find the hostess. Where the fuck is she?*

He strolled around the pool and finally found her. She'd changed into her evening outfit – a ridiculous cocktail dress that didn't fit the casual theme at all. It was also cheap, obviously from some store in a mall somewhere. The top was strapless and tight, while the skirt was short, almost sticking out at her sides. It reminded him a little of a ballerina. A cheap, slutty, ballerina.

*She wore that for me. God, she's perfection.*

His appreciation of her dress was spoiled, however, when he realized who she was talking to – Rich Klimas. They were near the end of the pool, and she kept taking steps backwards, clearly trying to end the conversation and get away. Klimas took no notice and simply matched her step for step.

It was fun for a moment, watching Tate be uncomfortable. She so rarely was – at the bar, if she'd been caught in the same situation, she would've simply told him to fuck off. But in Jameson's world, surrounded by his coworkers and colleagues, he knew she felt hindered. She didn't want to do anything that might embarrass him.

*Stupid girl. All these years and she's yet to figure out I'm not easily embarrassed.*

"Tate," he said loudly, finally walking up next to her. "There you are."

"Thank you," she gushed, the relief obvious on her face. "I was just coming to find you."

"Jameson!" Rich said, smiling big. Jameson cocked up an eyebrow. Were they on a first name basis now? "Tate and I were just talking – you know, it turns out Tate and I went to the same prep school! She was a couple grades above me, and I transferred out after my freshman year. But what a coincidence. We were just talking about getting together sometime and comparing high school horror stories."

Tate's jaw dropped. Clearly, this was news to her. But before she could ruin the moment and say she had no intention of comparing anything with Rich, Jameson spoke over her.

"Sounds like fun. Mind if I borrow my wife for a moment?" he asked, smiling congenially as he cupped his hand around Tate's elbow.

"Only if you promise to give her back," Rich chuckled, toasting his glass in jest.

"Twenty minutes and she's all yours," Jameson assured him.

He didn't wait for a reply – he steered Tate back into the conservatory. They went down the first row of flowers, stopping in front of the roses. When he let her go, she turned to face him.

"Okay, first of all – he came up and spoke to me. I tried to get away, and I didn't flirt at all. Second of all – we *never* talked about getting together. And third of all – did you just say 'borrow my wife' out loud? For reals?" she asked, still in shock.

"I never realized walking away from someone was such a problem for you, Tate," he said, glaring down the length of his nose at her.

"Oh, shut up," she grumbled, turning to look out the window. "So what did you want to 'borrow' me for? I'm hoping this stimulating conversation isn't why."

"I don't understand why you feel the need to talk to someone you don't even like," he kept harping on the subject.

"Not all of us are like you, Jameson. Some of us feel bound by social etiquette to be polite, and particularly so when we're dealing with a guest we invited into our home," she replied. He almost laughed.

"Bullshit. You're rude to me all the time, and I own this house."

“When you talk, you make my brain hurt.”

“Then you're getting an idea of how I feel almost all the time.”

“Why are you picking a fight right now?” she abruptly asked, looking at him again. “It's been a good party, I've behaved myself, you've pretended to be a decent human being. I'm pretty sure all your little peons are totally impressed with your awesome home, so what reason could you possibly have to be mad?”

“Maybe I don't need a reason,” he replied in a soft voice, stepping closer to her and dragging his finger up the center of her cleavage, across her chest, and scratching up her throat. “Maybe I just think it's *fun*.”

\*

Tate knew this side of him very well. As Jameson's fingers gently wrapped around her throat, she let her gaze slide away. Looked outside.

“Jameson,” she breathed. “You have a backyard full of guests standing maybe fifty feet away.”

“You're becoming shy in your old age, Mrs. Kane,” he said, his grip around her throat growing tighter.

“Ooohhh, that sounds like a challenge.”

“Game?”

“Do you even have to ask?”

His fingernails were cutting into her skin when he yanked her close. She gasped but his mouth replaced oxygen, his tongue blocked her air flow. She moaned and pressed herself against him, smoothing her hands over his chest.

She never got tired of it. His body, his mouth, his hands. And *especially* his voice. Each time was still exciting. Different. *Intense*.

“Is this the point you wanted to prove?” she asked in a breathy voice as she backed up onto a table full of flowers.

“I don't have to prove shit to you,” he growled, pulling at the top of her dress, forcing it down under her strapless bra.

“Maybe not to me,” she panted, practically ripping apart his belt and whipping it away from his pants. “But you sure feel the need to prove yourself to a lot of other people.”

“Shut the fuck up, Tate.”

“And to a lowly junior broker? Pathetic, Jameson.”

A hand was in her hair, yanking back hard. She let out a cry of pain, then groaned when she felt his teeth against the side of her neck.

"I thought I told you, this is all *fun* to me," he hissed, both his hands moving down her body and working their way under her skirt. When his finger curled around the top of her underwear, she pulled back a little.

"Jameson, the door is open," she whispered, glancing at the exit to the backyard. He didn't answer at first, instead taking the time to rip her panties away from her body.

"See? So shy," he chuckled, his face buried in her cleavage.

He wasn't entirely wrong – Tate *was* growing more reserved in her "old age", as he liked to joke. Crazy sex was still okay, but the possibility of getting caught had lost its shine. She liked it best when she was certain they couldn't be interrupted. When she was positive she would have him all to herself, from start to finish.

Not that it would stop her, though. As his hands forced her legs wide apart and his fingers made themselves at home inside her, she forgot all about the door. She moaned again and fell against the window behind her.

"What's ... the hurry ..." she gasped. His fingers were moving so fast, she couldn't quite catch her breath.

He didn't answer, but he did remove his hand from between her thighs. He stepped into the V of her legs and she didn't hesitate, she immediately began pushing and shoving at the top of his pants.

"Not so worried about getting caught now," he chuckled at her eagerness. Then it was his turn to groan as her hand wrapped around the base of his dick.

"Keep poking fun at me and I'll go find my new best friend, Rich Klimas," she teased, stroking up and down his hard length.

Those seemed to be the magic words. Jameson's hand was suddenly on her chest, shoving her back into the window again.

"Your fucking mouth," he growled, shoving her hand out of the way. "Always fucking pissing me off."

"You love it," she started chuckling, but it was cut off by a shriek as he slammed into her. The potted plants began to shake and rattle on the table as he pounded away.

*He is in a hurry tonight.*

"Yeah? You want to know what I love?"

"What?"

“When you shut the fuck up.”

She managed to laugh again and she pressed her hands to his chest, then clutched at his shirt.

“Some day I really will shut up, and you'll be sorry,” she warned him. He grabbed her wrists and held them together before raising her arms, slamming them against the window. A pane of glass cracked, but luckily didn't break completely out.

“That day will be a blessing. Fuck, Tate,” he grunted, grabbing her knee and lifting her leg up against his hip. “Why so wet so fast? Do barbecues turn you on?”

Tate smiled to herself.

*God, I love pushing his buttons.*

“Only certain guests at certain barbecues,” she whispered.

All movement stopped and Jameson's hand was back in her hair. He pulled hard enough that she was forced to stare at the ceiling. Her eyes watered from the sting and she took quick breaths through her nose while she felt his other arm coiling around her waist.

“Goddamn Tatum,” he snarled. “Always making me do things I don't want to fucking do.”

“Liar,” she squeaked out, then she gasped as she was yanked flush with him. He stepped away from the table, carrying her with him. He slowly turned so his back was to the window, then he lowered them to the floor.

“If you say one more thing just to piss me off,” Jameson warned. “I will fuck your mouth.”

“Promises, promises,” Tate moaned as she adjusted her position on top of him, rotating her hips in a circle over his lap. She almost went cross eyed. When she was on top, he hit spots that shut down her brain.

But after a while, the silence got to her. Orgasming was only fun when they got to do it together, and while she was perilously close to coming, she knew Jameson still had a ways to go. She licked her lips and pressed her forehead to his, pumping her hips faster.

“This is what you wanted,” she panted, scratching and pulling at his shirt until she was able to pull it free from his body.

“Always,” he breathed, dragging his nails down the length of her back.

“You think people will think you're a big man because you fucked your own wife at some party?” she asked. He managed a chuckle.

“You'd rather I was fucking someone else?”



“Might be more interesting.”

“Watch your mouth.”

“If you wanted to make a statement, why not just fuck me on the buffet table?”

“Because I don't like seeing *trash* served on my table.”

She laughed out loud.

“I know someone out there who doesn't think I'm trash”

“Shut your fucking mouth, Tate,” he growled.

“Maybe I should help him climb the corporate ladder, as it were,” she whispered.

“Stupid slut, you better shut the fuck up.”

“I can't remember the last time I fucked someone my own age. Could be *fun*.”

Apparently she'd gone too far with that comment. She let out a shriek when Jameson suddenly rocked forward. She fell backwards, her legs kicking straight up, and suddenly he was on top of her. Propping himself up so he could pound her straight through the floor. Her eyes rolled back in her head.

“God, yes, *this*,” she groaned. Her legs fell and struck the table, her calves catching on the edge and leaving her legs propped up in the air. Just when she thought it all couldn't get any better, she felt his hand on her neck, squeezing tightly.

*Perfection.*

“Such a bitch,” he growled, shifting up onto his knees so he could thrust harder. “Flirting when I asked you not to. Opening your mouth when I tell you to shut up. When the fuck are you ever going to learn?”

“Never,” she whispered, as a burning sensation started in the center of her chest and quickly started racing towards her extremities. “*Never*.”

“Never is fucking right. God, why are you always so difficult?” he demanded, his thrusts turning brutal.

“Because,” she was gasping for air in earnest. “It's the only way to get your attention.”

His grip on her throat got even tighter.

“Mission fucking accomplished.”

She couldn't hold it back anymore. She came hard, shouting out his name as her hands flew to her hair. She gasped and shook and cried out, pulling at her roots. When he leaned down and kissed her, his teeth nipping

sharply at her bottom lip, the orgasm doubled back and regrouped, pulsing across every nerve ended. Her back arched and he finally let go of her throat, dragging his fingers down her chest and squeezing her breast.

“So perfect,” he groaned before slamming his hips home one last time, coming in a series of jerks and swear words.

“Oh my god,” she gasped for air after he'd collapsed on top of her. “Holy shit. Oh my god.”

“Language, Mrs. Kane,” he was panting as well, his voice muffled by her chest.

“I can't believe we just did that while there's a party going on outside,” she finally laughed, pressing her hand against her forehead.

“Better than doing it with a party going on in here,” he pointed. She wiggled her feet, which were sticking up above the table still and in full sight of anyone who might happen to look in the windows.

“Not much of a difference. This is gonna be more awkward than that time you fucked me in Hong Kong, when all those investors were in the next room,” she sighed.

“Good,” he replied. “I like making people nervous.”

“And jealous,” she added, smiling to herself. He snorted.

“Everyone is already jealous of me. What I wanted was to fuck you in front of him so as to leave him in no doubt of who you belong to.”

“Possessive words, Mr. Kane.”

“Goddamn right they are.”

“Rich Klimas isn't any kind of threat to you,” she promised, combing her fingers through his hair.

“Of course he fucking isn't. He's offensive, and that's worse. Now any time he comes sniffing around you, he'll have this moment in the back of his head. Like I said, mission fucking accomplished.”

Tate laughed and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, hugging him close for a second. Then she started pushing him away.

“Get off, you weigh a million tons.”

Tate wiggled around on the floor, getting her bra back in place and putting her dress to rights. Jameson really had no shame and simply stood up, pulling on his pants as he moved. Then he stooped to retrieve his shirt and put that on, as well. She held out her hand and he pulled her to her feet.

“We look insane,” Tate commented, glancing at his hair and wondering how bad hers looked.

"I look fine," he replied, running his fingers through his dark locks and calming it down. "You, on the other hand, look like you just got fucked."

"Ah, my fave look."

She attempted to pull her hair into a ponytail. Jameson laughed and smoothed out some wild strands around the crown of her head. Then he straightened out the zipper on the back of her dress and smoothed out her skirt before pulling her close.

"I want you to know something," he murmured, trailing his lips along the line of her neck. She wrapped her arms around him.

"What?"

"It wasn't about him."

"Huh?"

"I would've fucked you in here regardless of whether or not Klimas had shown up tonight."

"Really?" Tate asked, not entirely surprised – Jameson generally always wanted to have sex – but curious about his reasons.

"This dress," he sighed, his hands running down the sides of her body. "Your body. You knew what you were doing when you picked it out."

"Maybe," she replied coyly. Of course she had. Jameson could never resist a cheap looking slut.

They finally pulled apart for good. Jameson looked none the worse for wear in his polo shirt and jeans. Tate's dress was wrinkled in odd places and stretched in others, her hair was mussed, and her voice was hoarse. All her old faves. She held his hand as he lead her back outside.

"Proud of yourself?" she asked as they moved along. All around them, people were snickering and grinning. A few were even blushing, averting their eyes as their boss stalked past them.

"Always, Tatum," he said in a clipped tone, but his hand squeezed hers while they moved.

*Summer barbecues might be my new favorite thing ever.*

## 6

"I still can't believe it."

"What?"

"A barbecue."

"You can't believe we had a barbecue?"

"No."

"But the grill is still right over there."

"Sanders, be quiet."

"Of course."

Tate sighed and put her hands on her hips. It was the next morning. The party had run late into the night, with several of the junior brokers getting sloppy drunk. Jameson had told the catering people to just go ahead and go home, and they could come pack everything up the next day.

She'd gone outside to look at the devastation in the morning, and Sanders had gone with her. Jameson had gone to work hours before, but he was heading home so they could all go to lunch and then the airport together.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked, glancing at Sanders before reaching over and rubbing his back.

"Yes. I was very surprised to discover that I enjoy hush puppies," he replied. She laughed.

"They're pretty good. And there was corn on the cob! I missed Jameson eating it. Can you imagine?" she kept chuckling. Sanders cleared his throat.

"No, I cannot."

There was a noise behind them and when they turned around, it was to find Rich Klimas gingerly stepping into the backyard. He had been one of the sloppy drunks. It had gotten bad enough that Jameson had ordered some of the men to carry Klimas upstairs and leave him in a guest room. He must have just woken up. He had some sort of reddish stain on his chin – probably barbecue sauce from the night before – and he wore a dark pair of sunglasses.

"How you doing?" Tate called out in a loud voice, grinning broadly. He grimaced at the noise.

"I've been better," he replied, his voice rough and scratchy. "Did Mr. Kane leave?"

“Mr. Kane left a few hours ago,” Sanders interjected. “I will call for a driver to take you home immediately, Mr. Klimas.”

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks, I need a ride,” he grumbled. Sanders nodded curtly then went into the house, walking fast.

“Seems like you had a fun time last night,” Tate said, smiling and folding her arms across her chest. Rich nodded.

“Yeah, maybe too much fun.”

“Looks like it.”

“Sounded like you had a fun time, too.”

The meaning wasn't lost on Tate. She rolled her eyes from behind her own sunglasses.

“The best. I just *love* Jameson's party,” she sighed.

“You must. You know, I met him a long time ago. I'm sure he doesn't remember, he was a guest speaker at some weekend event. I spent three days listening to him, and three nights watching him party. Gotta say, he never struck me as the marrying type,” Rich told her. She nodded and walked closer to him.

“I know. Me, neither.”

“Then how -”

“I was stupid enough to fall in love with him, and he was even stupider for falling in love with me first. As hard as it is to believe, the devil can actually love somebody. Maybe not lots of people, and definitely not you, but it does happen. Would you like some advice?” she asked. He seemed a little shaken by her frank response, but he managed a nod.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

“I've known Jameson a long time, and I know him better than anyone else. You want to keep your job? Stop pissing around his territory.”

“I wasn't -”

“*I wasn't*,” she mocked his voice. “You have a brass set of balls, you know that, right? And while some people might be impressed, I'm not. I've seen what perfection looks like, and you're a long ways off from it, so go try and steal someone else's wife, okay? Because right now you're like a mouse who doesn't even know he's been caught by the cat. Being nice to you? This party? Inviting you? *He's fucking with you*. And eventually, he will get bored, and when that happens, say buh-bye to your nice stock broker job.”

A faint blush swept across Richard Klimas' face, but he quickly calmed himself down.

“There's other firms I could work for. I'm not scared of him,” he stated. She threw back her head and laughed.

“Oh my god, then you are stupid. Fine. Whatever. Keep trying at this pissing contest with him, see how it works out for you. But please, do me a favor, and leave me out of it? I can't even express to you in words how completely uninterested I am,” she said.

“You know,” he started, pulling off his sunglasses. “Kane didn't get to where he is without challenging people. Without stepping up to giants and knocking them down. You think he didn't sleep with a boss's wife at some point? That he didn't screw over someone above him?”

“Challenging people, yes. He's all for that. Being a flaming piece of garbage? Nah, that was never his style. Good luck with your life, I can tell you'll make great choices. I'm thinking you know your own way out,” she told him, nodding her head at the door.

“He's not as big a deal as the rest of you make him out to be. Someday, someone else will come along and be even better and smarter than him,” Rich warned. There was the sound of a throat clearing from behind them and Sanders stepped out of the shadows of the conservatory.

“Mr. Klimas, your ride is here,” he said, adjusting his tie. “And if I may so, you are entirely correct about Mr. Kane. But that day has not happened yet, and that person will most certainly not be you. Now kindly get off our property, and please don't return.”

Tate hadn't seen it happen in a long time, but Sanders could still turn on the frost bite. Jameson's glare could flash with an angry fire that was scorching just to look at it, but Sanders could freeze people where they stood with one look. He spoke civilly and said nothing rude, but his manner and tone were slightly terrifying. Like he could turn you into dust just by saying the right words. Like he was talking to *nothing*. Tate shivered, then almost laughed as Rich stumbled over himself as he hurried to leave.

“You are a magical, magical creature, Sandy,” she snickered as she hooked her arm though his.

“On the contrary, I am exceedingly normal,” he corrected her. “I heard what you said. It was very nice of you to defend Jameson.”

“Of course! What did you expect, that I'd run off into the sunset with *Rich Klimas!*?” she exclaimed, staring up at him.

“No. I was worried that you would tease him. Drag out his punishment. Last night was bad enough, I did not want to endure more awkwardness,”

he explained.

“Oh, really? And what about last night was so awkward?” she asked, blinking her eyes innocently. He didn't react at first, just adjusted his tie again.

“You know those kind of outbursts of yours make me uncomfortable,” he said in a low voice.

“Outburst? Why, whatever are you talking about?” she continued feigning innocence.

“Please, stop. I would like to enjoy our time together,” he begged.

“We *are* enjoying ourselves! I'm just trying to remember – would this outburst you speak of have anything to do with a certain tryst amongst the flowers?” she teased, and was finally rewarded with a full on blush. He cleared his throat and wouldn't make eye contact.

“That is putting it delicately.”

“Why, Sandy! Are you saying you watched!?” she gasped in mock horror. His blush went from a delicate pink around his collar to red racing up his neck and onto his cheeks, though he still maintained the same air of aloofness. As if they were talking about the weather.

“Tatum, the entire party, and I'm pretty sure our closest neighbors, could hear you. I was not alone in my observations.”

“Please, I wasn't *that* loud.”

“Forgive me, but you weren't outside. It was very loud, I assure you.”

“At least it was a good show.”

“*That* is a matter of opinion.”

Tate shivered again.

“Don't talk like him, it's creepy,” she said, turning to look across the pool.

“What's creepy?”

As if they'd summoned him, the devil himself walked into the backyard.

“Sandy,” she answered as Jameson came to stand on her other side.

“You're being creepy?” he asked, looking over her head at Sanders.

“Apparently. I was unaware of it. I shall go and load my luggage into the car,” he said, and went to pull his arm free from Tate. She turned and held onto him.

“Wait, one more going away present,” she said. His lips twitched down for a second and she could feel the tension in his body. She smiled big at

him.

“Please, no, your 'presents' tend to give me anxiety. If I could just -”

She yanked on his arm, pulling him down to her height. Then she kissed him fast and hard, putting a hand on the back of his neck to hold him in place. He stood like a stone for a moment, then she felt him relax. Felt his lips go soft. She smiled against him and let him go.

“See? That was a great present,” she laughed. He frowned and wiped at his mouth, then looked down at his fingertips. She had put on a deep red lipstick that morning.

“Pardon me, but my idea of a good present and yours are two very different things,” he informed her. But just before he turned away, she was positive she saw a smile hiding in the corner of his mouth.

“Why do you torture him?” Jameson sighed, watching while Sanders disappeared into the house.

“Oh, deep down, he likes it,” she informed him.

“It makes him uncomfortable. You're going to tease him so much he won't want to come back,” he warned her.

“Pffft, not possible. We're joined at the soul.”

“You're both *strange*, *that's* the problem,” he snorted. She gasped and turned to face him.

“Did you just call Sanders strange?” she demanded.

“Enough about him. Did you have a fun time last night?” Jameson asked, rolling up his shirt sleeves. He'd left his jacket somewhere in the house, but was still in the rest of his suit.

“Yeah, I actually did. We should do stuff like that more often, only maybe with people we actually like,” she suggested. He shrugged.

“Seemed to work out okay for the people we did invite. I walked in on your little friend with one of my employees in the shower,” he informed her. Her jaw dropped.

“Rusty? Oh god, tell me it was that Steele guy!”

“How did you know?”

She clapped her hands together.

“They were eye fucking each other all last night! This is so awesome! She hasn't been with anyone in forever, and if they were showering together, that definitely means they must have had sex,” she pointed out. He snorted again.



“Tate, they were fucking the shower. She nearly had a heart attack when I came in to get towels.”

“Oh Jesus,” she groaned. “She’s going to be even more awkward around you than she was before.”

“Probably. I don’t think it helped that I stayed and talked with Steele for a couple minutes.”

“You didn’t!”

“He’s one of our best junior brokers, I wanted to offer him a permanent position.”

“Okay, but did you have to do it while he was *inside* Rusty?” she demanded. Jameson shrugged.

“I didn’t really care. He was there, so I mentioned it. Then I took the towels and left. By the time I went back downstairs, she was moaning his name again. I think it’s safe to say I didn’t do too much damage.”

Tate was daydreaming, not really paying attention. Rusty and Howard Steele. Wow! She’d been hoping for an end to her friend’s dry spell, but now she prayed that it would be more than just a one night stand. Maybe they really had a connection. Maybe they would go on to date, and then who knew what else.

*Summer barbecues are magical ...*

“Can you imagine if they got married?” she laughed. “Rusty Steele. I would pay to make that happen.”

“Tate, they just met. It’s just sex, it doesn’t mean anything,” he warned her.

“Pfffft, I had sex with you after we first met,” she pointed out. He rolled his eyes.

“Yes, but you’re a slut.”

“Hey!”

“And it was just sex – it didn’t mean anything at the time.”

She gasped, then without even thinking about it, she charged at him. He was still looking out over the yard and didn’t notice her until it was too late. She’d planted her hands on his side and pushed him, hard. He lost his balance, swung his arms, then tipped over the edge of the pool. She put her hands on her hips as he let out a shout and splashed into the water.

“Didn’t mean anything, huh?” she said when he resurfaced. He glared at her and raked his fingers through his wet hair, pushing it back from his face.

“Do you have any idea how much this suit cost?” he asked in a voice that could cut glass.

“A lot.”

“Or this watch?”

“No, how much?”

“A lot more than you're worth,” he replied as he looked down at his wrist.

“Oh, just wait until you get this month's credit card statement. I'll show you how much I'm fucking worth, you stupid – *AH!*”

He snapped his hand out faster than she could follow, and next thing she knew her foot was yanked out from underneath her. She pitched forward and fell face first into the pool. When she came up, she was hacking and coughing, pawing at her face and wiping at her eyes.

“What were you saying?” Jameson's voice was dangerously close to her ear, then his arms were around her waist, turning her to face him.

“I was saying you're a jerk,” she growled as she shoved her hair out of her eyes.

“Yes, but I'm *your* jerk, so that must count for something,” he pointed out, holding her close. She wrapped her legs around his waist and let him carry her.

“I think it just means I have bad taste,” she replied, and he barked out a laugh.

“Can't be worse than mine – I married a slut who puts out on the first date.”

“Hey, you *love* sluts who put out on the first date.”

“I love this one,” he replied, leaning back against the edge of the pool.

“And it always meant something to you, every time,” she added, staring up at him.

“Always, baby girl. Always.”

“Jameson,” she said softly.

“Hmmm?” he responded, brushing away hair that was clinging to her forehead.

“Can we have barbecues every weekend?”

He laughed and tugged sharply at her wet hair.

“You're ridiculous. *No.*”

“Okay, maybe every other -”

“Tate, I’ve been thinking about something,” he interrupted her. She stopped smiling.

“Oh god, what? It’s awful when you think,” she groaned.

“About what you were saying the other day. About children,” he said, almost choking on the last word. She sighed.

“Yes, yes, I know you find the idea of having kids with me disgusting, awful, horrible, and any other nasty adjective. I got the memo,” she told him. He glared at her.

“If you’d shut the fuck up, I’ll explain.”

“I just don’t see why I have to listen to more insults,” she snapped back.

“Tate, I would love to have children with you,” he stated, shocking her.

“Excuse me!?”

“Someday,” he amended his statement. “Obviously, there’s no one else I would want to have them with. If you ever did find out you were pregnant, yeah, I’d be shocked, you’d have to expect that. But I would also deal with it, and I would hope they had my eyes and your amazing smile.”

“Jameson,” she sniffled his name, trying to hold back tears.

“It’s not that I would hate it if you got pregnant, Tate. But right now, it’s just you and me. I get you all to myself, all the time. I don’t have to share you with anybody or anything, and I’m sorry, but I like it like that. I like having access to your body and your heart and your mind any time I want. I know it can’t be like this forever, so I would just like to enjoy it for as long as I can. I wanted you to understand that.”

Tate hated crying, and hated it most of all when Jameson made her cry. One tear slipped out, though, and was quickly followed by another.

“God, I hate it when you do that,” she cried.

“Do what? Say nice shit to you? Me, too,” he said, but he used his thumb to gently brush away her tears.

“I hate it when you do something awful, but then later it turns out you’re actually wonderful. It’s so *annoying*,” she told him, trying to glare at him and failing miserably.

“Well, you do a lot more things that are a lot more annoying, so I think I’ve got a little leeway here,” he said. She gasped.

“See!? There you go again, being awful, and just wait, a week from now, you’re going to make it seem like you were actually being nice. I can’t stand -”

He suddenly dropped down, dunking them under the water. She was so startled, she almost panicked. But then he was kissing her, and it was still magical, and she still felt all those wonderful things she'd felt the first time they'd ever kissed. She smiled with her lips against his, and she was still smiling long after they'd resurfaced.

*Perfection.*

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# SANDERS

***Author's note:** I have said it repeatedly, and I will say it again – I **am not** writing a full length Sanders novel. Believe me, I wish I could. I have tried, **multiple times**. He is still the hands-down favorite character of mine. People love him more than any of my other characters, **combined**. But Sanders is not an easy soul to communicate with, he only gives me tiny bits and pieces. So far, this excerpt of sorts is the only thing I've ever come up with – **in over three years** – that I've been satisfied with, and I know it'll be controversial. That's the other problem – writing Sanders means possibly writing something you all don't like, and I don't know if I could expose him to that. But maybe someday, when the planets align, Sanders will feel like telling me his story, and whatever it is, I will write it down. I hope he does. But until then, I only have this little piece to offer. I hope you enjoy. These events take place shortly after the end of Reparation.*

\*

## Prologue

Sanders didn't know why it was different that afternoon, but it just was; something had changed. Between walking into the library and walking out of the library, so many things had changed.

*He should not be allowed to touch her like that.*

He had been working in the sitting room when he heard the thumping. *Thump*. Pause. *Thump*. Pause. *Thump*. And then her name, spoken in a deep voice. An agitated voice.

*“Tatum.”*

Pause. *Thump*.

After a couple more thumps, Sanders got up to investigate. A couple more thumps and her name was said, again, and then he was standing in front of the library door. He pushed on it, causing it to fall open a little.

He could see Jameson, sitting behind his large desk. Behind oak and gold and opulence. A very natural setting for a very powerful man. He was looking down, flipping pages on what Sanders knew was a business contract.

*Thump.*

Sanders lifted his eyes away from the desk. Let his gaze travel across the fireplace. She was standing in front of a bookshelf, holding a heavy, hardback book in her hand. She flicked her eyes to Jameson, then tossed the book over her shoulder. It hit the ground with a heavy thump, landing next to a pile of other books. Jameson didn't look up, so she sighed and took down another book. Flipped through a couple pages. Threw it over her shoulder. *Thump.* Jameson finally looked at her.

"Tate," he snapped. She had pulled down another book and now looked up from it, her eyes wide and full of innocence.

"What?" she asked.

"I'm working," Jameson said, gesturing to the paperwork in front of him. She nodded.

"I know. That's why I'm *bored*."

But she was smiling. Sanders cocked his head to the side, trying to figure the situation out. He didn't want to interrupt before he knew for sure whether or not he was needed.

"Go be bored somewhere else," Jameson grumbled, turning his attention back to his paperwork.

"But it's so much more fun to be bored with you," she teased, and threw the book over her shoulder. *Thump.*

"Stop it," Jameson's voice was full of warning as he looked back at her. She smiled and grabbed another book. Didn't even bother opening it, just started lifting it. "Tatum, I'm not fucking around, I don't want -"

*Thump.*

Jameson stood up and stalked towards her. It was a menacing move that would have caused most people to back up or scurry away. Not her. She smiled up at him as she reached out to grab another book.

"I thought you were working?" she breathed. He took the book out of her hand.

"I am. You're distracting me. Not good, Ms. O'Shea."

"I'm not good very often."

"You should work on that."

Jameson was crowding close to her, forcing her to move around, forcing her down the room. He finally stopped when they were in front of the couch. She was saying something but Sanders couldn't quite make it out. Her voice was soft and breathy. *Sexual.* Normal.

Suddenly, Jameson lashed out. Slapped her across the face. Not necessarily hard, but enough to make her head whip to the side. Then he was grabbing her by the throat, pulling her close to him. She was still talking, still breathing silky words. Jameson chuckled, then shoved her, forcing her to fall onto the couch. She laughed, almost more of a giggle, and then he was lowering himself over her. On top of her, pressing down on her. She moaned, working the buttons open on his shirt. Pushing it off his shoulders. Jameson shrugged out of it and then used it to tie her wrists together.

*But that's Dior.*

Sanders turned and walked away. Walked past the sitting room and out the front door. Kept going till he was at the guest house – *his* house. Didn't stop till he was upstairs in his room. There was a cushioned chair in a corner, and Sanders sat down on it. Cleared his throat. Adjusted his tie.

Of course he had seen Jameson and her in all sorts of compromising positions. The two weren't particularly shy and had a horrible tendency to forget to lock doors. Or even shut them all the way. Sanders never knocked, because years of living alone with Jameson had conditioned him to not need to. So he had walked in on them, several times, in the middle of sex.

Even before her, Jameson hadn't been bashful. He had long ago explained his somewhat unconventional sexual preferences to Sanders. He liked rough sex, he liked dishing it out, and he liked being mean. Then after he had started sleeping with her, he'd taken Sanders aside and had gone into more detail. Explained that Sanders might see some things that could possibly cause him to worry, but that he shouldn't – she *wanted* these things done to her. They were *her* idea. She liked to be treated roughly, she liked what Jameson had to dish out, and she *loved* it when he was mean. The meaner, the better.

Still. Seeing Jameson hit her. Seeing him slap her. It did something to Sanders. Made him feel something. And Sanders was not a man of much feeling.

***He should not be allowed to touch her like that.***

Sanders spent the rest of the day trying to sort out his feelings. He left the armchair only to take off his jacket and use the restroom. His phone rang at one point, but it was her calling. He had never purposefully avoided her phone calls before, but he let that one go to voicemail. Didn't listen to her message.

The sun set. He sat in the dark, trying to figure out where his thoughts were coming from, his feelings. He had seen Jameson treat her roughly before, had seen him grab her by the throat. Had seen him push her around. One time Jameson had pinned her to the kitchen floor and cut her shirt off of her. Sanders hadn't witnessed it, but they had both told him about it. Another time, almost a year ago, while Sanders had watched from the hall, Jameson had wrapped both his hands around her neck. Shoved her up against the car.

Why was this time so different?

*He should not be allowed to touch her like that.*

Sanders finally changed into his pajamas and laid in bed. Stared at his ceiling. Sometimes, when Jameson was out of town, she would come over and sleep next to Sanders. It gave her comfort, so he didn't mind indulging her. Sometimes she cuddled against him, and he didn't mind that, either. He usually didn't think much about it.

But as he laid there, staring at his ceiling, he started thinking about it. She was warm, and soft, and usually smelled good. She would hum and sigh in her sleep. She would twine her legs around his, wrap her arms around him. He was an early riser, she was a late sleeper, so in the mornings he would lay as still as possible, waiting till she woke up on her own. She usually did with a stretch and sigh, laughing at her messy hair and his proper pajamas. So silly.

*When did I start looking at her like that?*

Sanders glanced at the clock. Two in the morning. He stared back at the ceiling. Thought about what he had seen in the library. Sanders had never been intimate with a woman before, didn't spend much time thinking about it. Now he couldn't seem to stop. Was he hitting a secondary sort of puberty? He didn't understand it. There were so many questions. She had been acting childish. Annoying. Why did that seem to spark a certain kind of reaction? And how had Jameson known that's what she'd been trying to do?

And how did Jameson know when to get up? How did he know when to touch her? How to touch her? Was there some signal? Something she said? When was it time to lower her to the couch?

So many things Sanders didn't know about, hadn't ever really thought about. It was all like an intricate dance that he didn't know the steps to – and



it seemed like everyone else *did* know. How was he supposed to learn? Who was supposed to teach him?

“... *I could show you the ropes ...*”

He closed his eyes finally. He had always dreaded this moment. Knew it was going to happen someday. Knew something would bring it about eventually.

But that didn't mean he had to like it.

\*

“Sir,” Sanders said, striding into the library the next day. He didn't look at the couch.

“Where have you been all day? It's almost noon,” Jameson snapped. He was standing next to his desk, holding a Chinese takeout container and using chopsticks to eat chow mein out of it.

“I was at home. I need to discuss something important with you. Where is she?” Sanders asked, glancing around. Still not looking at the couch.

“In the pool. Does this have to be now? We just got lunch,” Jameson replied, gesturing to the other containers which were on his desk.

“I would like for it to be now, while it's just the two of us,” Sanders said. Jameson glared, but didn't move. Shoveled some more noodles into his mouth.

“Well, make it fast. If this gets cold she's going to bitch, and then I'll have to order more, and then -”

“I am going to be moving away, sir,” Sanders interrupted.

Jameson started choking.

“Jesus,” he finally managed to hack out, dropping the container onto his desk and then pounding on his chest. “Just like that, huh!? *'Hello, good afternoon, oh by the way, I'm moving,'* - what are you talking about?”

*He never did handle change well.*

“It's time for me to go,” Sanders said simply. Jameson looked completely bewildered.

“What the fuck are you on about?”

“I have been taking correspondence courses, this past year. I have gotten my master's degree in Russian historical literature,” Sanders confessed. Jameson went from bewildered to ... a look Sanders had never seen before. Didn't know how to decipher.

“You're shitting me. Why didn't you tell me? For fuck's sake, Sanders, you got offers from MIT and Yale when you were eighteen! Correspondence courses!?” Jameson exclaimed, sitting back against his desk. Sanders cleared his throat.

“I didn't want to leave home until I absolutely had to,” he responded.

“Well, I'm very happy for you, but why do you need to leave? What are you going to do with a degree in Russian historical ... *literature*!? Jesus, Sanders,” Jameson grumbled.

“I can teach. I can tutor. I have also saved every single paycheck you have ever given me. I don't have to work at all, if I don't want to,” he explained.

“But why? Why do you need to go? Harvard is right next door, teach *there*, tutor *there*. You don't need to leave home,” Jameson told him.

“I do.”

“*You don't*. Do you have any idea how much this is going to upset her? She's -” Jameson started to point out.

“She is the reason I need to go.”

The silence was heavy. She had always been a double-edged sword between them, slicing right through their bond, seamlessly and effortlessly. Sanders was her best friend. Jameson was her lover. At any given point in time, it was impossible to tell whom she would choose, if it ever came down to it. In the beginning, the answer was easy – Jameson. In the middle, there was no question – Sanders. Now? It was like Solomon's Choice, and Sanders was prepared to be the one to let go.

Jameson certainly wouldn't.

“And may I ask *why* she is a reason for you needing to go?” Jameson's voice was soft. Full of steel. His eyes were locked onto Sanders', and they weren't happy.

“Because.”

“Because *why*?”

“Because ... things have changed. I am no longer comfortable being here,” Sanders went on, adjusting his tie. The movement wasn't lost on Jameson.

“Cut the bullshit. What the fuck is the problem? Maybe it can be fixed,” Jameson snapped.

“I think I might be in love with her.”

Jameson lurched away from the desk, away from Sanders. Paced to one end of the room, shoving his hands into his hair. Paced back. Gave an evil stare to Sanders, then paced down again. Came back.

"I'm sorry. I ... wait. Are you serious? Is this a joke? Because if it is, I have to tell you, it isn't fucking funny," Jameson hissed, getting close to him. Sanders shook his head.

"I would never joke about this, sir," he assured him. Jameson got even closer, having to tilt his head down to stare Sanders in the eye. Like a predator. His eyes were narrowed, his anger alive in his glare.

"And when did this happen?" his voice was soft.

"I'm not sure. I'm not even sure I am. But I do know that ... something is different, and I think it would be best, for all of us, if I wasn't here anymore," Sanders said.

"I don't understand how this happened. You two are friends. You know what she means to me, what we are to each other. How did this happen?" Jameson demanded.

"I don't know. I didn't realize it was happening, and then the other day ... I just realized it."

Jameson went to say something else, but there was a sound in the hallway. A thud, then a crash, followed by laughter.

*Even her laugh is bawdy. Loud. Sexual. Inappropriate. I will miss it so much.*

"God, I just bit it so hard out there! I think I broke my ass!"

Tatum O'Shea was a very beautiful girl. Sanders had always thought so – he wasn't blind. But just because someone was beautiful didn't necessarily automatically make them attractive, at least not to Sanders. No, it had taken a while for Tatum to grow on him as a friend.

There had been a turning point, though. When she had run away the very last time and Sanders had gone with her. A hotel room. A confusing night. A heavy kiss. He had stopped it, and she wouldn't have gone through with anything more, but still. He'd never said anything about it, but it had stayed with him. Suddenly, Tatum wasn't just Tatum anymore. Wasn't a silly girl he was friends with, a girl he had to be around. No, suddenly she was a woman, with curves, and skin, and lips, and a tongue. A tongue he'd experienced firsthand.

Not good.

She walked into the room, rubbing at her backside as she laughed. She had obviously slipped and fallen, most likely because she was soaking wet. Jameson had mentioned that she'd been in the pool – she had probably come straight from it. She was wearing a bikini, holding a towel in her free hand.

Sanders and Jameson exchanged glances.

“Tate, maybe you should -” Jameson started.

“Sandy!” she exclaimed, finally spotting him. He cleared his throat. Looked away. “Where have you been? I called you like a hundred times yesterday! We made pizza.”

As she babbled, Tatum suddenly bent at the waist, rubbing the towel over her wet hair. Sanders was no lech, she probably could've walked into the room naked and he would have maintained his cool. But having just confessed his feelings to Jameson, and having Jameson standing right next to him, and her bent over, in a bikini ...

*This is very awkward.*

“I had a lot of things going on, I'm sorry,” Sanders managed. Tatum stood up, whipping her hair back.

“Well, you should be, you missed out on awesome pizza,” she laughed, starting to march towards him, her arms out for a hug. Jameson smoothly stepped in between them.

“Hey, go get changed so we can have lunch,” he said, running his hands up and down her arms.

“I didn't realize it was a formal occasion,” she snorted.

“Why do you have to make everything an argument, baby girl? Just go put on some clothes, I'll get plates,” Jameson instructed.

“I still don't -,”

“I wasn't asking, Tate.”

There was some huffing and grumbling, but she finally left the room, throwing the towel at them as she went. They listened to her stomp up the stairs, then Sanders turned to stare at the back of Jameson's head. At his guardian. His best friend.

*At my father ...*

“I'm very sorry,” Sanders said in a soft voice.

Jameson turned around and Sanders halfway expected anger, but the other man just sighed and grabbed him by the arm, pulling him into a hug. Jameson was a lot bigger than Sanders, taller. Broader. They were only ten

years apart in age, but he always felt like so much more to Sanders. Stature, size, age. *Everything*. Sanders felt like he could fit inside him.

*It's where I've been living all these years.*

"I'm sorry," Jameson whispered, his arms tight around Sanders. "I should've ... I should've been more careful. I'm not mad. Never think I'm mad. And you don't have to go. We can work something out, we can try."

Sanders shook his head.

"No. It wouldn't be right. I am the problem, I am the one in the way. I am twenty-one years old. It is time I do something for myself," Sanders replied, wrapping his arms around Jameson's middle.

"You can do that from here. She'll miss you, you know," Jameson pointed out.

"I know. But it's necessary," Sanders stressed.

*"I'll miss you."*

"And I can guarantee I will miss you more. But I am not dying. I will come home for Christmas," Sanders promised.

Jameson barked out a laugh and pulled away. Held Sanders at arms-length and looked him over. They had been in each others lives for almost nine years, and for seven of them, it had only been the two of them. Always the two of them. Sanders had missed those times, he was startled to realize.

"She's going to be very upset. Would you like me to break the news?" Jameson asked. Sanders shrugged.

"Eventually. I still have some preparations to make, things to set up, before I leave. We can continue as normal until then. I would never try to ..." Sanders' voice trailed off, not sure how to end that sentence.

"Don't be stupid, I wouldn't ever think you would. Are you going to just avoid her till you go? You know she won't take that, she'll just come find you," Jameson warned him. Sanders nodded.

"I know. I won't avoid her. But I think it would be best if I didn't spend as much time in the main house," he suggested.

"Fair enough. If there's anything you need me to do. Or ... *not* do ..."

Jameson was obviously struggling with words, as well. Sanders waved the suggestion away.

"Of course not, I would never ask that of you. Do as you have always done," he instructed. Jameson sighed, dropping his arms.

"God, this is awkward as fuck. Why can't things ever be normal for us?" he grumbled, rubbing a hand over his face.

He didn't get an answer. Tatum pranced back into the room, wearing a pair of shorts and a tank top over her bikini. She had yanked her hair up into a sloppy ponytail and hadn't bothered with any makeup or shoes. She skipped across the room, to Sanders' side, and kissed him on the cheek. He managed a tight lipped smile as she made her way to Jameson's desk. Both men stared at each other.

"Did you remember to get my veggie spring rolls?" Tatum asked, picking through the food boxes.

"Of course," Jameson replied. She smiled and grabbed a styrofoam container before turning towards him.

"You take such good care of me," she sighed in a sappy voice, before standing on tiptoe and kissing his cheek, too.

"Always, *Liebe*. Go wait in the kitchen, we'll bring the food," Jameson said in a soft voice, kissing her quickly. She headed off into the kitchen, but not before stealing another kiss.

*Liebe. German for love. His love. The only woman he's ever loved.*

"I don't want things to be awkward. I would be very uncomfortable," Sanders said quickly. Jameson rolled his eyes.

"I think it's a little fuckin' late for that. C'mon, *Cassanova*, carry some boxes. We'll figure this shit out eventually," Jameson grumbled, then picked up some of the food cartons.

\*

A week later, Sanders told Tatum his decision. She did not take it well, as predicted. There was crying and begging and cajoling. Then pouting. Then the silent treatment. She didn't want him to go, and she was willing to go to great lengths to convince him to stay, even if it meant guilt tripping him. Sanders, however, had unshakable reserve.

She cracked after another week, and Sanders woke up in the middle of the night to her crawling into bed with him. He was a little shocked; she had never stayed over at the guest house while Jameson was in town. But she snuggled up against him, cried into his shoulder, and wished him well. Made him promise that she could visit him, wherever he ended up.

*Maybe not such a good thing.*

It took him an additional month, but Sanders finally figured out what he was going to do. If he was going to "leave the nest", as it were, then he

decided he might as well make it meaningful. He would go back to his roots. He would go to Russia. He knew that his grandparents were originally from Moscow, and though he had no desire to look up his family in Belarus, he lined up a tutoring job with Lomonosov Moscow State University – it wasn't hard, with his ability to speak multiple languages and his grades.

So six weeks after his confession to Jameson, Sanders Dashkevich was ready to leave everything he had known for the last nine years and move halfway across the world.

All because a woman with dark eyes and a teasing smile had dared to kiss him.

“Sanders,” Jameson's voice called out. Sanders had been walking out of the kitchen and turned back around. Walked into the library. It was late at night and all the lights were off. Just the fire was raging, as it always was when Jameson was at home.

“Yes?” Sanders asked, taking a seat in front of the desk. Jameson sat behind it, shadows flickering across his face. Tatum often teased that he looked like Satan. At that moment, Sanders couldn't argue with the description.

“You leave in three days.”

It was said as a statement. Sanders nodded in agreement.

“Yes.”

“Do you want to do anything special?”

“No, not really. I think that will just make it worse.”

“Alright. I'll take you to the airport on Sunday.”

“Just you?”

“Just me.”

“Is she ...” Sanders let his voice trail off, his gaze fixed on the flames. It hurt him to see her hurt – she was his friend. A kindred spirit. A soulmate. He didn't want to hurt her.

“No, we talked about it and felt it was best if she didn't come along. But she does have something special she would like to do for you, before you go,” Jameson continued.

“And that is?”

“A surprise.”

Sanders looked away from the fire, back to Satan.

“What kind of surprise?”

“One we both think you'll enjoy.”

“Oh god.”

Jameson laughed and stood up from his chair, came around the desk. Clapped Sanders on the shoulder.

“I will miss you, *Mijo*. More than I can tell you,” he said softly. Sanders nodded. Cleared his throat.

“*Claro*, and I will miss you, too.”

There was silence for a moment, then Jameson squeezed his shoulder one last time before walking out of the room. Another moment later, and the door slowly swung shut. But Sanders wasn't alone in the room. He finally turned in his chair and took in Tatum standing in front of the door, her hands behind her back.

“How are you?” she asked, smiling at him. He frowned.

“I am well. And you?”

“Good.”

“What is going on?” Sanders demanded.

Tatum laughed and finally walked forward, taking Jameson's seat on the opposite side of the desk.

“Nothing bad, I promise,” she assured him.

“I don't believe you.”

“Not a shocker. Look. You're leaving soon. Jameson and I were trying to figure out something to do for you, something ... something ...” she was clearly searching for the right word.

“Something what?” he asked, looking around the room.

“Something special,” her voice went soft.

“Special how?” he pressed.

“Things are going to change a lot. You've never lived alone. You'll be surrounded by people you don't know. I worry about you,” her voice got even softer.

“Pardon me, but I lived on the streets of London for over six months – behind a dumpster, no less. I think I can handle living in the *house* I've rented,” Sanders assured her. She laughed.

“Not what I mean, Sandy. Look ... just ... hear me out, alright?” she begged.

“Oh god.”

“I want to give you a send off that will help you in your new life, help you adjust,” she kept stumbling over her words. Sanders sighed.



“Please just say it. I have heard many strange things come out of your mouth before, and I have yet to be truly disgusted or offended. So there's no need to be afraid,” he promised. She leaned across the desk and smiled, but it was decidedly dark. Almost a little evil. *Satanic*.

*“I want to give you a present ...”*

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# 1

They went to Gloucester, Massachusetts. Sanders wasn't entirely sure why – the beach during the summer was awful. So many people and tourists. But Tate loved Good Harbor Beach, so he'd allowed himself to be dragged to the coast.

He was somewhat regretting it now. He'd assumed she'd book a house for them. Money was no object for people like Jameson and Sanders, so even at the height of vacation season, they could have found something. Silly man, he'd forgotten who he was dealing with, though. She'd booked them a room at a quaint but cheap motel that was directly on the beach.

When they'd checked in, he'd kept calm and collected, but inwardly, his skin had been crawling. So many people, all around him. Being loud and rude. Flip flops clacking away, the smell of sunscreen everywhere, hairy backs as far as the eye could see.

“We could have gone to Saint-Tropez,” he'd pointed out. She'd laughed at him while she signed them into their room.

“And waste half a day getting there and then again coming back? I only have you for four more days, I'm not wasting any of them.”

The room had been small. One king sized bed with an ugly comforter. A scratched dresser against the wall, and a worn but comfortable sitting chair near the bed. Surprisingly enough, the bathroom was very large. A spacious, but dated, tub took up most of one wall, and a shower stall, vanity, and toilet were across from it. There was lots of floor space, and he assumed it was because of the beach. Giving the motel dwellers ample space to clean off all the sand.

*I wonder if there is a Hilton nearby, I cannot be expected to shower here.*

Though Sanders loved any time he got to spend with Tate, he couldn't quite figure out her game. Good Harbor Beach wasn't exactly anywhere special. They put their overnight bags in a corner in the room. They had a normal dinner at a plain restaurant. All things that could have been done at home.

“Will you tell me now?” he finally asked.

It was almost midnight and they were down on the beach. There were some bonfires in the distance, and once in a while a couple people

sauntered by up closer to the street. But they were down in the water line, letting the ocean lap at their legs. It was also unseasonably chilly out, so that seemed to be keeping people away.

“Tell you what?” Tate asked, staring out over the black sea. The wind was whipping some loose strands of her hair around and she kept trying to tuck them behind her ears, almost absentmindedly.

“Why we are here,” he said, looking down at her. She was to his side and a couple steps in front of him. Her sandals were dangling from one hand and she had her other hand up by her face, still fighting with her hair. Though it was cold, she hadn't bothered changing out of what she'd driven up in – high waisted black shorts, which were very tiny. Almost more like bathing suit bottoms. On top was a loose black crop top. Ridiculous for the weather, really, but so perfect for her.

Sanders was still in his suit. He had wanted to change before going down to the beach, but she'd insisted on walking straight down. He'd left his shoes, socks, and jacket up by the motel, then had rolled up his pant legs before going into the water with her. His tie kept flapping around in the wind, so he finally unbuttoned the middle button on his shirt and slipped the length of silk through the hole to keep it in place.

“I like the ocean,” she sighed. “And you like the beach. I knew the weather was going to be shitty, which meant it wouldn't be crazy busy. I thought it would be nice for us to spend some time alone together. I know we won't get a chance again.”

“There is always Christmas,” he assured her, frowning at her back. She finally looked over at him, and even in the dark he could see her smile.

“Like I said – I know we won't get this chance again.”

She didn't elaborate, and he didn't ask for more explanation. He understood, and apparently, so did she. Jameson must have told her about Sanders' feelings. Still. What was the difference, then? If she knew about the issue, why bring him out there alone, now?

*I may have ruined everything. I can't let us end like this.*

“I appreciate everything you've done for me,” he suddenly told her. Her smile got bigger and she turned to fully face him. She was deeper than him, the water coming to just below her knees.

“Really? All the teasing and needling and embarrassing?” she laughed.

“Every moment of it,” he assured her.

“And all the splashing?”

“Excuse me?”

She didn't respond, but instead kicked up a leg. He gasped – actually gasped – as a sizable splash of water soaked his right leg.

“Tatum,” he said in his stern voice. “This suit was specially designed by Tom Ford for -”

More water. This time she swung her cupped hand through the ocean, throwing it up at him. He managed to turn his face away in time, letting the brunt of it hit him in the chest and cheek.

“I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you. What was that?” she asked, wading towards him.

“I hope you realize this suit is completely ruined now,” he said, his voice full of frost. It had absolutely no effect on her.

“Oh please, there's dry cleaning even out here in the 'burbs,” she told him.

“It is not the same.”

“That's what's missing in your life, Sandy,” she said, leaning down to put her hand back in the water. “Messiness. You better get used to it, because life alone can get pretty messy.”

She was already swinging her arm towards him, ready to give his poor suit another wash down, but he couldn't handle it. Without thinking, he abruptly put his arms out and shoved her shoulders. She was already off balance, so it didn't take a hard push to send her onto her back. She shrieked and laughed as she went down on her butt in the water.

“See? That wasn't so hard,” she chuckled as she struggled to push herself upright. “That was lesson number two – standing up for yourself.”

She couldn't seem to find her footing in the shifting sand, so Sanders offered a hand to help her up. He should've known better. She gripped his arm in both of her own hands and yanked hard. He went down without a sound, belly flopping.

“And I guess that's lesson number three. Don't trust anyone,” she was laughing at him when he pulled himself upright.

“Forgive me, but you can get yourself out of the water,” he told her, pulling his tie free from his shirt and wringing it out before heading back up the beach.

Tate crawled out of the water behind him and raced back up to the motel, her toned legs carrying her there quickly. Sanders took his time, rolling down his sopping wet pant legs and putting on his shoes and jacket

before striding through a small courtyard. They were almost at the door to the room when Tate let out a startling shriek and leapt backward.

“Do you see that!?” she shouted, grabbing his arm and jerking on it. He moved so he was standing in front of her, shielding her from whatever imaginary danger she was perceiving.

“See what?” he asked, peering into the shadows.

“*That!*” she yelled, and her arm came around him and pointed at a trash can.

He stared at where she gesturing to, but didn't see anything for a moment. Then the trash can shimmied, its lid falling to the ground with a loud crash. There was high pitched squeal and Tate moved completely behind her, gripping his jacket in both her hands. As he stared, a small raccoon scurried away from the garbage.

“That is what all the screaming was about?” he asked, watching the rotund creature disappear into some bushes.

“Are you kidding!?” she snapped, finally peeking around him. “It could have had rabies!”

“The chances of that are very small. I thought it was rather adorable.”

“It's a trash panda – what is adorable about that?” she asked, following him as he covered the distance to their door.

“It's furry.”

As he unlocked the door, he could tell she was trying hard not to laugh. When he stood to the side, she dashed through the entryway quickly, throwing her sandals on the floor.

“Brrrrr, it was freezing out there,” she said through chattering teeth as she hurried on tiptoes into the bathroom.

“Yes, that's what I said before we went down there,” he reminded her. “It is not beach weather tonight.”

“It was awesome,” she called back to him.

He didn't argue.

He'd removed his shoes and was sliding off his jacket when he realized she was running the tap in the bathtub. Was she taking a bath? The door was wide open. As free a spirit as Tate was, she didn't usually bathe in the open. He cleared his throat and took a couple steps forward.

“What are you doing?” he asked from the other side of the open door.

“Come in here.”

“No thank you.”

“Stop being a baby and come in here. I won't bite,” she laughed.

Bracing himself, Sanders stepped around the door and into the room. She was still fully clothed and standing in the tub. The water looked to be steaming hot and was swirling up and around her ankles. She was sighing and had her head tilted back.

“This feels so good,” she moaned. “Get in.”

“Excuse me?”

“Get in.”

“I am not taking a bath with you.”

“I wasn't asking you to strip down and scrub my back,” she laughed, turning towards him. “Just step inside the bathtub, Sandy.”

“I am not taking a bath in my clothing.”

When she grabbed him by his tie and started yanking roughly on it, he had no choice but to follow. If he stood his ground, she would either break his neck or rip the material, and he had hoped that some parts of his suit could yet be saved. So while she pulled, he stumbled into the tub and stood in front of her.

“Why do you have to be so difficult,” she grumbled, but she was smiling and she straightened out the knot in his tie.

“Pardon me for saying so, but that is very much the pot calling the kettle black.”

The tub was only about half full, but she leaned back and turned off the faucet. Then she gingerly lowered herself into the hot water, hissing and breathing fast as she adjusted to the temperature. She bent her legs at the knees, her feet braced on either side of his.

“This feels amazing after that cold water outside. Sit down,” she ordered. He refused to look at her, instead staring at the back wall.

*Walls are safe. Walls can never look back at you and judge you or read your mind.*

“I told you, I am not bathing with you,” he repeated himself. She laughed and he felt her gently kick him in the ankle.

“Sandy, we're both fully dressed and there's hardly any water in this tub. We're warming up. *Sit down.*”

He frowned even more, but did as he was told. It was awkward – he was lankier than her, his legs needing more room than hers. But eventually they were situated with Tate sitting upright, her legs on the inside of his with his knees bent and his feet almost under her butt.

"This isn't so bad," she said in a soft voice, pulling at a loose thread on the sleeve of her shirt.

"No, it isn't," he agreed. His suit was most likely ruined beyond repair now, but the hot water did feel good. They sat in silence for a moment, just soaking in the warmth, when she suddenly made a gasping noise.

"I forgot! I got us something to celebrate," she said in an excited voice. She leaned over the edge of the tub and pawed at her purse, dragging it close. He heard the sound of glass clinking.

"Please, I do not want to drink whiskey tonight," he begged. She snickered and pulled the object free of her bag.

"I figured, so I got you this," she replied, holding up a bottle of Veuve champagne.

"Now *that* I'm pretty sure my palate can handle," he told her, watching while she unwrapped the foil and expertly pulled out the cork. "I can go get glasses so we can ..."

His voice trailed off as she lifted the bottle to her lips and started chugging down the expensive bubbly alcohol. It was several swallows before she finally came up for air and she laughed at his expression.

"Here's to you, Sandy. May your next steps in life be almost as awesome as the ones before," she toasted him, handing over the bottle.

"Glasses would be easier," he insisted, but he took a sip straight from the bottle.

They didn't move for a while. Tate chattered on about odds and ends, as she was wont to do, and Sanders fell into a comfortable silence, just enjoying her voice. Her expressive face and animated hand gestures. They continued passing the bottle back and forth, sipping and laughing at her stories.

*I should really never doubt her. This has been quite an enjoyable last weekend together, ruined suit and all.*

"Sandy."

Her voice interrupted his thoughts and froze him in place for a second. Contented feeling *gone*. It wasn't her normal voice, the one full of naughty laughter and innocent teasing. No, this was her husky voice. Breathy, with raspy fricatives. He'd heard that voice often, but never directed at him. No, she'd never used that voice on him.

Only one person got to hear it directed at them.

“What?” he asked, instantly on guard. He even looked around, halfway expecting to see Jameson in the doorway. But they were still alone, and when he looked back, she was shifting around. She moved until she was on her knees, sitting back on her heels.

“There's some things I want to talk about,” she said, some of the sexiness gone from her voice, but not entirely. She was still speaking in a low tone, and was making very direct eye contact with him. She had dark eyes, ringed in thick lashes. Even without her signature makeup, which she'd left off for him, they still stood out.

“What things?” he asked. She shrugged and he became aware that she was walking her fingers very slowly up his shin.

“You're very good looking,” she informed him, her fingers finally reaching the summit of his knee.

“Thank you,” he replied, not sure how to respond. Her fingertips were now tap dancing on him. Making him edgy. Nervous.

“And I'm not just saying that because we're close. It's fact. Other people have noticed it, and when you're alone in the world, without me next to you, or Jameson looming over you, more people are going to notice.”

“I feel that is very presumptuous of you. Just because you find me attractive does not mean other -”

“*It's fact,*” she insisted. “Empirically speaking, *you are good looking.* It's just how things are, and girls will be all over you.”

“Well, thank you for the vote of confidence, but even if that is true, I highly doubt they will be 'all over' me. And even if they are, I am pretty sure I can defend myself,” he told her. She smiled and her hand went flat over his knee. The water had grown lukewarm during their time in it, but suddenly he felt himself warming up again.

“You're so sure?” she asked.

“Yes. I -”

His voice caught in his throat as she suddenly sat up on her knees, her hand sliding down the top of his thigh. She followed behind, crawling between his legs until she was leaning over him. Boxing him in. He held his breath and looked over her shoulder.

“You don't seem so sure now,” she whispered, her face only inches from his own. He swallowed thickly.

“Tatum. What are you doing?”



"It's okay," she said, propping herself up with one arm and letting her free hand smooth its way up his chest. He took a shaky breath.

"This is not okay," he whispered back. Her fingers came to rest against his cheek and her thumb hooked under his jaw, pulling his head around until he was forced to look her in the eye.

"*It is,*" she insisted. "We wanted to give you a going away present you would remember forever. Something that would help you. Make you more ... *comfortable.*"

"I am very *uncomfortable* right now," he assured her. She chuckled low in her throat. That bawdy sound he loved so much. Then she was leaning even closer, her cheek pressed to his and her lips at his ear.

"You won't be for long," she whispered, her lips catching his earlobe.

What most people – including Tate – never understood about Sanders was that though he presented himself as an uncaring, aloof, detached individual, he was far from it. Inside him was an ocean of emotion that he'd never been properly taught how to navigate. He kept it passive and calm by ignoring it. But sometimes it was like a storm raged through him and he couldn't handle it. He couldn't control it, and Sanders hated nothing more than being out of control.

He lurched forward, forcing her back. She didn't say anything as he abruptly stood up and climbed out of the tub before hurrying from the room. He didn't care that he was soaking wet and trailing puddles of water behind him. Didn't even think about it as he sat down in the chair with a loud squelching sound. He folded his arms across his chest and stared at the front door.

*Nothing. Nothing. Think about nothing. The square root of thirty-two is five-point-six-six. Thomas R. Marshall was the twenty-eighth vice president. Control yourself. Control your environment. Don't do anything rash. The twenty-ninth president was Calvin Coolidge. Four hundred and thirty-two divided by seventeen is twenty-five-point-four. **Control yourself.***

\*

Tate took a deep breath and ran a hand over her hair. She'd known this wouldn't be easy, but she was ready for the battle. She slowly climbed out of the tub and walked into the bedroom.

Sanders was sitting in the shitty chair at the foot of the bed. His arms were folded sternly across his chest and he was refusing to even look in her direction. She smiled to herself and came to a stop in front of him. When he still didn't acknowledge her, she put her hands on her hips.

"Are you going to ignore me for the rest of the night?" she asked. His mouth was set in a stern line, but he surprised her by responding.

"If that's what it takes to make you realize you are being absurd, then yes."

"If a woman throws herself at you, the last thing you should do is call her absurd."

"But it *is* absurd when that woman is involved with another man. And *especially* when that man is practically family to me," he informed her.

"It's *not* when it's a carefully considered choice made by *both* that woman and man," she replied. Even Sanders wasn't able to hide the shock a statement like that induced and he finally looked at her.

"Excuse me?"

"Sandy," she sighed, dropping her hands and slowly moving around him. "I worry about you. More than you could possibly know. The idea of ... of just *anyone* being your first time. I can't handle it. You're so different. You deserve perfection. You *are* perfection. I refuse to send you out to the wolves. I can't let it be awful or awkward or uncomfortable or wrong. The idea of you possibly feeling bad about it, or somebody treating you badly, it kills me. I just ... I can't, Sanders. I can't."

She was behind him when she finished speaking, and she lightly rested her hands on his shoulders. He was completely stiff, his body locked up into one giant charley horse.

*It's gonna take a lot of work to loosen him up.*

"What, exactly, are you suggesting? You and I have sex, just so you can feel assured that I've lost my virginity to someone deserving?"

"No," she laughed. "I don't deserve it. I doubt anyone does – you're too good for mere mortals. But you can relax with me, there'll be none of that awkwardness that usually comes along with a first time or when you have sex with someone you don't really know. You can be yourself with me. We can talk to each other. You can ask me anything, do anything. Like I said once before, I've had a lot of practice. *I can show you the ropes.*"

That hit a note. She felt a shimmy under her hands. A slight tremble rippling through his system.

*He remembers. I'm winning.*

"This is a bad idea," he breathed. Tate bent at the waist, running her hands down the front of his body. She kept moving till her chin was on his shoulder.

"Trust me, you'll feel differently in about fifteen minutes," she whispered back, deftly undoing one of his buttons.

"I don't want to do this."

*"Liar."*

Another button. He was still refusing to move, but he wasn't stopping her.

"Please," his voice was hoarse.

"I'll stop when you make me stop," she informed him, now working at the knot in his tie, pulling it loose and slipping the loop free of his collar.

"I don't want him to hate me," he finally voiced his fear.

"Do you think I would be doing this if that was a possibility?"

"I think that the two of you rarely think through your actions."

"You think wrong, Sanders. We would never do anything to hurt you. This is a limited time offer. A very special present for a very dear friend who is going so far away. Just accept it. It's like a band aid – just rip it off. Get it over with."

He was breathing fast, and when she turned to press her lips to his cheek, she saw that he was again staring at the wall.

"I don't want *you* to hate me," he whispered.

"Not possible."

"But what if I don't -"

*Enough.*

Using both hands, Tate grabbed either side of his shirt and jerked them apart. The remaining buttons popped and flew across the room. He was forced to uncross his arms and she pushed the wet material back over his shoulders, slid it down between him and the chair, then let it fall down his arms.

As his shirt fell away from his hands, she stepped to the side of the chair. She held onto his tie as she went and pulled it free over his head. Then she bent over again, cupping his face between her hands.

"I promise," she whispered, so close her lips were brushing his. "You won't regret a moment of tonight."

"I can't ..." he sighed, his eyes closed. She laughed softly, then she pressed her lips to his for a brief second.

"Oh, but you will."

When she kissed him again, forcing her tongue between his lips, he finally broke. He hid it well, but there was a wild kind of passion in Sanders, she knew. Whenever it came out, it was like a tidal wave, taking over everything in its path.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her down onto his lap. She didn't miss a beat, quickly rearranging her legs so she was straddling him.

"What if this is a mistake," he panted when she pulled away enough to kiss down the side of his jaw.

"Does this feel like a mistake?"

"You do not love me."

"Sanders, I love you more than just about anything."

"But you're not *in* love with me."

That made her pause for a moment. Did Sanders really want to wait to have sex until he was in love?

"No," she agreed, and let her hands drop to his belt buckle. "But you're not in love with me, either, Sanders. No matter what you think. We're not making love here. We're having sex, and that's very different. You'll be having a lot more sex than you'll be making love, trust me."

If he'd argued with her, if he'd made any sort of statement about wanting to wait, or even if he'd hinted at it, she would've stopped. No real harm had been done. They'd kissed before, she'd sat on his lap before, it was no big deal.

But he didn't say anything. His hands came to rest on her hips and she leaned into him again, tracing her tongue down the side of his neck.

"I do not want this to come between us," he insisted, clenching his fingers. "I don't want to do this if it could possibly ruin anything between us."

Tate laughed again and as she bit down on his earlobe, she ripped his belt away from his waist, letting it fly across the room.

"This is two friends having a very good time together, and nothing more. If you understand that and you're okay with the fact that it'll only happen while we're here, then there is absolutely nothing to worry about."

When she pulled off her top, he finally seemed to lose any reservations he'd had. His hands slid over her hips and up her back, his palms warm

against her skin as he moved them up onto her shoulders.

"I don't understand why he would let you do this. Why he would share you," he breathed, toying with one of her bra straps and gently sliding it to the side.

"Because he cares about you and he knows I'll take of you," she told him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "And he trusts me and knows that I know what I'm doing, knows that no matter what happens, I belong to him. Besides, sex has always been different for Jameson – it's not as emotional for him. It's an act. Think of it like a pick-up tennis game. We're just playing a friendly set, you and I."

"Whereas you and he are a doubles team."

She let her head drop back and she laughed loudly.

"You really do understand me, Sanders. Even when I'm talking absolute bullshit."

This time, he initiated the kiss. Tate knew she was the only woman he'd ever kissed, but he was still pretty good at it. With a mind like his, she wouldn't be surprised to find out he'd thought about it and studied the act in his mind. Going over and over it until he was confident he could do it well.

*If that's true about his kissing, then Jesus, he's going to be amazing in bed.*

He startled her by abruptly standing up. Sanders was like chorded steel – slender and tone, and also very strong. She wrapped her legs around his waist and scratched her fingers through the hair on the back of his head. He carried her across the room, his tongue becoming very acquainted with the inside of her mouth while he moved.

"See? This isn't so bad," she laughed when he lowered her to the bed.

"Please, don't talk. I'm trying not to think about what is going on right now."

"Oh, you better be very aware of *everything* that's going on right now."

Since the age of eighteen, Tate had never been shy about her body. Jameson had cured her of that, fucking away any inhibitions in one night. She knew what she liked, how she wanted to be touched, and she knew how she wanted to touch other people. She let her hands wander over every inch of Sanders without thought, memorizing him in a totally different way from before.

She pulled his undershirt away from his body and over his head, chucking it behind the headboard. Then moaned as he kissed along the shell

of her ear, sighed as his hands ran down the sides of her body.

While Sanders may have been somewhat uncomfortable – what with being with a woman for the first time, and being with Tate *at all* – she wasn't. She felt more comfortable with Sanders than with anyone else, including Jameson. So touching him and playing with him were just second nature to her, even in this new way. His skin was her skin. She smiled against his kiss as she swept her hands down his chest and hooked her fingers into the top of his pants.

"I want you to talk to me," she whispered into his mouth. His eyes fluttered shut when she unbuttoned his pants.

"I can't talk like him. I don't want to," he told her. She laughed softly as she pulled down his zipper.

"I don't want you to," she assured him. "I want you to tell me what you want. I want you to say anything that's in your head. Anything at all. *Everything.*"

"I don't ..." his voice trailed off as her hand slipped inside his pants and her fingernails scratched at his boxer briefs.

"Think of this as Sex 101," she suggested. "This is your chance to ask what goes where and what to do with what, and not feel nervous or embarrassed at all. *Tell me what you want.*"

"I don't know," he said, then she could hear his breath catching in his throat. She opened her eyes wide and stared down between their bodies. Sex was usually just sex, one man was pretty much like the next, she'd always told herself that – especially in regards to this endeavor – but this was still Sanders. He could never be like any other man in any regard, and that proved to be true in more ways than one. She was a little blown away by how ready and hard and *large* he was.

"I take it all back," she laughed. "No matter what happens tonight, you will do *perfectly* fine in the sex department."

He actually laughed. A loud, warm sound, coming from his chest. A rarity, for sure. Then he sighed and dropped his forehead to hers as she started stroking her hand up and down.

"I ..." he tried to speak again, but still couldn't finish. She licked her lips and moved her hand faster. Arched her back and pressed her breasts to his chest.

"Do you like this?" she breathed.

"Yes," he hissed through clenched teeth.

“What else?” she insisted, writhing slowly underneath him. Seeking some friction for herself. “Tell me what else you want.”

“I want ... I want to touch you.”

“God, yes, please touch me.”

He was kissing her again. He was a surprisingly aggressive kisser, lots of tongue and crushing lips. Just like she liked. One of his hands pressed down heavily over her breast and she gasped, then moaned as the hand moved over her stomach.

*“Move.”*

The command startled her and before she realized what was happening, he was pulling away. Breaking her hold on him. As her arm fell away from him, his own hands were squeezing her ribs. He roughly moved her, shifting her around on the bed. As he pushed her back into the pillows, she strained towards him, kissing him even as he continued moving over her. She had her hands on either side of his face, holding him close while he laid down on top of her.

“I want to explore you,” he whispered against her lips, and just the idea of it sent a shiver over her entire body.

“I would like that,” she whispered back.

“I’ve never been with a woman,” he said, kissing his way down her neck.

“I know,” she sighed, raking her fingers through her hair as his lips wandered down her cleavage.

“I may not be very good at any of this.”

“So far, so really fucking good, Sanders.”

“You would not lie to me about this.”

“No. No, I promise,” she panted, finally looking down at him. His brown hair was mussed and disheveled, tickling her as he kissed along the edge of her ribs. His hands were pressing down hard on the tops of her hips – everything he’d done had been heavy, she realized. Like he was trying to push her through the mattress. It was such a different sensation. She was used to his touches being light. Gentle hugs and delicate pats.

*He's trying to feel me, all the way through.*

Then those same hands were pulling down the zipper in the center of her shorts and she suddenly caught on to what exactly it was he wanted to explore.

*Oh, what a good man. He will do so well in life.*

“Remember,” he breathed against her skin while he peeled the shorts away from her body. She lifted her legs as he pulled the material free from her. “You promised to be honest about my abilities.”

“When have I ever – *oh my fucking god.*”

Her eyes rolled back in her head when she felt his lips against the center of her panties. He hadn't bothered taking them off, just moved his tongue through the lace, doubling the friction. She gasped and threw her head back, her shoulders lifting off the mattress.

“Is that a good exclamation, or a bad one?” he paused to ask.

“A very fucking good one,” she panted, waving her hand at him impatiently. “*Don't stop.*”

Her assumption must have been right – he had to have been practicing in his head. Or possibly on fruit. He went down on her like it was something he did for a living. Her hands flew above her head, scratching down the headboard, and she even surprised herself when she cried out his name.

“Oh my god, Sanders, where has this side of you been hiding!? God, right there,” she was having trouble catching her breath. “Please, please, please, it's so good, right there ...”

She'd forgotten her own name and what was going on and even who she was doing it with – all she knew was that she was on the verge of coming and it was all that mattered. She was trembling and shaking, one hand clawing through his hair, when he took it all away.

She choked when he pulled back. She felt his tongue sweeping a straight line up the center of her stomach, then he was hovering over her. She opened her eyes just as he kissed her again, his lips warm and damp as they slid across hers.

“You're a bad, bad, man,” she chuckled, then bit down on his bottom lip.

“Why?”

“Because you're a liar.”

“Pardon me, but I never lie.”

“*Liar* – you know *exactly* what you're doing to me.”

“*That* is a lie. I am guessing at every step. But thank you for the compliment.”

“You're very welcome. Now stop talking and fuck me.”



She hadn't meant to be vulgar with him, but it was just in her nature, and she was so turned on. She really hadn't expected it. She had imagined something sweet and sort of innocent. A bumbling virgin, fumbling around under the sheets with her. But so far, there wasn't much bumbling from him, at all. It seemed as though he really was exceptionally capable in everything he attempted. Her on-switch had been flipped and once that happened, there was very little that could be done to slow her down, and almost nothing that could stop her mouth.

Luckily, he didn't seem to notice her language, or just didn't mind. They both moved onto their knees, hands everywhere as they tried to get closer. One of his hands was fighting with the clasp in her bra while his other hand was inside the back of her underwear, pushing at the material and gently squeezing her ass.

She laughed when he let out a frustrated snort at her bra – there it finally was, a hint-o-bumbling – and she reached back and undid it herself. While she tossed it to the floor, he pushed her panties down her thighs at the same time as he kissed across her breasts. They both fell to the side, a tangle of arms and legs.

“This is the part I'm most nervous about,” he finally said while her feet pushed and shoved at his pants, forcing them awkwardly down his legs.

“Don't be nervous,” she said. “Tab A fits into Slot B almost every single time.”

“That is the easy part. It is the rest that I'm not sure about.”

“No one ever is, not until they've slept together a couple times. We'll figure it out together.”

He kicked his pants free of his legs and she wanted to look at him. Wanted to push him away so she could appraise him. But when he laid down on top of her, she remembered who this was about, and she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

“I wanted ...” he started to ask, then stopped himself. She stared up at him and combed her fingers through his hair.

“What? What do you want?” she asked. He wasn't look at her, she realized. He was staring just over her shoulder, at the sheets.

“It feels awkward to be asking questions,” he explained. “I feel like there shouldn't be so much talking.”

“Are you serious? I never shut up in bed,” she laughed. “There's no rules, except the ones we make together. If I don't like something you're

doing, I'll tell you, and vice versa, okay? So don't worry about it. Anything goes.”

“But I like rules,” he said simply. She groaned.

“Sanders, just let go. You don't have to be in control right now. What is it, are you embarrassed? Is it something kinky?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. He didn't say anything. “Do you want us to play a guessing game? Okay, what is it ... do you want me to blow you?”

“No,” he replied, then paused. “At least, not right now.”

She smiled big.

“Oooohhh, we'll save that for later. Something else – want me to get on my hands and knees? Want to spank me? I'm a very open minded person, as I would think you'd know by now,” she teased, but it still didn't seem to help. “Stop worrying, Sanders. I like it when you tell me what to do. I like it when you say what you want, when you say what you're going to do to me. *It turns me on.*”

He finally looked directly at her.

*Jackpot.*

“I want you to be on top of me.”

“Well, that's just asking *too much*,” she said in a dramatic voice, and they both laughed.

She kissed him again, trying to bring back the sensual mood he'd created so well just moments before. She pressed her body against every inch of his, forcing them onto their sides. When she rolled him onto his back, he moved a hand into her hair, and she was pleasantly surprised to feel him pulling. Not hard, but enough that she felt the tug.

*Now we're getting somewhere.*

“Can I tell you things?” he whispered as she put her knees on either side of his hips, forcing her ass into the air.

“Tell me anything,” she breathed, keeping her chest flush with his while she kissed the side of his face and his ear.

“I like the way you smell,” he sighed. She smiled against his skin.

“I never knew.”

“And the way you feel. You're very soft.”

“Thank you.”

She propped herself up over him and stared down at him for a second, then she kissed him gently.

“No going back, Sanders,” she whispered, running her hand down his body and between her legs. “I’m not going to force you, but I want to do this. I want you to do it with me.”

“I want this,” he agreed, his fingers spearing into her hair and holding it away from her face. “As of right now, you are truly the only person I feel comfortable enough with to engage in this kind of activity.”

“But it will only be now,” she warned him. “Only while we’re here. Is that okay?”

He nodded.

“I wouldn’t want anything else,” he promised. “Nor would I ask for it.”

She had one hand on his chest, holding her up, and her other hand was wrapped around him. Holding him. Guiding him. She had kind of hoped he would look at her when it happened. She wanted him to remember this moment. But his eyes were closed, his head tilted back, his lips parted. She couldn’t wait any longer, so she slowly slid down his erection.

“Oooohh, wow,” she breathed, finally taking him to the hilt.

“This ...” he sighed. “*Thank you.*”

She laughed softly.

“Congrats. You’re not a virgin anymore,” she informed him, smoothing her hand down the side of his face. He didn’t open his eyes, but he chuckled and moved his hands to her hips.

“Perhaps I am wrong, but I think I’m a virgin until I actually orgasm,” he informed her. She snickered.

“Oh, well then, better get to work.”

“No rush.”

She laughed again, but it was cut short when he moved his hips under her. She gasped when she felt his hands squeezing her, urging her to move. She obliged, rocking against him, sliding up and down his hard length.

He was quiet, which for a person with Tate’s fetishes somewhat unnerved her, but he was big enough that it really didn’t matter too much. He also had rhythm – she remembered he’d taken dancing lessons and wondered if they were coming in handy now. For it being his first time, she was very impressed. So he wasn’t a talker; most people weren’t, she had to remember. This was about him finding out what *he* liked, not about knowing what she already liked.

However, she was a little surprised when he finally did speak.

“Faster,” he urged. She chuckled and started riding him harder.

Then she was really surprised when she felt his hand on her chest. He was pushing at her, forcing her to sit upright. She was happy to do so, moaning when she felt him even deeper than before. Her hands went into her hair, lifting the long tresses off her neck and shoulders.

His hands, once he'd started moving them, didn't stop wandering. They slid around to her back, pressing down hard to enough to feel like a massage. She groaned when they finally came back to her breasts, cupping them and lifting them. She knew it was all supposed to be about him and letting him lead the way and whatnot, but she couldn't help herself. She dropped her hands to his, squeezing them over her breasts, then she dragged his right hand up to her face. She wrapped her lips around the base of his index finger, then slowly pulled it free, sucking as she went.

"Oh my god," he groaned, and it was probably the most uncontrolled she'd ever heard him sound the entire time they'd known each other.

*Who knew that would be so hot?*

She couldn't handle it. Sanders could be as quiet as he wanted, but she simply couldn't.

"Oh, god," she gasped for air as she rocked on top of him. "I'm going to ... I can't ... I'm going to come."

"Is too soon bad?" he asked through gritted teeth. She laughed, then let out a sharp cry as a tremor ripped through her body.

"Coming is never ever ever a bad thing," she replied, pressing both her hands against his chest. He finally opened his eyes and looked at her.

"I don't want this to end yet," he breathed. She shook her head.

"It's not ending any time soon," she promised, starting to shake all over.

But he was full of surprises. She let out a shriek when he abruptly rolled them over, his arms wrapping around her and holding her tight. When they finally came to a stop, he was on top of her and she was impaled on him. She couldn't remember how to breathe.

"Is it always like this?" he asked, not moving. It took her a few seconds to be able to answer.

"No ..." she squeaked out, scratching her nails down his chest, silently begging him to move and alternately praying that he'd stay just where he was. "No. Sometimes ... it's not good. Not fun. But this ... this ..."

"This is *so good*," he groaned, pulling out so slowly she thought she was going to go insane.

“*Fuck*, yes. Yes, it fucking is,” she agreed quickly.

“You said I could do anything, correct?”

“Yes. Anything. Whatever you want. Please.”

“I think I like it when you do that.”

“God, what? I’ll do anything. What did I do?”

“Beg.”

*Kinky little fucker.*

“Please, Sanders,” she breathed his name as she started moving around. She had some practice with begging – maybe she and Sanders had similar tastes, after all. “Please, please, please. Do whatever you want to me. Do *anything* you want. *I want you to*. God, so much. *Please*. Don’t stop.”

He slammed into her and she screamed. She was worried for a second it would scare him, but he didn’t even pause. She dragged her nails down his back and babbled incoherently while he fucked her. She made somewhat of an attempt to continue begging, but she was pretty sure most of it was nonsense.

How could she possibly think when he was everywhere? His hands were all over her, constantly moving and pushing and squeezing. *Exploring*, just like he’d said, yet it didn’t slow him down at all. He kept pushing and thrusting and pounding away at her. God, so much. She felt like she was going to explode and she started coiling herself around him, lifting her legs and squeezing her thighs against him.

“You were right,” he panted, running a hand down her thigh and then cupping her asscheek. “You are very, very good at this.”

“I have a good partner,” she replied. Her nerves were being wound so tight, her teeth actually started to chatter. He dug his fingers into her flesh and dragged his hand back up her thigh.

“Tatum,” he said. It was the first time he’d said her name since he’d been inside her, and it almost undid her right then. She bit down on her lips and tried to concentrate on his voice. “This has been very amazing, but I need to know one more thing.”

“Anything, anything, anything,” she chanted in time to his thrusts.

“I’m going to come,” he breathed. “Please ...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“Please, yes, I want you to. Anywhere you want,” she urged, turning to look at him. She was surprised to see him staring right back at her. His

forehead dropped down to hers again.

"I want you to come, too," he said.

"Don't worry," she whined, her voice high pitched and thready. "I'm going to."

"Please, for me. Just this one time. I want to know I could make someone do that, at least once."

"Oh god," she cried out, squeezing her eyes shut tight, trying to stave off the orgasm until he was finished. She felt his fingers against her face, tracing over her lips.

"Don't, don't, don't," he whispered. "Don't hold back from me. Don't ever do that."

Funny how she could stand harsh words and stinging hands so well, yet a dear friend speaking so softly and sweetly could just shred her.

She screamed when she came, her entire back arching off the bed. His index finger pressed down hard against her bottom lip, setting off the nerve endings there, then dipped into her mouth. Stroked over her tongue. She moaned and cried, gently biting down on him. She heard him give a loud groan and he started thrusting even harder. The headboard banged against the wall in time, making a loud, sharp, smacking sound that seemed to reverberate through the room.

"Oh my god," she sobbed when he finally pulled his hand away. "Holy fuck. I can't stop ... *god, please, Sanders ...*"

If she'd been in her right mind, she would've been worried about leaving scars on his back, but her right mind was a million miles away. No, her current state of mind was set to "well fucked" and she paid no attention to the deep scratches her fingernails were leaving behind on him.

He didn't seem to mind, though. One of his hands was clenched around her breast and the other moved to grip the top of the wiggling headboard. He used the leverage to pound harder still and she really did go cross eyed.

She was of no use to him, locked in her orgasm. She could only moan and shriek and say his name. Over and over again. Finally, he let out his own shout. He let go of her breast and when she opened her eyes, she saw that both his hands had the headboard in what looked to be a white-knuckle-grip. His erection throbbed and grew inside her, and then she could feel him coming. Felt him pulsing and twitching.

Her orgasm had just started subsiding when he collapsed on top of her. His face was next to hers, buried in the pillows, and their chests fought

against each other as they both tried to catch their breath.

“Well then,” she panted, sliding one hand gently up his sweat slicked back. “Now you are *officially* not a virgin anymore.”

“Yes,” he grunted, and she felt him nod. “I think it is safe to say that I am most certainly not anymore.”

They were quiet for a while. Her hips were aching and her thighs were trembling, but she didn't say anything. Just kept one hand in his hair and kept rubbing the other up and down his back.

When they could both breathe normally again and the warmth in the air started to dissipate, he finally slid off her. He pulled the sheets over them, then laid on his stomach next to her. She stayed on her back, smiling up at the ceiling.

“I did alright?” he finally asked. She barked out a laugh.

“Uh, yeah, Sanders. You did 'alright',” she snorted. “I'm pretty sure every single person in this motel knows just how 'alright' you did.”

“Do you know, I always wondered how you could stand to be so loud. Why it didn't embarrass you,” he said. “But now I think I understand. I didn't even care when it was happening. Didn't even think about it.”

“We'll see how you feel about it tomorrow at breakfast when you have to face all the other guests,” she joked.

“I don't think I'll care then, either.”

“No, you probably won't. When sex is that good, you never do.”

“Was I as good as some of the other people you've slept with?” he asked boldly.

“Yes. Good god, yes, you were.”

“Even for it being my first time?”

“Shockingly enough, yes. Did you study for this or something?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus, how do you study for sex?”

“I can be somewhat obsessive when I want to know about something, and I have had a lot of alone time to thoroughly think things through and read up on the subject. The only thing missing was someone to engage with.”

“You should teach a course,” she suggested.

“So I was better than some of your other partners?” he asked. She loved that he asked so outright. No shyness, no hinting, like other men would do.

"Than most of them," she told him, then she reached out and pressed her hand against his back. "I'd put you in the top ten."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"That is quite an honor, considering how many people you've slept with."

She burst out laughing and swatted him.

"Watch it, you're not good enough to be giving attitude during pillow talk."

"Was I as good as Jameson?"

Ah. She had wondered if that question would be asked. Wasn't surprised to hear it. She turned to face him and found him staring at her.

"Do you want me to tell you the truth?" she asked. He nodded.

"Always."

"No," she was honest. "No one has ever been as good as him, at least not for me. Not only does he have a lot of practice, but he's ... he's my other half, Sanders. It's like my body was built specifically for him. He knows where all the switches are, all the buttons. He knows exactly what I like, what I want to do, what I want to hear. Sex is good with anybody if they're halfway decent at it, but with Jameson it's ... someday, you'll experience it with somebody."

"With me it's just sex," Sanders understood. "With him it's making love."

"Yes," she nodded. "As fucked up as it is, he and I make love. It's something completely different, and it'll happen for you. You'll find your other half and you'll know what it feels like. It's ... there's nothing like it."

"Then I look forward to it."

"You're gonna break some hearts," she sighed, rubbing her hand up and down his side. "I'm almost jealous."

"Almost," he chuckled, and then he reached out his own arm and wrapped it around her waist.

"Whoever these girls are, you better warn them that I'll kick their ass if they treat you wrong," she told him, turning onto her side. He'd closed his eyes again, but he smiled at her.

"Thank you, Tatum. For tonight. You were right, I wouldn't have enjoyed myself with anyone else for my first time, and now I feel more comfortable with the act. What you did – what you *both* did for me – I



know how important it was, and I am very honored that you chose to do this. I will remember tonight always, and with great fondness,” he told her. She sighed happily and combed her fingers through his hair.

“Well, tonight's not over,” she pointed out. His eyes popped back open.

“Excuse me?”

“We have this room for tonight and tomorrow night,” she reminded him. “I rented it for only one purpose. We have the rest of tonight, and then tomorrow we'll go get breakfast and maybe go shopping, find somewhere for dinner. Then we have tomorrow night before this all turns into a pumpkin and we have to go home.”

He was silent for a long time and for a moment, she wondered if she'd scared him off.

*Too much, too soon?*

“Do we have to leave the room at all?” he asked.

Tate burst out laughing and pushed him away.

“I do believe I have corrupted you, Mr. Dashkevich.”

“Forgive me, but I do believe you are right, Ms. O'Shea.”

## **Kane Fun Facts**

Jameson Kane was born at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, on January 9<sup>th</sup> at roughly eight in the morning.

His mother, Camila Kraven, was born in Salta, Argentina. Her father was the British Ambassador and her mother was an Argentinian teacher in a private school. Her parents divorced when she was five and her father moved back to the United Kingdom. She never saw him again and he passed away when she was eight.

Her mother relocated to Buenos Aires and taught school there. Camila grew up multilingual and after she graduated high school, she was hired by various embassies to work as an interpreter.

Through her job, she met Jefferson Kane, a wealthy financier from New York. She traveled around Argentina with him for two weeks, acting as his interpreter. Though he wasn't a particularly nice, or even likable man, their relationship moved beyond professional and they slept together. It wasn't until after he'd gone back home that she'd realized she was pregnant.

A scandal about impregnating an employee of the Argentinian government was certain to put a damper on Jefferson Kane's political ambitions, so he flew Camila to New York and married her. Nine years later, she died from small cell lung cancer.

Jameson had an extremely close and loving relationship with his mother, and her death was hard on him. He'd never developed a relationship with his father, and directly following his mother's passing, Jameson was shipped off to boarding school, where he stayed until he graduated.

\*

Tatum O'Shea was born at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia, on December 20<sup>th</sup> at roughly seven in the evening.

She was an unplanned pregnancy, and was also supposed to be a boy. Matthias O'Shea had been counting on a son to carry on the O'Shea name. He held her gender against her for the rest of her life.

Her mother suffers from depression. She is an alcoholic who also has an addiction to xanax, oxycontin, and ambien.

Her father was verbally and emotionally abusive to everyone in his immediate family. He is an outspoken sexist, racist, bigot. He didn't speak to Tate for seven straight years, and hasn't spoken to his daughter Eloise in almost four.

Eloise Carmichael is the elder O'Shea daughter. She dated Jameson Kane for several years before breaking up with him. A year later, she married Robert Carmichael, who became physically and verbally abusive after the nuptials. They have one child together, which she gave birth to after divorcing her husband.

Tatum excelled in school, particularly in studies involving vocab and sociology. She was also an accomplished equestrian, played softball, and once won a painting contest. After her sophomore year, her parents forced her to give up all extracurricular activities so she could focus on her studies. She was accepted into Harvard and moved to Boston, where she planned to have a career in politics.

\*

Sanders Dashkevich was born in the Dashkevich household in Minsk, Belarus, on March 21<sup>st</sup>, at roughly two in the morning.

He was the sixth of eight children. His eldest sibling died at the age of five, and his two younger siblings both died within months of being born. He has no memory of his remaining brothers and sisters, and no clear memories of his mother or father. He knows they are both alive and living in Minsk. He has made no attempts at contacting them and has no desire to ever do so.

Jameson Kane is his legal guardian, and falls somewhere between the roles of father-figure and living-legend. In Sanders' eyes, Jameson can do no wrong. Most of the time. Since everything Jameson does comes from a place of either self gain, or calculation, he is easy to understand – that's why Sanders finds it so comfortable to be around him.

Tatum O'Shea, however, is neither selfish nor calculating. Most of her decisions are based purely on emotion, made in the spur of the moment, with very little thought process behind them. At first, she was very difficult for him to understand. Her bold personality refuses to be ignored and she doesn't care if someone doesn't like her – that combination is what broke

down Sanders' walls. Once he realized that she came from a place of love and wanting to be loved, he found her easy to understand, as well.

He has an impressive IQ and an astounding intelligence. Book learning of any kind comes naturally and easily for him. He was sent to expensive private schools and excelled in virtually every subject. He also took well to some sports, including horse riding. He declined college because he felt it would be pointless to go to school when he didn't know what exactly it was he wanted to focus his studies on.

He only wears custom made suits. He has three shops he buys them from – one in London, one in Manhattan, and one in France. He rarely wears the same tie twice and has a collection of thousands. He does his own laundry when he can, and the rest he has dry cleaned.

His preferred music is classical, though he also enjoys quite a lot of '80's music. His favorite painter is Bouvier de Cachard, his favorite composer is Vivaldi, and his favorite television show is “Billions”.

He identifies as heterosexual and he finds women sexually attractive. However, people in general make him nervous, and also annoy him, so he avoids them and most relationships. He has explored his sexual wants and desires, but has never once come close to finding anyone he would ever even consider having a relationship with, nor is he looking for anyone like that. He likes his solitude and is quite content in it, which is very unfortunate for the rest of us.

# **Soundtrack**

Kane mash-up – my fave songs from the trilogy's soundtracks and songs that make me think of the one and only Satan.

- Lady Gaga – Bad Romance
- 30 Seconds to Mars – Up in the Air
- Lisa Fischer – Ruler of My Heart
- Neon Hitch – Some Like it Hot
- Natalia Kills – Problem
- Miley Cyrus – Wrecking Ball
- Bryan Ferry – Slave to Love
- Stromae – Tous Les Memes
- John Mayer – Slow Dancing in a Burning Room
- Lo-Fang – Boris
- Chris Isaak – Wicked Games
- Adam Lambert – Better Than I Know Myself
- Natalia Kills – Wonderland
- Lifehouse – You and Me

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# NEIGHBORS

A Twin Estates Novel  
excerpt

**Author's Note:** *I am including this excerpt because the character of Wulfric Stone from Neighbors was inspired by Jameson Kane and patterned after him.*

"I'm sorry, have we met?" Katya asked, glancing around, glad to see there were other people around them.

"No, not officially. I'm Liam Edenhoff, I live in the building next door," he explained, and she finally smiled. That's why he was familiar – she must have seen him around.

Katya lived in an apartment building just outside of downtown San Francisco – really it was *two* buildings, together called *Twin Estates*. Her building and the one next door were twins. Identical and managed by the same company, they shared an alleyway and dumpsters between them. She'd probably bumped into him while taking out the trash at some point.

*But why was he looking for me?*

"Oh, hello. I'm Katya," she introduced herself, but didn't offer her last name.

"I know."

*Creepy just got bumped up to totally weird.*

"Oh. Um ..."

"Sorry, I'm coming off totally weird," he laughed, reading her mind. "I've seen you around the buildings, and then I was on this website, and I saw your profile."

*Oh. Jesus.* She was really going to murder her roommate. It was one thing to have a bit of fun and put some naughty stuff up on a website, but when it brought random strange men to where she lived, it was going too far.

"Ooohhh, yeeaaaahh. *That* website," she grumbled, finally kneeling down to pick up her bag.

"Yeah. I gotta say, I've noticed you for a while, and I always thought you were ..."

“Were what?” she asked, glancing up at him. He shrugged.

“I don't know. Just ... I read that profile, and I had to meet that woman.”

Katya wasn't sure what to make of his statement – she was a little insulted that the woman he'd seen around the building hadn't been interesting enough to meet. But she was also a little flattered – and, admittedly, excited – that he'd sought out the woman from the profile.

“So if you hadn't seen my profile, you would never have introduced yourself?” she double checked. He chuckled and rubbed at the back of his neck, looking a little sheepish.

“Honestly? No. I mean, don't get me wrong, you seemed like a really sweet girl, and you're gorgeous, but I'm not exactly a sweet guy. I didn't want to waste your time, or freak you out,” he said.

“Freak me out?”

“Yeah.”

“How? What do you mean?”

“Well, like I assumed you were a Sunday school teacher or something,” he explained. “I own and operate a club downtown. The two don't exactly match.”

“Sunday school teacher? Why?” she was a little surprised, then was even more so when she watched his gaze blatantly travel up and down her body.

“My other guess was librarian. You just always seemed ... sweet. Innocent,” he said.

*Sweet and innocent. Translation: **boring**. Tori was right. I'm dull, and it took a made up online profile to get a guy to notice me.*

Katya should've been angry at him. For judging her before he'd met her, solely based on her outward appearance. For perpetuating the stereotype that a woman had to be overtly sexy in order to be interesting. For only giving her the time of day because of some ridiculous website.

But she was actually angry at *herself*. She felt like a prisoner of her own inhibitions, her own naiveté. She was angry that deep down, she *wanted* to be an overtly sexual woman, the kind that could draw men in with a single glance.

She wanted to be that woman from her profile bio.

She just didn't know how, and before her anger could boil over, all her carefully built manners and over the top etiquette cooled her off. She

managed a tight lipped smile for him.

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I didn't write that bio," she told him the truth.

"You didn't?"

"Nope. My roommate did."

"Ah. Roommate. So I take it you don't do strip-aerobics," he said with a chuckle. She shook her head.

"I didn't even know that was a real thing."

He burst out laughing.

"Gotcha. So the whole sweet and innocent thing, that *is* the real you."

She opened her mouth, then froze. Was that the real her? Or was that just who she'd convinced herself she needed to be? She was so sick and tired of everyone assuming she was this insipid goody-two-shoes. Tori telling her to get a life. This stranger assuming she was a librarian. It wasn't fair. She could be just as wild, just as fun-loving as the next person. All she needed was the chance.

*Take a chance ...*

"Just because I don't walk around in a thong bikini doesn't mean I'm all innocence," she replied. He cocked up an eyebrow.

"I dunno. A baker, huh? You pretty much look like angel food cake to me," he teased her. She glared at him.

"Was this your big plan? Stalk me down in my building and interrogate me? Is this how you ask out all your dates?" she demanded.

"Who said I was gonna ask you out on a date?" he replied.

"Oh, please. You didn't come over here to ask me about my strip-aerobics class, and we both know it," she said, proud of herself for the quick and snappy come back.

"Touché. I was going to invite you to my club," he said. She took a deep breath and for a split second, thought about how early she had to get up for work. Thought about the design she had to work on for a client. Thought about her big plans for the evening – reinforcing all the buttons on her dress shirts.

"I'm free after eight o'clock," she blurted out. He laughed at her again, and she couldn't help but notice that he had a great laugh, and an even better smile. She'd known him for all of two seconds, but she was willing to bet "fun-loving" was his middle name. The man was made to smile.



“Whoa there, angel cake, I don't think this is such a good idea,” he said, holding up a hand.

“Why not? I love to dance.”

“It's not that kind of club.”

“What? Is it like a book club?”

He laughed again, but she hadn't been joking. She figured he didn't need to know that and she managed to laugh as well.

“Look, you seem like a nice girl. I'm sure you get asked on lots of dates, and if I was a tax attorney, or an insurance salesman, I'd for sure want to go out with you, but I don't want to make you uncomfortable,” he told her. She rolled her eyes.

“If anyone here is a '*nice girl*', it's you – I've made all the moves so far. If you don't want to go out, just say so, and I can move onto the next guy, and you can go to your little club house thingy,” she said.

This was so far out of her comfort zone, she wasn't sure she was still the same Katya anymore. Her Eros profile had come to life and body snatched her. The words coming out of her mouth, the tone of her voice, were completely foreign to her. Yesterday, Katya would have gotten embarrassed. Blushed at the way he talked about her, apologized for taking up his time – even though he'd been the one to stop her.

This new-Katya, though, refused to be embarrassed. He had come there for a reason, to ask *her* out, so she had nothing to be sorry about, and hell, maybe she would move onto another man. She'd certainly gotten a lot of offers from the website. She squared her shoulders and looked him straight in the eyes, praying her bravado held out for a few more minutes.

“Club house thingy, huh,” he mumbled, his eyes wandering over her form again.

“Are we done? I have some messages to catch up on,” she said, then she went to step around him. He reached out and grabbed her arm.

“Alright, alright, calm down. You want to see my club?” he asked. She noticed he kept putting emphasis on that word, *club*.

“I don't know, now. You've made it weird. Am I going to show up and it's some football club? A One Direction fan club? I'm not so into those things,” she said.

“How about a sex club? You into that?”

She almost swallowed her tongue. A sex club? He owned and operated a *sex club*? Did those even exist in real life? And the way he'd said it. A

perfect stranger, talking about a sex club with her. In broad daylight.

*Maybe I never really woke up this morning and this is all a dream.*

"I'm sorry," she cleared her throat. "Are you saying you want to take me to a sex club?"

"Yes."

"Is that where you take all your first dates?" she asked, still thinking he might be joking.

"No. Usually I keep it a secret. Freaks most girls out – just like I thought it would you, until I saw that Eros profile," he explained.

"So let me see if I have this straight. Whatever you saw on my profile made you think I'd be interested in going to a sex club with you," she spelled it all out.

"Yeah. Clearly, I was mistaken. It was nice meeting you, Katya."

She was having a moment. A tidal pull on her conscience. This was a bad idea on an epic level. Going to a sex club with a man she'd just met? That's how women ended up on Dateline. Not to mention the fact that Katya simply didn't do things like that – she was more of a museum or opera house kind of girl.

But new-Katya, the woman from the profile, she bristled against old-Katya. Got mad at the way this handsome stranger was looking at her, as if she couldn't possibly be brave enough to try something new and daring. Something sexy and a little dangerous.

"Nine o'clock," she blurted out.

"Excuse me?"

"I'll need more time," she explained. "I can meet you down here at nine o'clock."

"C'mon now, this isn't like truth or dare. No points for trying, it's okay. We can just pretend this didn't happen, go back to avoiding eye contact when we pass each other on the sidewalk," he suggested.

"Awww, see? You're such a good little girl, trying to look out for me," she spoke to him in a baby-voice. His smile finally reappeared and she had to will away the blush she felt creeping up her neck.

"Alright, angel cake. Let's see how far you'll take this cute little act. Nine o'clock," he said, then he finally let her go. She nodded her head.

"I'll be down here," she assured him, then she started for the elevator.

"Oh! And a suggestion," he shouted after her. She turned as she stepped onto the lift and saw that his grin was stretching from ear to ear.

“Yes?”

“Don't change your clothing. What you're wearing is *perfect*.”

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