

Bonus Chapter: The Night Before Everything Broke Open

The loft should have been asleep. Tools stacked, notes filed, futon folded. Tomorrow was supposed to be the finish line, and Rae's voice still echoed in my head like a drill sergeant: *No slip-ups, no distractions.*

But my body wouldn't shut down. Not after today.

I'd watched Theo run straight into the maze during the fire drill like he was indestructible, like nothing could fall, like I wouldn't feel my stomach drop out of my body if he disappeared under a railing. Rage should have kept me upright, pacing. Instead it was something hotter, uglier, more dangerous curling in my gut.

He was across the loft, bent over the worktable, scribbling corrections under the lamp. Too calm. Too precise. My hands ached to shake him. Or kiss him. Maybe both.

"You could've gotten yourself killed," I said, sharper than I meant.

He didn't look up. "I fixed it. No one was hurt."

"That's not the point." I stalked closer, shoved the pen out of his hand. It clattered, and the sound was too loud in the loft. My voice cracked on the last word. "You scared me."

Finally, he looked up. His eyes found mine like they were tethered. Not apology, not dismissal. Hunger.

"You're shaking," he murmured.

“You’re infuriating.” The word came out more like confession than insult.

The silence between us broke like glass. I kissed him first — or maybe he kissed me. All I knew was teeth, breath, and fury crashing together.

The table dug into my hips as he lifted me onto it, sticky notes scattering like confetti. My hands yanked his shirt over his head. My blouse didn’t survive the process — buttons pinged off wood and metal, falling like pebbles. We laughed, breathless, half-mad already.

His mouth trailed down my throat, leaving heat where tomorrow I’d see marks. My jeans tangled at my ankles. His palms slid up my thighs like he’d been waiting all week, all year, for permission.

“You still mad?” he whispered, voice frayed.

“Yes.” I arched into him. “Don’t stop.”

His fingers slipped between my thighs, finding me slick, ready, reckless. The first touch was a spark. The second set me on fire. My breath hitched loud in the cavernous loft, echoing off steel and wood.

“God, Lia...” His voice cracked, rough with disbelief.

I grabbed the waistband of his jeans, dragged them down, greedy. He fumbled for his bag, tore open a foil packet, rolled latex down his length with hands that shook only slightly. The care in that gesture almost undid me.

And then he was inside me — deep, hot, relentless. My gasp turned into a cry that rattled the rafters. The worktable creaked in protest, but I didn’t care. Let it splinter. Let the whole market know.

I clung to him, nails down his back, thighs wrapped tight, riding the rhythm he set. Each thrust sent a jolt through me, brighter than the neon lights downstairs. Pressure built fast, too fast, until my body seized around him, climax tearing out of me with a muffled scream into his shoulder.

He didn't stop. He chased me through it, hips snapping, sweat slick on his chest. When he came, it was with a groan so deep I felt it in my bones. He collapsed against me, trembling, breath ragged in my ear.

But the fire hadn't gone out.

I shoved him back gently, slid down to my knees. The floor was cold under my skin, but his taste was heat and salt and control surrendered. His curses cracked the air, his hand tangling in my hair until I pinned his hips against the table with my palm and set the pace myself. He tried to pull me up. I refused, sucking harder, greedy for every sound he made until he shattered again, shaking above me.

We collapsed in a heap on the floor, surrounded by fallen notes. One stuck to my thigh: *Work first*. I laughed, half delirious, peeling it off and slapping it onto his chest.

"Not tonight," I said.

He grinned, ruined and beautiful. "Work tomorrow."

We kissed again, slower this time, almost tender. But my body wasn't finished. I climbed astride him, skin against skin, sinking down onto him with a moan

that curled in my belly. His hands gripped my hips, guiding me as I rode him, each grind deliberate, pulling aftershocks from nerves already fried.

This round was slower, deeper. My hair fell into his face, his stubble rasped my collarbone, and the table leg dug into my back, but none of it mattered. All that mattered was the way he whispered my name like a secret he'd never give up. When release hit again, I clutched him so tight I thought I'd bruise. He followed with a broken laugh, spilling inside me with nothing left to hide.

Silence settled heavy. Our bodies stuck together with sweat. The smell of clay dust and sex filled the air.

We lay there, half-naked, bruised, alive. Sticky notes pressed into our skin. One read *Deliverables*. Another, upside down, just said *Hope*.

Theo brushed damp curls from my forehead, voice low, roughened. "We're never going to look at this table the same way."

"Good," I said, laughing weakly. "Let it remind us we can't always follow rules."

He kissed my shoulder, slow and reverent. For the first time all week, *work first* didn't echo in my head. For the first time, it was just this: our bodies, our mess, our secret.

Tomorrow, donors and kids and reporters would walk through the maze. Tomorrow, everything would be fragile and public.

But tonight was ours. And it was too much to ever admit out loud.