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“HOLY SHIT! IS THAT OUR VIEW?” I drop my carry-on bag in the entry way and walk straight through the presidential suite to the balcony terrace.

The investment firm we work for told us they’d spare no expense on this trip, but I had no clue they’d put us at the top of the tallest high-rise that Hong Kong has to offer. The city skyline sparkles in a carnival of color, shimmering in teal and pink and silver.

“Dom!” I call back into the suite, where I see his shadow near the door, tipping the bellman. Between us are floor-to-ceiling windows that run the whole length of the living room, all of them reflecting the spectacle of color behind me. “Get out here. You won’t believe this!”

I walk to the edge of the balcony, feeling as if I’ve stepped into a universe of stars. Not only is the sky twinkling, but the entire terrace is reflective and breathtaking—the railing walls are made of glass and a private pool reflects the city. There’s even a lounge area with a modern fire-pit where flames dance from a mound of cut glass that look like

a raw gems. It's a sparkling terrace of wishes, a thousand stars and neon reflections of light.

"Damn! How many rooms are in here?" I hear Dom say from one of the hallways and a prickle of delight warms my stomach. The summer air is warm and balmy, and a tiny ball of nerves flutters over my skin. I'm *sharing* this suite with Dom—my boss.

I glance back through the glass. Dom wheels in our luggage cart, looking like he just walked out of the pages of *GQ* magazine, completely elegant and unflustered by the long flight. His fitted grey suit is cut to perfection, hugging his tall frame, and there's not a button out of place. Dom wears business suits the way other men wear t-shirts. They just *fit* him. I've never seen him more at ease than in a business suit, as if there's nothing more comfortable in the world. In fact, I can't say I've ever seen him wear anything else.

My palms slip against the terrace railing as I watch him unload the cart. He fills out his trousers too well and his fit backside makes me flush. Dom and I have been on dozens of business trips before. We've shared a hundred shitty cups of hotel coffee and mastered the art of eating chow-mien out of Styrofoam take-out boxes with plastic chopsticks. We've spent countless nights laughing and talking strategy—followed by an awkward good-night hug—before I'd retreat back to my private room. Two years he's been grooming me for the firm's restaurant division. Two years of waking up in the morning and strolling into the hotel lobby where I'm met by Dom's brilliant seize-the-day smile as if I didn't sleep alone in my hotel room fantasizing about what might've happen if he'd knocked on my door in the middle of the night and asked for dessert.

Only Dom isn't that kind of a man. I can imagine his

suit on the floor and his Irish skin dolloped in whipped cream as much as I'd like, but the reality is he's the epitome of professional. He's brilliant and *always* the gentleman, and gentlemen don't appreciate you thanking them for their business acquisitions tutelage with cans of whipped cream and naughty intentions. Not even after the two of you made a silly drunken pack on your first business trip together to never keep anything from each other. I'm pretty sure "I want to jump your bones" doesn't fall under appropriate boss and mentee secret-sharing. So, yes, that prickle of heat I feel when Dom is near is one card I keep close to my chest.

Dom knows these trips are important—to the company, to our careers, to me. And he's gone out of his way to make sure I feel like his equal. "It's hard to be a woman in a man's world," he's said, and it's been his personal declaration to make sure I've never felt taken advantage of. But that pronouncement has also created an unspoken tension between us, because Dom would never mess up our business relationship with something like sex ... despite our longing glances or the hundreds of late hours we've spent together in foreign cities, both of us over-worked and full of pent-up stress.

He's my boss—the boss who respects my job too much to ever make a move—that, and the easy excuse of separate rooms.

But *this* trip is different.

This trip is our *last* trip. Not only has the firm put us up in this star-lit presidential suite together, but this is *it*. This is the largest acquisition our firm has ever made and it will give us a significant foothold in the Asian market. If Dom and I nail this deal, I'll get promoted to the head of the restaurant division, which is what Dom's been grooming me for the last two years anyway. We both know it's been

leading up to this. Nail this weekend and I *will* be Dom's equal. I'll be given my own accounts and staff and office on the twenty-second floor of the building that just so happens to be on the complete *other side* of Manhattan. Yup, I won't be working with Dom anymore. I won't even be in the same building. This is our last trip together. It could be the jet-lag or the warm foreign-country air, but I know he feels it too, the finality of this. And, yes, I'm about to make the biggest deal of my career, but honestly, it's not the deal that's got my palms sweaty.

"Damn, that's beautiful."

I turn to see Dom leaning against the glass doorway, his auburn hair catching the wind. A hint of that rogue Irish-boy peeks out from under all his polish and grace, and I can't help but smile. Dominick Pierce is the smartest and most brilliant acquisitions lawyer I could ever imagine having by my side. He's taught me more about negotiation and business law than I could thank him for, but that's not what's got me twisted up inside. Dom's gaze lingers somewhere between me and the glittering city at my back, but I can't read his expression.

I hold his gaze, consciously imagining something there that probably isn't. It's irrational, and I know that, even though the affection I feel for him is real. Even though the respect and admiration he has for me is real. But respect doesn't easily translate to lust.

"Did you bring a bathing suit?" I ask, turning away from the heat I want to imagine is in his gaze and shifting our attention to something lighter. I walk toward the pool, hearing him laugh uncomfortably.

"Um..." he mumbles. "No, I didn't," he says politely and I suddenly realize the implication of that comment.

I stop in front of the sheen of silver water and try to

shrug off my own unconscious intention. “Too bad,” I say playfully, even though my imagination is already a traitor. What would it be like to walk out here in the morning and find Dom in this pool? To be met by his beautiful smile and wet body? And he just said he doesn’t have a bathing suit, so ... my neck heats making me kick off my shoe and dip my toes in the water. The surface ripples as my foot descends into the cold, sending a chill all the way up my leg and under my skirt. “Oh wow!” I say, surprised. “They don’t heat the pool.”

I pull my foot out, despite the soothing chill of goosebumps that shiver over my skin.

“I bet it feels good,” Dom says, walking toward the balcony railing with his head angled away from me. I wonder if he’s doing that deliberately. If he’s avoiding me with my shoe off and my ankle wet. Is he’s also thinking about what it would be like to be in this pool surrounded by water and skin?

All I can do is speculate as Dom looks out at the city. He leans against the wall of glass and it looks like he about to fly, perched on the edge of a precipice. I can’t help but feel like my heart is standing out on that edge with him. We’ve both known for weeks that we’d be sharing this suite. And here we are, for the first time up in this high-rise. Alone.

My body warms with how badly it wants this to happen, and a part of me considers walking over to him right now and kissing him. I could close this unspoken distance and tension by pressing him up against that glass and showing him exactly how I’ve imagined this happening.

“Do you want to choose a bed?” Dom asks and my eyes cut to him. A flush of heat spreads across my chest and I know I should’ve worn something more professional. This

airy sundress is thin as crepe paper and it barely hides how my nipples peak at that comment. Only he's not looking at me. Instead he's nodding back to the suite. "I think there are four bedrooms. You can pick whichever one you want first. I don't mind."

"Oh, uh ... sure," I say, realizing he only means for me to find my own private space, which nipples-be-damned I wouldn't mind right now. I had no idea how badly my body has been waiting for this weekend. Nor did I realize that even the slightest innuendo, which *wasn't* innuendo at all, could betray how eager my body is. Dom is over ten feet away, yet my body is achy and flushed and *positive* that this is a sure thing. But, if I've learned anything from the last ten years of fighting my way up the corporate ladder, it's that treating anything like a sure thing is a recipe for disaster—especially as a woman.

"Are you nervous?"

My eyes find him again. "Nervous? What do you mean?"

"About tomorrow," he says calmly, a slight wind playing with the collar of his shirt. "About the negotiation?"

"Oh, uh ... no. Of course not." I shake myself and find my shoe. "Sorry. It must be the jet-lag." I slip my foot back inside the heel, needing to focus. "We've got this planned, Dom. Everything will be perfect."

I take a long measured breath before walking toward him, forcing myself to ignore the soft way my dress plays against my hips and the tickle of fabric at the back of my thighs. My body thinks it's on a date and this is the most romantic high-rise in the world—twinkling lights, summer dress, my beautiful boss with soft lips who's casually leaning against the railing.

"Are *you* nervous?" I ask, trying to deflect, and he

shakes his head before looking out at the city again. Only, the fact that he didn't answer means he is. I want to put my hands on his shoulders and rub that tension away, to tell him it's nothing and we've got this. But, I don't dare touch him. I don't trust my hands to not unbutton his collar first and then the rest of him.

Dom's troubled expression is out of character. He's always so sure, always the confident one oozing smiles and charm and able to make even the most boring of Excel charts fascinating. He's the one who taught me to walk into every room as if the deal is already done, as if I don't need it, and I'm ready to walk away. That's what puts you in the power position. And I thought I was ready. Ready to walk into this weekend with that same confidence, making every fantasy I've ever dreamed of become a reality. But that troubled look on Dom's face means I care too much. I can't make a move. Not right now. Not at the expense of this deal. He'd never forgive me.

"There's no possible way you—we—can screw this up," I say. "Our strategy is perfect. The only reason this deal won't close is if *they've* been leading us on. And we both know they want this as much as we do."

Dom looks at me and the uncertainty in his gaze is unsettling. His shoulders have locked and his hands are clasped into a tight fist.

"Hey?" I ask. "What are you worried about?"

He shakes his head. "Nothing."

I call him out on his vagueness. "No lies between us. We agreed on that our first deal together. Day one. We're only as strong as the truth we share."

He straightens up and fiddles with the top buttons of his pressed shirt. "Curse the day I said that to you." He smiles kindly, both of us knowing that pact has only brought

us closer and made us a more powerful team. “Tomorrow’s a big deal,” he admits. “Maybe I’m just putting too much pressure on myself.”

“You’ll be brilliant,” I say, leaning against the railing next to him. “Everyone knows you’re the best man for this job.”

“Well...” he smiles, deflecting and pretending to take the compliment. “*You* have to say that. You’re my protégé.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

His eyes flick to my mouth and linger. Suddenly, the hot air on my shoulders becomes a sauna slicking hair to my neck. The worried crease in his forehead deepens and I start to wonder if it’s not *tomorrow* he’s worried about. After all, there’s a whole night for us to get through first.

“You always close the deal,” I say softly. “You always get what you want.”

Dom’s eyes skim down the front of my dress and I bite my lip at the dress’ lack of modesty. The thin fabric barely hides my tightened nipples, which should assure him there’s nothing to be nervous about if his hesitation is about me.

“It was a long flight,” Dom says abruptly, smoothing out his suit and turning toward the suite—a motion that feels like an overcompensating act of politeness. “I just need to sleep.”

“Of course.” I nod, before changing my tone to one that’s more playful. “Yes, well,” I start. “I get to choose the first bed!” I stalk away from him, making a show of stomping my heels along the shiny patio. I do it to lighten the mood, but when I twist around at the door I have to grab the doorframe. Dom’s gaze is completely disarming. He’s even farther away now, but the light from the suite allows me to see the actual heat in his gaze. His eyes skim my body

again and it's laced with a longing I know all too well, shooting a pulse of heat straight between my legs.

I've imagined a look like this on Dom's face before, but it's nothing like the real thing. My heart races and all of my skin tightens, because your boss isn't supposed to be looking at you like *that*. Like tomorrow's business merger doesn't matter as much as grabbing my hips and crushing the air out from between us.

I squeeze my legs together and try to shallow my breath.
Business first.

Acting on this will be sweeter after the deal is signed. Dom's passion will only heighten when he's in victory mode and all our hard work can be truly celebrated.

"Goodnight, Dominick," I say quietly, inching backwards and hoping I don't trip over the carpet with my boneless legs.

"Goodnight, Ilsa," he says back, and he's too far away for our traditional awkward hug, for which I'm thankful. My body is too awake to feel his hands curl around my back and the whisper of his stubble against my neck. I nod and head back into the suite, grabbing my luggage in the hallway before walking into the first bedroom I can find. I don't bother to compare them.

The door clicks shut and I force myself to take several deep breaths, leaning my head against the doorframe. We've been here a whole—what? Twenty minutes? And I'm already out of my depth. I knew there'd be tension this weekend, but when did my body get so damn strung up?

It was probably the long flight. Thirteen hours from New York to Hong Kong talking strategy and brushing elbows with Dom was bound to get my libido drunk. Or maybe it's the two years of flirty stares across the board room as I imagined him tearing off my panties in reward for

getting our associates to sign on the dotted line. Or maybe it's the last few weeks of late nights at the office, stress knotting our shoulders as the two of us tried to anticipate every possible thing that could go wrong with this deal. Couple that with the fact that I haven't been fucked in months, and ... yeah, no wonder my body's on high alert.

The light in the bedroom is off. I haven't touched the switch. Instead my hand clutches the doorknob as my thumb runs over the lock. Should I press the tiny button in and lock it?

I kick off my shoes and walk to the bed instead. I strip off my dress in the darkness and climb onto the layers of pillows and blankets. The softness is divine as I lie back and allow the plush comforter to mold to my skin. I take several deep breaths, but my whole body is on fire. It can't forget the fact that Dom is only a few steps away out on the terrace, and I'm in here wearing nothing but my bra and panties.

I think about the coolness of water from the pool and how it would feel against my hot skin right now. How delicious and shocking it would be if I dove in. I think about the normal barriers that stand between Dom and me: our job, our titles, our politeness emphasized by the hallways that have always separated our hotel rooms. *This* shouldn't be different, but the truth is he's only steps away and ... I've left my door unlocked.

It's reckless, but I run my fingers over my chest. My nipples are hard and responsive through the lace fabric and I have to bite my lip to muffle my ragged breath. I shouldn't do this. We have a job to do tomorrow and I need to keep my head clear. Yet, my hands slide down my bare stomach to the elastic of my panties where my fingers tease the hem.

My fingers swirl over my hip bones, contemplating if this is a good idea or not, my clit throbbing in anticipation.

I've been turned on like this by Dom before. I've wanted him so badly, and then gone back to my private room all alone to finish the job. It would be so easy to do it again, to release this tension so I can get a decent night of sleep.

My knees inch open and I draw my fingers over the heated lace between my thighs teasing the edge and threatening to sweep the fabric to the side.

Only, the thought of Dom in the other room makes my pulse increase. This is different somehow. He's not locked away on the other side of the hotel. He could be in the hall, or just outside my door. Heck, he could knock on my door. I bite my lip as my fingers breeze over the lace, where I'm wet and swollen. Hell, forget knocking. What if he opens the door and comes right in? He doesn't know what room I picked. He could easily swing the door open and accidentally find me here, legs open and pussy drenched. My hips rise off the blankets at the possibility. What if he didn't stop at the door? What if the surprise of finding me practically naked is all the permission he needs? What if he storms past the door, tears off my panties, and covers my pussy with his—I gasp at the thought of his mouth—hot gorgeous lips intimately sucking. His tongue—I pull the lace fabric aside and thrust two fingers inside myself.

“Oh God!” I breathe, imagining the touch is his. Imagining him shirtless and hooking my knees over his shoulders as he savors my scent, before dragging his lips across my clit. I grip the sheets with my free hand, knowing in reality he's only steps away, closer than he's ever been. And the truth of that makes my pussy clench. I cover my face with a pillow

to muffle my gasps, but I'm nowhere near the release I want. This would be a thousand times better under his hands.

Sweat makes the sheets stick to my back and I imagine Dom dropping his pants and sliding his beautiful cock inside me. But it's not good enough. It's not the same as being actually fucked. It makes me realize how long it's been since I've actually had a man, and I'm desperate and annoyed at how far off this orgasm really is, at how damn familiar I am with my own fingers. They don't have Dom's roughness, or the surprise of not knowing how he wants to touch me.

I drop my hands to the side of the bed after several unsuccessful attempts to work myself into a frenzy. I grind my eyes closed in frustration. The musk of sex hangs on my skin without properly bringing me to release, mocking me with what I want, but can't have.

Damn.

This is going to be a long, long weekend.

I WAKE up in my underwear, realizing I must've passed out after last night's frustrations. Crisp morning light filters into the uber-modern room, which I didn't even bother to look at last night. To my left is a floor-to-ceiling window instead of a wall, similar to the ones out on the terrace. The view overlooks an expanse of skyscrapers, all of them tiny and endless. The city is harsher in the daylight, having lost its neon galaxy of twinkling lights from the night before. That's life, isn't it? Everything is more sobering in the daylight.

I walk to the window and my reflection catches the glass. My brunette hair and hour-glass figure ghost over the cityscape, and caught somewhere between the buildings and the refraction of light is a half-defined version of myself that's not quite solid, a part of me that feels only half-there.

Needing a shower to clear my head, I pull off my undergarments, only to turn and realize I don't have a bathroom. Seriously? I'm in the presidential suite and I randomly picked the room without a private bath? I search the closet

and find a robe, tying it shut around my waist before walking into the hallway. Good thing I didn't have to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. I wouldn't put it past myself have stumbled half-awake through these halls in hardly my knickers. Damn. Maybe I'm getting *too comfortable* with Dom.

I turn the corner and slam right into him.

"Oh jeez! Dammit!" I swear as we twist in the momentary chaos. His hands grab my waist as we try to right ourselves, both of us cursing. Not to mention, my body perking up at the fact that under this robe I'm wearing *nothing*! "I was trying to find—" I mumble, looking up only to see—

The man holding my waist isn't Dom!

"Uh ...?" A streak of panic wicks through me at the sight of the stranger. "Who the hell are you?"

His brown eyes flash wide, surprised at my intensity. "Sorry! Hi—" he flusters, the embarrassment of crashing into a stranger disorienting us both. "I, uh—I'm Dom's friend. I didn't see you coming around the corner. Sorry about that. It's Ilsa, right? You're Dom's coworker." He moves back half a step and it gives me a second to see him. He's obviously in his pajamas, wearing nothing but a thin t-shirt and shorts. It shows off his broad shoulders and toned calves. He's in his thirties with five-o'clock shadow and dark hair that's unfairly sexy with his tousled I-just-woke-up look.

"Um, uh ..." I stutter. "I—I didn't know—Dom had ..."

His face breaks into the most beautiful of smiles and his eyes warm with a friendliness that disarms me in the most inappropriate way.

"Dom didn't tell you I was coming, huh?" He squeezes

my side as if we're close friends. "That totally makes sense. My fault," he explains. "I didn't know if my trip was gonna land me in Hong Kong this weekend or not. Dom told me to come by if things lined up. I didn't know till last minute. I got in late last night. You were asleep already."

I want to pull my robe tighter around my waist, uncomfortable with his hands still there, but his warm gaze has me paralyzed. What if *this stranger* walked in on me last night? My door was unlocked. He could have found me sleeping in my underwear!

"I'm sorry." I shake my head. "Clearly I need a massive cup of coffee to help me understand. Did you say you're Dom's friend? Who just happens to be in Hong Kong?"

"Yeah, sorry. You're obviously"—his eyes flick down my robe—"not up yet." A slight smile plays on his tanned face and I try to ignore it, even though my body seems to be delighted. Damn, I'm way too strung up over Dom that my body is reacting to any attention it can get. "Why don't you take a shower and I'll reintroduce myself once you're up."

I eye him, still thrown off guard. "Yeah, uh ..." I start, but the more awkward part is his hands are still at my sides, though there's something innocent and charming about it, as if he simply forgot they're there. He breathes in slowly and suddenly I can smell myself. I *need* a shower. The dank perfume of my skin wafts out from under my cotton robe, evidence from the sweat that covered my body last night with its unmistakable musk of sex. His eyes catch mine and my neck hairs stand on end. Can he smell me? Does he think Dom and me ... or does he realize I did that all on my own?

"Do, um ... do you have a name, Dom's-Friend?" I say to cut the prickle of tension that ticks up my spine.

“Of course,” he shakes his head, and that dashing smile spreads over his face again, only it lights up his features in an embarrassed way, as if he needs to hide something. As if I caught him thinking something he shouldn’t. “Sorry. I feel like I’m going to be apologizing to you all weekend.”

“You’re here all weekend?”

“Uh, yeah.” He nods, catching my tone. “Dom said you’d be working most of the weekend. I won’t be in the way.”

I look toward the kitchen, wondering where Dom is. “No, of course,” I say. “We *are* working this weekend. Why else would we be here.” A knot of something I don’t understand balls in my stomach. Dom is allowed to have friends. He’s allowed to invite them to visit. And this suite is huge, after all. There’s plenty of room. But, *this* weekend? This deal? Hong Kong was supposed to be our time away from the world, away from everyone we know. “It’s just a big weekend,” I say, controlling my tone.

“You won’t know I’m here,” he guarantees, his eyes flicking to my neck and making me certain it will be the complete opposite. I’m already too aware of how my body *likes* his hands on my waist and the unapologetic way his eyes run down my neck. He’s brash and present and completely different than Dom. He’s not afraid to look at me like I’m a woman—not his co-worker or his friend—but something he would like the pleasure of devouring.

“And, it’s Isaac, by the way.”

I look back at him. “What? Sorry?”

An amused kindness crinkles his eyes and he points to himself. “Me. Dom’s-Friend. Isaac.” He says it in a gruff cave-man voice, making a joke, and I’m certain my cheeks flush a deeper shade of red.

“Right, of course.” I look to the kitchen again. “No

caffeine,” I say, making excuses. “I swear I’m not normally this rude. It’s nice to meet you.” I nod and reach down to remove his hands, knowing they’re clouding my judgment, but when our fingers connect a jolt of something rude and excited shoots through me.

Our eyes catch and his hands twitch, his gaze darkening for a second, only long enough for me to catch it, before he pulls his hands back.

“Oh man!” He tosses his hands in the air like a criminal. “I’m such an asshole!” A blush colors his cheekbones just above his stubble, as if he really *did* forget his hands were on me. “Man, I’ve known you for two seconds and I’m the creepiest guy ever!” His eyes are wide and serious. “I officially give you permission to slap me. Damn, I am so sorry!”

I can’t help but smile.

“It’s not funny,” he says, running both his hands through his dark hair, clasping them behind his head. Only that shows off just how muscular his arms are. “That’s some class-A stalker-shit. I’m just—fuck! I’m going to go into the kitchen.” He drops his hands. “Please, forget all this ever happened, and ... if you sue me later, I completely get it.”

“It’s fine.”

“No, really it isn’t,” he shakes his head furiously. “Dom is gonna nut-punch me.”

I laugh at that. “No he isn’t. Dom’s the sweetest guy in the world. He wouldn’t punch anyone.”

“That’s what you think.” Isaac shakes his head at me, dead serious, making me wonder if Dom might have done something if he walked down the hall and found Isaac’s hands on my waist. “You’re his protégé!” Isaac continues. “If there’s one person I shouldn’t be making passes at, it’s you.”

A prickle runs up my neck. “I’m sorry, was that a pass?”

“Even *unintentional* passes! Not that you aren’t—” He shuts his mouth quickly, but his eyes say everything for him, once again flicking down my body and riddling my skin with goosebumps. “It was lovely to meet you, Ilsa,” he says. “Let’s make a pack to avoid bumping into each other in the morning half-naked.”

I shake my head to lighten the tension. “It’s fine. And don’t be so hard on yourself. Nobody’s half-naked.”

His eyes bore into me and I realize he’s deliberately making a show of looking at my face.

I look down quickly, only to see my robe has fallen open. It’s still cinched at the waist, but in our stumble the top must’ve pulled apart to expose a generous view of skin. He can see all the way to my navel, with the fabric barely catching my nipples to keep my breasts from being entirely bared to him—Thank God!—though he’s had plenty of time to ogle the half-exposed goods.

“Jesus!” I grab the edges of the robe and thrust them together. “I had no idea!”

“I wasn’t looking, I swear,” Isaac says, despite the fact that I know that’s untrue. He closes his eyes to prove his point, even though I’ve already covered up. “I’m going to find my way back to the kitchen now,” he says, reaching a hand out to find the wall. “I look forward to seeing *less* of you in the future, Ilsa.”

“Putz,” I quip, shaking my head at him, which he can’t see, but the mischievous grin that spreads across his face lets me know just how much he enjoyed his private viewing.

“It’ll be our little secret,” he says, before turning around and using the wall to walk himself back toward the kitchen.

A flutter stirs in my stomach as I watch him go, realizing it’s been ages since anyone’s flirted with me, much less ogled my tits. And what did I expect? I’ve been nothing but busi-

ness, business, business, daydreaming about Dom and wishing something was there when maybe there isn't.

I don't like the idea that flits through my mind next. Is it possible I'm so hung up on Dom because he's been the only one around? Is it possible I've convinced myself he's the only option?

DOM AND ISAAC are both in the kitchen when I come in showered, clean, and one-hundred-percent clothed. Isaac's gaze skims over me in my pencil skirt and low-cut blouse, which I wear deliberately to make the men in our business meetings think I'm docile and feminine. They never see the wolf in the sheep's clothing. But this morning, I'm not sure if I put it on for that same reason, especially when Isaac looks away quickly and I know he's deliberately keeping his eyes from roving over the goods he saw earlier.

I turn my focus to Dominick, who's at the stovetop cooking eggs, and I'm surprised to see him with an apron over his dress shirt and slacks. His suit-coat hangs over a stool and even though his red hair isn't combed yet, he still looks like he walked out of the pages of *GQ*. He's brilliant and put together even as he cooks eggs.

"Morning, sunshine," he says pleasantly and this whole sight triggers an unsettling feeling in my stomach. His comment is completely normal. So usual and expected—except I've never seen Dom cook eggs before, much less do anything so domestic. I always think of him at the office,

making deals, or presenting at a conference. Even late at night after our meetings, when we're eating crappy take out, he's always had a polished professionalism about him. The idea of him cooking breakfast for me is ... different. It's overly familiar and almost intimate.

I drop my laptop case on the granite kitchen island and turn to face Dom, suddenly irritated that Isaac is here. I want to sit at this island and stare out at Hong Kong as I savor the fact that Dom is *making me breakfast!* This is *our last* weekend, where we were supposed to do exactly this —alone!

"I met your friend in the hallway this morning," I pronounce, not bothering to hide the edge in my voice. "I didn't realize we were going to have company."

Dom turns quickly, spatula in hand. "Right! Ilsa! I uh, Isaac is—"

"An old friend," I interrupt, pulling open the fridge and grabbing the orange juice carton. "Or something of that sort. Yes, he mentioned it. You're in Hong Kong. He's in Hong Kong. Old buddies from—" I look over my shoulder to Isaac, raising my eyebrows in question. "College? High school?"

"Harvard Law," Isaac answers cautiously as I squint at him. With his tossed hair and beach-bum t-shirt, I'd expect Isaac to be surfing the waves rather than standing in a courtroom pontificating.

"You're a lawyer?"

Isaac shrugs behind his cup of coffee. "Not anymore."

I wait for him to elaborate and when he doesn't, I shake my head. "Okay, law school buddies, or ... whatever."

"Woah!" Dom's eyes are wide, clearly thrown off by my aggressiveness on this topic. "Is this, uh—this isn't going to be a problem, is it?"

I close the fridge and turn to Isaac. He watches me like

a hawk, hunched over his empty place setting with a completely amused look in his eyes, as if stirring things up was his god-given meaning in life.

“Of course not,” I say, turning back at Dom. “It’s just a big weekend. Negotiation. Acquisitions. Promotions on the line. But if you guys need to catch up and toss around business accolades or whatever ...” I uncap the orange juice and toss it back like it’s a hard drink. “Do what you’ve got to do. You’re the boss.”

A crease wrinkles Dom’s forehead and he looks at me hard, showing off just how unhappy he is that I played the boss card. I don’t usually throw it around and he hates it when I do. We’re equals, remember. And that’s what I want to say to him. Equals, exactly! Don’t bring a wild card into our lives when I’m about to make the biggest deal of my career. Especially one that—

Isaac smiles at me like he knows what’s got me so riled up and he’d be happy to recite law terms as he shows me his favorite stress-relief secrets. Suddenly, I’m not sure what I’m more pissed about—the fact that he’s here messing up my weekend with Dom, or the fact that I’m imagining exactly how he might ruin it.

Dom on the other hand is completely at a loss for what’s just happened. I nod to his frying pan.

“Your eggs are burning.”

“Crap!” Dom scrambles to pull the eggs from the burner and I use the opportunity to walk away, marching through the open terrace door and out into the fresh air. Only, it’s already muggy outside and the air is thick and unsatisfying. The sun blankets my neck as I toss back another swig of orange juice to cool me down.

“Sorry, man,” I hear Dom mumble. I look back through the floor-to-ceiling windows and see him toss the eggs in the

trash. “I didn’t think this would be a thing. Give me a minute to—”

I look back at the horizon, then lean against the glass railing and peer down the monolith of the building that we’re atop of. It would be quite the fall. I imagine it would feel like soaring: the wind through my hair, the rush, that last moment of excitement before the crash at the bottom. It makes me feel reckless and like I’ve done nothing but play it safe with Dom for the past two years.

“Ilsa, hey—” Dom says, walking up next to me and drying his hands on the skirt of his apron. “I’m sorry, I didn’t think—”

“Exactly!” I snap, turning to face him. “What if something goes wrong this weekend? I don’t want you distracted. I get that he’s your friend, but what if there’s something—”

Dom puts his hand on my shoulder and I’m startled by it. He’s done this a hundred times before, but right now it turns on my every nerve ending. It fills me with every doubt I could imagine: wanting his touch to mean more, but unsure it ever will. Realizing he invited his friend to crash the one weekend where this could *be* more, which can only mean he doesn’t see us as ... anything.

“You’re right.” Dom nods, his thumb rubbing against the silk of my blouse. “I didn’t think. Honestly, I didn’t expect him to even show up. Everything about Isaac is unpredictable.”

My eyes flick past Dom to where Isaac is watching us through the glass. Unpredictable is an understatement.

“But yes,” Dom continues. “He’s a good friend, and ... he’s here now.”

I bite back what I really want to ask, which is *why* he would invite Isaac in the first place. But it’s not a question I can ask. Not right now. Not with the negotiation still ahead

of us. I need to leave our personal feelings out of this and make sure we make this merger work. And frankly, inviting Isaac here *is* the answer in and of itself. Dom never intended for this weekend to be anything but business.

I shake my head in polite agreement, stepping back so his hand falls off my shoulder. “Of course, its fine,” I say. “I’ve overacted and I apologize.”

I drink from the juice carton to distract myself from the knot of disappointment that wrings in my gut. I can’t look at him right now. Not as this truth washes over me. Dom and I are brilliant together—but only as business colleagues. That’s *all* we’ll ever be.

“I must be more nervous about this deal than I want to admit,” I say to cover my silence, pushing through the lump in my throat. “Of course your friend can be here.” I laugh forcefully, rolling my shoulders back and making myself look at him. “I just like to focus. You know that.”

“Hey, you said it yourself last night,” Dom counters, that regal confidence he effortlessly exudes sparkling in his green eyes. “We’re going to be great. Everything is planned. The only reason this deal won’t go through is if *they’ve* been jerking us around.”

I nod, unconvinced by my own defense, and my eyes flick over his shoulder to Isaac again. Only Isaac isn’t in the kitchen anymore.

“What if there’s something we didn’t anticipate?” I ask. “Something we misjudged, or took for granted? A move we’re not expecting? What if we’re blindsided?”

“Do you trust me?”

Our eyes catch, and there’s so much compassion and devotion sparking in Dom’s gaze I feel overwhelmed by his intensity. I bite my cheek to remind myself that this is my *boss* asking and not the man I’ve imagined a hundred other

ways, asking me to trust him with my heart. This is the man I'm supposed to trust with my *career*. And of course, that's how he intended his question, even if it unearths everything else I'm uncertain of.

I give him a non-committal nod. "Of course. You've always known what you were doing."

That's true. Dom is a brilliant lawyer and a smart businessman. I'm the one who's muddying the waters with personal emotion and losing sight of what's truly important—which is to stay sharp, focused, and get the job done.

"Then trust me," Dom says confidently, reaching up to take both of my shoulders in his hands. He squeezes them like a coach encouraging his star player to keep her head in the game, and I nod again, tossing him my best smile. It seems to convince him.

But when he walks back to the kitchen I find myself looking down the side of the building to the ground below. Down there, nothing is in focus and everything is a blurry mass of color and shape. There's no clear path except to fall. And it scares me that so little—a friend, a single person, a pebble thrown into a giant pool—could cause such a ripple.

THE SUN IS SETTING as I pour the whiskey into a tumbler glass and slide it across the kitchen island to Dominick. I've spent the day on the couch sending emails to my suppliers and making sure everything's ready for our launch next month. Dom thought I was crazy when he and Ilsa got back from their negotiations and he caught me typing away at the keyboard like a crazy man, which is when I explained to him that I quit my job at the firm.

"You left your job to do what? Build a software company?" Dom asked.

"Hey, software's the wave of the future," I defended, to which he frowned at me. I'm not sure his pale face could get any whiter with his Irish blood and all, but I swear it did. It was the kind of frown that asked how I could throw away a six-figure salary and years of schooling on a reckless business venture. Which I suppose is what makes Dom the man he is. I'm the entrepreneurial maverick, while he's the one up here at top of his game, making multi-million dollar mergers with Hong Kong's elite, but still playing it safe. "You always said I'd never

hack it in a business suit," I say. "You can't deny who you are."

Dom unfolds his arms quickly to catch the drink I've slid across the counter before it topples over the edge.

"Whoa, okay!" he says quickly. "Someone's ready to party. Maybe we should wait till my deal is signed and you haven't flushed your entire life savings down the drain."

"It wouldn't be any fun without a bit of risk," I say, raising my glass. "And if I'm going down with the ship, I'm going out in style." I take a reckless drink, savoring the smoky flavor.

Dom swirls his whiskey carefully. He's watching me cautiously, his expression a mix of concern and condemnation. "I'll be fine," I say to ease the tension that creases his face. "You know I'll be happier hotel-hopping and working from my laptop and pissing off the side of the Swiss Alps."

"Yes, I believe that's what normal people call a vacation."

I smile at him and shake my head. "Yeah well, I'm not normal people. And—" I nod out the window to where Ilsa lounges in a deck chair next to the pool. "I don't have a hot brunette to keep me addicted to my life at the office."

Dom follows my gaze out the window to Ilsa, who's wearing a bikini under a gauzy wrap that puts her legs on display. I won't deny it, she's magnificent. Especially with her hair down and her body soft and relaxed and no longer stuffed into her business clothes. The sun sets behind her, lighting up the space between her bent knees and setting the whole pool on fire as it reflects the sky's orange blaze.

"It's not like that," Dom says tersely, and I'm pretty sure that's a complete lie. I mean, look at her. He *has* to have a thing for her. What hot-blooded man wouldn't? In fact, I'm not sure how they aren't already together. After all, Dom

told me they go on business trips like this all the time. Only ... something *is* off between them. I could feel it earlier when they returned from their business meeting. Ilsa dismissively stalked into her room, changed out of her business clothes, and then came out here in *that outfit*. She's either trying to get a rise out of Dom, or a rise out of me, and from the embarrassed way she bit her lip this morning with her robe half-open, I'm already having dirty fantasies.

I sip the whiskey, eyeing my friend. "This is the good stuff," I say, encouraging him to drink. "Straight from your neck of the woods. Pound-your-blood Irish stock."

"Of course, yes." Dom eyes his glass, before tentatively raising it to his lips, still distracted by Ilsa and the sunset. There's definitely something unspoken between them. Maybe they fucked in the past and it's all business now. Or maybe he wants to fuck her, but Dom being Dom, he'll never make a move and jeopardize his job or position.

"You want a glass?" I call out to Ilsa, who looks up and catches us watching her. She pulls off her sunglasses and shakes her head causing all of those long locks to spread out over her exposed shoulders. It takes a second to realize she's shifted her gaze to Dom, squinting at him as if it's weird to see him drinking. Is that concern? Confusion? Affection? "You're missing out," I say, tossing her a smile that makes her roll her eyes.

When I turn back to Dom, he's staring at me, a tiny flush under his scrutinizing gaze. I know that look. I've seen it a hundred times in college when the two of us would go out to a bar. It's jealousy. He used to ask how I could get any girl to come home with me, but he never liked the answer. It's not a big secret. "It's business," I'd tell him. "You decide what you want and you go out and get it. Simple. You don't wait for permission. You make it happen."

Dom *knows* how to do that—in business—but he’s never had the same determination with women. For example, take Dom’s shirt. The cuffs are rolled perfectly. Intentional. Not a button out of place. His attention to detail is impeccable, and yet that’s also what holds him back. He never lets anything get messy. Even now as we have a drink and relax, his guard is up. And I’d bet my left-nut he’s in love with Ilsa, but he’s never taken the initiative. Never told her or shown the slightest hint of intention. Not to mention the way I’ve heard him talk about her—smart, friendly, someone he can confide in. The question is: does *she* want him back? And would Dom *ever* make a move if she did? The two of them have been partners for two years, so if it hasn’t already happened ... maybe it won’t.

I haven’t been able to stop thinking about Ilsa since they left for their meeting this morning. My pants feel tight at the thought of taking what I want and playing out the fantasy. What would’ve happened if I untied Ilsa’s robe this morning and exposed her to me? Slipped the terrycloth off her shoulders and tasted the scent that warmed her skin? But Dom’s my friend, and I can’t do that. It’s shitty back-hand business. You don’t fuck over the people that are loyal to you, even if your cock has a different agenda.

Ilsa’s gaze lingers on us again, smiling sweetly, and it’s hard to tell if she’s smiling at me or Dom, but there’s something in her expression that’s curious.

“She’s got a thing for you,” I say to Dom, and he coughs viciously, completely thrown off guard.

“What? She—” he coughs again, raising his wrist up to his mouth to clear his throat, but the flush of pink that runs up his Paddy-white neck hides nothing. “She doesn’t. She’s my colleague. We work together,” he defends, throwing back half his whiskey and shaking his head as if the two of

them together is the last thing that would ever cross his mind. He straightens his shirt and I see the pansy-ass friend from college who's afraid to take what he wants. "I mean, I *wish* a girl like Ilsa had a thing for me," Dom says, brushing it off. "But we work together. Even if we didn't, a girl like that doesn't go for a guy like me."

"What are you talking about?" I shake my head at him. "Why not?"

"Like *you* need to ask that, asshole." I smile, happy to see his wits are back, and that he's finally drinking his whiskey. But I know he's talking about all the nights in college when he went home alone and I didn't.

"Those are flings. One night stands," I explain. "A girl like Ilsa ... I mean, she's your confidant. From the way you talk about her, it sounds like you two talk about everything: deep conversations, business strategy, no secrets. I don't do that." I shake my head. "I know you think I have some magical charm that makes women's panties evaporate, but trust me, a woman like Ilsa ... she wants something else." I fill my mouth with another hot gulp of whiskey and swallow it down. "Hell, she's barely said two words to me since I got here."

I grab the bottle to refill my cup, deliberately not mentioning the conversation I had with Ilsa this morning or the incredible view.

"That's because she's attracted to you."

"Excuse me?" I look at Dom, whose expression is dead serious. I frown at him. "That's not true. You're deflecting now. I see the way she looks at you."

"Oh no, trust me," Dom reaches over and takes the whiskey bottle from me, pouring himself a generous glass. "I've known Ilsa a long time. She sees me as a friend. Like a brother. She opens up to me because I'm not a threat. Our

connection, as you call it, isn't *that kind* of connection. I've seen her around men she's attracted to. She does exactly what she's doing right now. She clams up, ignores them, goes and sits next to the pool and pretends they don't exist. If you weren't here right now, we'd be eating take-out and chatting business strategy, but instead she's sitting over there all by herself with her guard up."

"You're reading too much into this," I say, but he shakes his head and throws back another swig.

"Trust me, Isaac. I know her. She's acting like this because she wants ..." He doesn't finish his sentence. Instead, he looks into his glass somberly, and my imagination can't help but play out the possibility: me lying on one of those lounge chairs with Ilsa straddling me, the sun lighting her from behind as my hands clutch her pumping hips.

"Look, man," I take another sip, moving my attention away from the terrace. "Maybe she's got a mild attraction, but it doesn't matter. *You're* clearly into her, so I won't—"

"Why not?" Dom puts his empty glass onto the countertop with a clank, the buzz of alcohol softening his eyes. "Seriously." He looks at me. "I'm her boss. The friend. Her eyes have a whole different sparkle when she looks at you. Sure, I get the late-night strategy sessions, and philosophical conversations, but you, my friend—you can get the conversations that don't require talking."

"Dom," I shake my head at him, grabbing his glass and refilling it. "I can't. I mean, yes, she's beautiful." I slide the glass to him. "But come on, you're clearly—"

"—*not* the guy she's into." Dom looks at me hard, and I don't know why he's pushing this. "I said it once, I'll say it again. I'm her boss. And honestly, it's for the best. Tell me you're not into her. You can't, right? The two of you—"

“Dom, you’re my friend!” I say, eyeing his third drink.

“Don’t let me stand in your way,” he insists. “Trust me, she’s into you. I can tell. She gets the same way when we’re around powerful men during our deals. Flirty then quiet. Usually it helps us close. It clouds their minds and makes them think she might ...” He shrugs, drinking again.

“But she doesn’t. Does she?”

“No, not with them. Of course not.”

I lift my glass. “Exactly, so maybe it’s an act.”

“It’s not. She just knows when she shouldn’t mix business and pleasure.”

I watch him carefully. His eyes are hard and I don’t know why he’s pushing this so much, except maybe he really *isn’t* into her. Maybe he means what he says about business and pleasure, and knows the two of them together would ruin everything.

“So, you’re saying ...” I start. “*I’m* not business, so ...”

“Exactly,” Dom says definitively, looking out at Ilsa and avoiding my gaze. That wasn’t exactly permission. In fact, it sounds like the opposite. “I adore her,” he says honestly. “And if you hurt her, I’ll pound your face in.” He laughs at his big-brother act. “But she’s an adult. You’re both adults, and ...” He drinks again, the flush of a buzz running up his neck. “I’m not going to stand in your way.”

“But you *like* her!”

“That’s never stopped you before.”

His drunk eyes catch mine and that comment stings. It’s not entirely true, of course. Dom could have any girl—in college and now. He just doesn’t believe it. And, I never took any girl from him. Ever. Though I suppose he believes my presence alone was the problem, and they chose me over him, which is why his insistence that I make a move on Ilsa is ... weird.

"You're my friend," I assert.

"And she's my business partner," he replies. "We won't. Ever. So ..."

"People have business flings all the time."

"Yeah? And how does that turn out? How many of the women that you've done business with—and fucked—do you *still* do any business with?"

"None."

"Precisely. Me and Ilsa ..." He waves his hand back and forth, gripping his glass, definitely drunk now. "That would mess everything up."

"Are you seriously standing there and giving me a free pass?" I face him, because if he's going to say shit like this out loud, I'm going to call him on it. "You're saying if I want to pursue her—which I will, and you *know* I fucking will—you're giving me your blessing? One hundred percent, no strings attached?"

He looks at me hard. "She already wants you."

"That's not what I asked."

"Yes," Dom says stubbornly. "Yes, if you want her." He nods in her direction. "Then I'm not going to get in the way."

"You'd kill me."

"No, I wouldn't."

"Yes you would." I stare at Dom, at the glass in his hand and the rosy flush of his cheeks. "You wanted to kill me in college when I got more girls than you and this would be exactly the same. Probably worse."

"You want her, don't you?"

"Of course I do. She's phenomenal. We're not debating that fact."

"And she wants you. So, I don't know why we're debating any of this."

“Serious?” I shake my head.

“Serious.”

“I’m going to give you one last chance,” I say, holding up my drink. “If you’re fucking with me, you better tell me. Tell me right now. I don’t want you pissed off afterwards when you gave me your fucking blessing.”

“No last chances needed. It’s a done thing,” Dom nods. “I know you’ve already made up your mind that you want her.”

“That’s not the point—”

“It’s exactly the point.” Dom raises his glass and downs it in one hot swallow. “You can’t stop inertia. You can’t stop an avalanche that’s already started.”

I stare at him, pretty sure that was a mind-fuck more than permission. But if that’s his attitude, if he believes this is already a done thing and he’s given up, then hell, Ilsa deserves better.

“What are you two conspiring about over here?”

Both of us look up to see Ilsa walking toward us. Her wrap flutters at her thighs from the breeze and the sun lights up the fabric with a caramel glow.

“Who can drink more whiskey,” Dom says, turning to smile at her with fake exuberance. She frowns at him.

“Since when do you drink whiskey?” Ilsa asks.

“Since my buddy here brought us some straight-from-the-mainland Irish gold. And this guy has the most refined whiskey palate I’ve seen this side of the hemisphere.” He nods to me and the bottle on the counter. “I’ve got a thing or two to learn from him about the nuances of barley malted alcohol.”

Ilsa turns to me and narrows her eyes. “You’re quite the instigator. You got him drunk, didn’t you?”

I raise my hands like an innocent. “I only claim to have

brought the bottle. I don't control what he says, or does, or drinks."

"I may be a weeeeeee bit tipsy," Dom agrees, pouring himself another healthy glass.

"Hey, that's expensive shit," I scold, and Dom smiles.

"You can afford it," Dom teases, before tilting his head and remembering my new venture. "Oooor, maybe not."

"Not really the point."

"Told you he was drunk," Ilsa says, walking between us and picking up the bottle. She throws back a swig, straight from the open neck. "Jesus!" She curses after swallowing, looking at the label. A flush blooms over her neck and my pants tighten as she licks the remaining whiskey off her lip, my mind racing with a hundred dirty things that make me wish Dom wasn't here. Her eyes lift up to meet mine and her pupils dilate.

"Okay, ladies," Dom raises his overly-full glass, pulling our attention back to him. His gaze is on me with a sharp smile that I'm still not sure is permission. "I'm going to retire for the evening and write my report on today's dealings."

"Don't write that now!" Ilsa snaps, nodding to his glass. "It'll be a mess."

"Nah, it won't," he counters. "I better get out what I can remember now, before this sweet baby obliterates the rest."

"Dom!" Ilsa scolds. "That's a bad idea. Stay. Hang out." She motions to the terrace, where the sun has hit the horizon and the sky is dancing with pink.

"It's a *brilliant* idea," Dom replies, nonchalantly winking at me. Fuck, I want Dom to let loose and embrace the mess. But is this *really* how he wants to do it?

"Are you sure you know what you're talking about?" I ask, and Dom's gaze is hard on me for a second before it softens into a smile.

“Always,” he says in a cocky tone that makes Ilsa frown. “Please, keep Ilsa entertained, would you? I really must update our board about the progress.”

“Dom, come on,” Ilsa protests. “We can call the company later. You’re friend is here and—”

“Oh, you know me,” Dom says playfully, sauntering over to Ilsa and kissing her on the top of the head. It’s chaste and brotherly, like he said their relationship is. “My brain’s a sieve,” he continues. “I won’t remember a thing in the morning.”

“Like you’ll remember anything now!” she complains.

Dom starts to rattle off numbers and sales figures, and I have to admit, he sounds like he could walk into a board room right now and give a full report. Drunk or not, Dom doesn’t fuck around when it comes to business. I eye Ilsa and his persistence that they’re just friends suddenly makes sense. Dom would never play around with something this important. I look at him again, just to be sure, but he’s already heading toward the hallway.

“You’re a complete bore!” Ilsa calls out and he turns around, smiling widely.

“That’s what makes us such a great team: the beauty and the bore. You keep Isaac entertained. I’ll do the report. See you both in the morning.”

“You’re an ass,” I chime in as Dom heads down the hallway.

“One that’s makes five times what you do, now that you’ve gone rogue,” he sasses back. “All work and no play, makes for a big fat bank account!”

He disappears around the corner and I turn to Ilsa, shaking my head.

“I’m sorry about that,” I say. “He used to be able to hold his liquor.”

She laughs. “When was that, college? You flash a virgin mai-thai in front of that Irish lad and he practically doubles over from the *thought* of drinking.”

“You two don’t drink?”

“We drink, just ... not on these trips,” she explains. “We played the hold-each-others-hair-back-as-you-puke game on our first business trip, and trust me, he may have held his liquor once, but his liver doesn’t know he’s Irish.”

“Shit.” I pick up the bottle of whiskey, feeling guilty. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s alright. He’s an adult. We don’t have to baby sit him. He’s just going to pass out in there in ten minutes anyway.” Ilsa leans forward and takes the bottle from me. “And just because Dom can’t hold his liquor, doesn’t mean I can’t.” She twists off the top and throws another shot back.

“Jesus! You realize that’s pretty much the hottest thing in the world.”

Ilsa raises an eyebrow. “You’re easily amused.”

“Most women won’t go near whiskey.”

Ilsa shrugs. “Yes well, I don’t get to drink much on these trips. We usually celebrate a deal with truffles, or something I’ll have to spend three hours on the treadmill to burn off. This—” She lifts the bottle. “Is a God-send! Come.” She grabs my elbow and pulls me out toward the pool. “You have to see this view.”

I WALK Isaac to the pool and sit down on the tile, hiking my wrap up to my thighs before plunging my feet into the water.

“Take your shoes off and put your feet in,” I say, cold shooting up my legs. I’m pissed at Dom for drinking and bailing on us, so I toss back another swig of whiskey in retaliation. “Feel the water on your legs,” I say, practically moaning. “Feel the contrast of the cold water and the heat of the whiskey in your throat.”

I don’t have to look at Isaac to feel the way he’s staring at me. That was an overly sexual thing to say and I know it. Maybe that’s why I said it. Because I want *someone* to look at me like that.

I don’t know why I feel as pissed off as I do. Today went beautifully. It was the perfect negotiation. We reeled in our clients like fish. The Asian territory and that promotion are in my grasp. We simply sign the documents tomorrow and it’s done. I throw back another swig.

“Are we about to go skinny dipping with the way you’re

throwing whiskey back?” Isaac teases, and I smile without answering.

“Sit!” I say, patting the tile next to me and Isaac does as he’s told. He takes off his shoes and socks and rolls up his pants.

“Jeez! They don’t heat this?” Isaac exclaims as he dips his feet in the pool.

“Nope.” I hand him the bottle. “That’s part of the magic. I’m not kidding. Take a drink then look at that horizon. Look at all those neon lights blinking to life and how the sun dips behind the buildings and turns everything into stars.” I point to the glittering teal and pink skyline, where the sun can no longer be seen, as my eyes start to adjust to the dark that’s incoming.

“That is amazing,” Isaac agrees and I’m happy to have someone to share this moment with, to be on top of the world where anything is possible and dangling my feet beneath that stretch of infinite sky. Maybe that’s the whiskey talking, but I don’t care.

I kick my feet in the water, delighting in the swirl of ripples against my toes, then I look over at Isaac. He’s beautiful in the dying light, his strong jaw still peppered with five-o-clock shadow, his broad shoulders visible through the thin t-shirt.

“You know,” he starts. “Dom said you weren’t philosophical with people you find attractive.” He turns his head to look at me and smiles mischievously, seeing if I’ll take the bait.

“Dominick doesn’t know anything,” I say smoothly, delighting in the warmth of the whiskey that’s started to buzz in my lower belly. I know nothing about Isaac. I don’t know what business he’s in, why he stopped being a lawyer, where he

grew up, or how the heck he and Dom ended up friends. In a hundred ways, I don't care. I'm just thankful to have someone sitting next to me atop this lonely high-rise in a foreign country.

Maybe that's the piece of this puzzle that I didn't expect—*me*. How lonely I really am. How the flirtation of one good-looking stranger can throw me off my game so much and disrupt everything I thought I wanted—which is passed out in the other room.

Isaac's arm brushes against mine and a zing of excitement shoots through me. The tickle of his arm-hair makes my body twinge with the tease of how simple this attraction really is. It's charged and effortless, in contrast to everything with Dom which has been tension and calculation ... and maybe, all in my head.

The color of the pool has changed. The innocent pink is lost from the sky, replaced by something deeper, an intoxicating shade of purple. And I know slipping under that sheet of water would feel like diving into starlight, my skin covered in a splash of stars I could never catch. My calves bob in the water, creating tiny ripples that tickle me with how little it would take to send a shock wave through my entire life.

"Okay," Isaac says, pulling me out of my reverie and abruptly yanking his feet out of the water. "Fuck it." He stands up and I barely have time to register that he's pulled off his shirt, before I'm staring at the muscles of his stomach. I try not to react, or stare, or holy-hell let my mouth drop open as I take in his tanned and broad landscape. My hands grip the edge of the pool, wishing they could trace the carved lines of muscles, when—

He unsnaps his belt buckle.

An erotic whoosh shoots through me with the promise

of that tiny clank of metal, and suddenly his jeans lay pooled by his ankles.

“What are y—” Only my words don’t have enough breath, because he stands in only his grey boxers with the orange glow of the suite back-lighting him, making my skin tighten. He’s positively lick-worthy and everything my body is aching for.

“What can I say?” he says, tossing me a cheeky smile. “I got the view this morning, so ...” He shrugs his shoulders making all those perfect muscles bunch and gleam. “Your turn to enjoy.”

Isaac dives in the pool then, showering me in a spray of water that I swear sizzles into steam when it hits my skin. Isaac comes up for air right in front of me, his dark hair wet and his bare shoulders painted in the teal colors of the skyline.

“You coming in?” he asks, one of his hands finding my foot under the water. Our eyes lock and I don’t move as his fingers dance slowly over my ankle. The water isn’t cold anymore, and though his fingers barely touch me, the feather of heat that aches up my legs is the most erotic thing I’ve felt in weeks. Hell, months maybe.

He watches me as the pad of his hand slides around my ankle and up the under-side of my calf. It’s so delicate, his fingers teasing the sensitive space behind my knees, forcing me to resist reacting, even though my pussy is throbbing.

“What do you want?” I whisper, caught by his look that promises pleasure—and not the sweet kind. My bikini bottoms dampen with the thought of being flipped over in the shallow end, bent against the pool edge and taken from behind. How delicious would it be to feel the hard dig of tile scraping against my hip bones as Isaac lifts my ass out of the water till he sees

my aching pussy glistening against the water's surface? The position would be uncomfortable and amazing, with my torso bent forward and my palms flat against the poolside, my tits swinging across the tile, my thighs spread as he positions his—

I'm yanked forward!

Into the pool.

I hit the water with a shriek as cold water douses every hot ember of my skin. Fucking hell! Who doesn't heat a pool! My whole body riots against the punch of ice, the skin so tight it hurts, my nipples fisting into knots that have me practically screaming.

"Jesus fucking Christ, that's cold!" I cry out as I surface. The gauzy beach wrap clings to my body in a swath of strangling weeds, tangled in a hundred directions all over me. I quickly untie the damn thing and toss it out of the pool. It smacks against the tile in a wet slap next to Isaac's discarded jeans.

I tread water, quickly, feeling naked even though I'm still in my bikini, each of my limbs wracked with goosebumps.

"What the hell was that?" I snap, whipping around to find him smiling at me broadly like an amused child.

"You're the one who wanted to 'feel the contrast,'" he tosses back, swimming to the side of the pool and reaching for the whiskey bottle. He takes a generous gulp before offering it to me. I know it's a bad idea, but I swim over to him anyway, needing the heat. I take the bottle and lift it to my mouth, knowing that if I get any drunker I'll start acting on my naughty imaginings. Do I really want that, especially with Dom in the other room?

Suddenly, I'm angry. What the fuck is Dom doing? Why did he desert me out here with his sex-pot of a friend? No man in their right mind would leave a woman they're

into with Isaac. Look at him! He's a Greek god, with a wicked smile that promises Mount-Olympus-sized orgasms. If Dom *actually* liked me, he'd never leave me out here with his friend! Which means there's only one logical conclusion

...

I toss back a hot swig of whiskey, letting it coat my throat with a reckless boldness, before replacing the bottle on the tile and turning to Isaac. His eyes darken for a second, reacting to whatever he sees in my gaze, and I cup the water next to me and launch a giant splash at him. He laughs and I use the time to dip under the surface and swim away. Only, he's on my heels before I make it to the other end of the pool, his thick fingers catching my waist and twisting me toward him. We swirl underwater, his hands branding my stomach. I gasp when we surface, laughing as I try to break away from him, pushing against his shoulders and splashing. But his arms are strong and wrapping me, and the squirming knot we bind ourselves together in has me hot with the friction of our slipping bodies.

Suddenly my back hits the wall of the pool, my shoulder blades scraping against the cold tile—then my thighs, my ass, my spine—they all press against the slick coldness, my body shivering as my heart races. Isaac lets go of my waist only to lift his muscled arms out of the water and cage me in against the pool.

"I'm not like Dom," he says, his cocky smile curling his lip. "When I want something I go after it."

I look him in the eye and try to seem unphased, despite the fact that my legs want to wrap around his hips and ask him to prove it. Instead, I lift my arms up out of the water and drape them on either side of the pool ledge, the position arching my back so I'm open and prone, my tits lifting up to skim the water's surface.

“Good,” I say hotly, relishing the way his eyes rake down my body, and I wonder how exactly he goes after what he wants. Is he the kind of man who will follow through and kiss me? Or will he forget the pretense and peel back the cups of my bikini and start sucking on my tits?

His eyes return to mine and his gaze is unmistakable – he’s going to fuck me.

Beautifully. Completely.

And in this pool.

I inhale sharply, disarmed by the clench in my pussy that aches for him to tear off my bikini bottoms and get to it already.

Only he doesn’t move, not quickly, not in the way my body is aching for him to. Instead, he watches me before pulling himself an inch closer—just an inch—just enough for my aching nipples to brush against his chest and release a sharp moan from my lips. The zip of ecstasy shoots through my extremities, making me close my eyes and roll my head back. Damn! That was barely anything, but my core is pounding.

When I open my eyes, Isaac is slightly above me and dominating, as if he’s waiting for me to ask for more. Except each pass of his chest against my nipples is a tiny stroke that makes my pussy throb and my imagination soar—what would it feel like to have his mouth on my skin? To feel his lips on my tits? A tiny smile hitches the edge of his mouth as if he knows exactly what I’m thinking.

My mouth falls open at the tight ball of electricity that winds in my breasts and our eyes catch as if he knows exactly how intense this is. He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t move his hands to satisfy me. Instead he makes me wait. He makes me sit here and see how much can I take.

How long? is the question his eyes ask. *How much can you take before you ask me to touch you?*

Only, he doesn't know how long I can hold out. How long I *have* held out, and how this act alone—my tits on his chest—is a delicacy I could savor for hours. I'm practically delirious with the cloud of sensations aching through my breasts, my mouth dry as the gentle up and down of our bodies fills me with tension.

"Isaac," I whisper, tilting my head back so I can look up the night—a thousand stars have emerged out of the darkness. "I, I haven't had ..." I close my eyes and savor the tiny roll of heat that zips from my tits down to the heat between my legs. "I—I—" I stutter through delirious rolls of pleasure. "It's been—"

"A long time?" Isaac asks roughly, rocking his hips forward—and suddenly our whole bodies connect. I gasp at the pressure of him as our bodies mold together, our hips, our thighs, our—

"Oh God, is—" I gasp again, feeling his hard cock press against my core. I bite my lip to keep from whimpering as my legs instinctually fall open to allow his thickness to rub against my bikini bottoms.

"When I want something," Isaac repeats, pumping the length of his erection across my clit. "I go out and get it."

My mouth falls open in a silent gasp and his lips connect with my neck. He drags them over the ridge of my gasping throat and up my jaw until his mouth is open against mine where he swallows my hot and wicked panting. He smiles under my gasps, as if claiming each as his own, and every part of us that connects under water is throbbing.

His entire body is a brand.

"Of course," Isaac says, his tongue grazing my bottom

lip that's plump and gasping for him. "I take what I want, Ilsa, but the question is ..."

"Uh-huh?" My nipples press eagerly into his chest, my legs already wrapping his hips.

"Are you in love with my friend?"

"What?" I pull back startled. Only, I can't go anywhere. I can only shift my shoulders and glare at him, overly aware of his cock pressed snugly against my bikini bottoms. "What the—" I shake my head, flustered and annoyed that he's bringing up the elephant in the other room. "Are you kidding?" I snap. "You know where your cock is right now, right? And then you ask *that*?"

But then his mouth is on mine, kissing me hot and deep. It's fucking incredible, demanding, and tender, as he sucks my bottom lip between his teeth and starts nibbling. Nibbling in a way I want him to be nibbling on other parts of me. Nibbling in a way that makes me slip my tongue in his mouth and take the power back. He reacts immediately, kissing me harder and with more force. I let go of the pool and wrap my arms around his shoulders, threading my fingers into his dark hair. He responds by deepening the kiss and pulling back just enough to slide his arms around my body so I'm wrapped in his muscled arms, his wide palms cupping my shoulder blades.

His fingers tease the strings that tie my bikini top on and I moan into his mouth, wanting him to unravel them. Instead he digs his hips into mine, forcing my legs to widen and accommodate the thickness of his body. His hands drop to my knees, securing them over his waist as he rolls his pelvis and rocks his cock against me. Black spots of desire race across my vision and it's so hot I know all I need to do is push down his shorts and get him to untie the strings on my

hips. Then our lower halves will be bare and the next time he rolls his hips like that we'll be fucking.

But Isaac pulls away, panting, and I stare up at him, my whole chest heaving with how turned on I am.

"Did that kiss answer your question?" I say brazenly, staring up at him hotly. He smiles before sliding both of his hands down over my ass and kneading his fingers into my cheeks with a heat that makes me want his hands massaging my every inch of me, every muscle, dominating me and tearing out my pleasure.

"Tell me honestly," Isaac says, slipping his fingers under the edge of my bikini bottoms so his fingers are completely palming my bare ass.

"Yes?" I rasp out, pressing into his chest so I can lift my ass higher, and—damn—his fingers slide just where I want them—they slip down over my ass to lightly brush the back of my pussy. "Yes, Isaac?" I urge, wanting him to dip his fingers inside me, even if it's just the tips and that's all he can reach from this angle.

He growls as my eagerness, his fingers parting me from behind. "Tell me honestly," he repeats, his middle finger teasing my entrance in the space where his other fingers have opened me wide. I gasp against his neck, needing him now, and the taste of his salty skin has me aching and quivery. "Tell me honestly, how would you feel if Dom walked out here in five minutes and found us fucking?"

I pull back and glare at him. "What kind of game are you playing at?" I snap, furious. Furious at how prone and ready I am. Furious that he's trying to mess with me by turning me on and then denying me! Fantastic. Just what I need, another man who won't step up! I drop my legs and yank his hands out of my bikini bottoms, even though my pussy is

screaming at me for doing so. “Jesus! I can’t believe this is some stupid game to you!”

“Oh, now hold on—” Isaac says, his powerful hands clutching my waist. “*I’m* not the one playing at anything.” I try to squirm out of his grip, but when I look up, the direct heat in his eyes is alarming. “For me, things are very clear,” he says calmly, pushing me back against the wall and nudging my knees open with his. Before I know it, his cock is pressed hotly between my

thighs again. The bastard. “Do you get me hot?” he asks, thrusting his cock against my bikini bottoms in answer to his question. “Hell fucking yes.”

My pussy clenches and I swallow hard, because I’m so damn confused. I want him, but what the hell is this?

“Do I want to fuck you?” he asks, his eyes boring into me, and my mouth goes dry. “Yes.” The gruffness of his tone makes my hips twitch. “Will I fuck you thoroughly and intently, and make every inch of your body ache with fire? Trust me, I’m going to damn-well try!”

My mouth falls open. My whole body screams at such a promise.

“But—” His tone shifts, and he leans in close to my ear, an edge of confrontation clouding his voice. “The question is will *you* fuck me because you want to, or because Dom won’t?” My nails dig into his shoulders with the shock of what he’s said and how it hits me in a way I don’t want to admit. “Will you imagine it’s Dom inside you instead of me? Or will this be some kind of anger fuck, because you need to be touched—and the man you want to fuck you isn’t stepping up?”

I shrink in his arms. Is that what this is? Our eyes lock and suddenly the water feels like ice again. Isaac stares at me, watching intently, and—shit, I don’t know what kind of

look is on my face right now. Is he right? Was I just about to use him to feel close to someone—anyone? Am I so desperate that I'd hookup with Isaac simply to feel desired?

Isaac leans forward and softly brushes his lips against mine again and my body shivers still wanting this connection. "Let me clarify," he whispers. "I want you, Ilsa. Don't for a second think I don't." But then he pulls back to look me in the eye again. "But what do *you* really want? I'm not going to fuck you if you're in love with my friend. That's one hell of a shit storm that ends badly for everyone."

"Then what the hell were you doing with your hands on my ass?" I deflect. "And your—"

He grips my hips and rocks his pelvis against me again, shooting a hot pang of heat straight through me. "I said—" he counters, his eyes burning into me. "When I want something, I go after it."

His directness makes the blood drain from my face. It points out how ridiculous the stupid game I've been playing with Dom has been. How it's been months of avoiding, and hoping, and never pulling the trigger.

"The question isn't who I want," he says firmly. "The question is who do *you* want?"

He releases my hips and steps away from me abruptly. Suddenly, I'm floating and weightless. I'm suddenly lost, with my body on fire, and completely torn between the desire to be touched and the fear that the man I want to do it will never step up.

Isaac swims to the far side of the pool and gets out of the water. Water cascades down his sculpted chest and legs, and when he turns in my direction his shorts don't even pretend to hide the size of his erection. His boxers cling to his impressive cock and a hot flush spreads over my cheeks as I take in the size of it. He stands there proud, letting me

look, as if he wants me to fully consider what I could have. Our eyes connect and my body purrs. The attraction between us is real. If I wanted Isaac, this *would* happen.

“Let me be really clear right now,” he says, not breaking my gaze. “I’m going to go take a shower, and when I’m in there, I’m going to rub one out to the thought of you riding my face.”

My mouth drops open.

Did he just say—

“That’s right,” Isaac confirms. “I’m not Dom. I talk dirty.” Then, he puts his money where his mouth is and he reaches into his shorts and starts stroking himself under the fabric. Holy hell! “If you decide you want *me*, Ilsa? Then you know where I am tonight, and tomorrow, and I’ll tell you where I’ll be in three weeks. But *you* have to decide, because you can’t have us both.”

He picks up his shirt and jeans and walks back into the suite, down the hallway, and into the bathroom, holding his hand in his shorts as he goes, completely unashamed of what he’s about to go do.

I stare at the empty suite after he closes the bathroom door. My whole body is aching at the idea of Isaac in that shower stroking his cock. Stroking himself to the thought of tasting my—

Fuck.

Just ... fuck.

I fall back into the water and float, my mind flashing with how hot Isaac would be to have. How hot and brazen it would be. How he wouldn’t be afraid to fulfill my every shameless desire and fuck me without abandon. I run my fingers over my stone-hard tits and it’s painful how aroused I am. Is that truly because of Isaac? Or is that because he’s the only one who’s promised to follow

through? I can't deny how tempting he is. How immediately and directly I could fulfill this need. Walking down that hall and into that bathroom feels like the best fucking idea in the world right now, because Isaac could pleasure me in a way Dom never would. Or is that why I want to do it? Because I'm so pissed off at Dom that I want to fuck my feelings away?

And what would happen after? Would Isaac and I become a couple? Would we have wild amazing sex for a little while and then the spark would fade? A heat like that can't last, can it? It's only hot because it's forbidden.

I look up at the stars and spread my arms out wide like an angel, the quiet and fragile water keeping me afloat. A bruise of purple clouds has floated in above, covering all the stars that—only moments before—had burned so hotly. I feel like I'm suspended in those clouds, lost and floating somewhere between infinite possibility and the cold hard ground. I skate my fingers over the thin surface of water, so soft and fragile and unlike Isaac's firm muscled body, which is solid. Solid with its frame. Solid with his intentions. No game.

I dance a hand up over my naked stomach and close my eyes, feeling the water hold me delicately. My fingers trace the skin, skimming my navel and toying with my own sensitivity. I could touch myself in the same way I know Isaac is touching himself in the shower. It wouldn't take much to find relief. I could swim to the edge of the pool where Isaac caged me in, dip my fingers inside my bikini bottoms and think about the assured way Isaac could fuck me—without hesitation. Or I could go back to my room and—like this business deal—get it the fuck done. Even though I failed to work out this frustration last night, it seems like the only sane option.

I kick up and start treading water, turning to the suite-side of the pool to find the stairs, when—

I see Dom.

“Oh shit!” I gasp, completely startled. My whole body tightens with the jolt of surprise. He’s sitting on one of the patio chairs at the end of the pool, silently watching me. He must’ve come out while I was floating, because I didn’t hear him. How long has he been sitting there, poolside, watching me float in the water with my nipples hard and my fingers tracing my abdomen?

“Dom! Hey...” I cough out water. “I didn’t—I didn’t hear you come out.” I wrap my arms over my chest underwater, wanting to hide how aroused my body is.

“Sorry,” he says quietly, his eyes catching the light and revealing a light glaze from the whiskey. “The night is beautiful, don’t you think?” His eyes linger on me a second, before they skip out to the horizon, a light breeze catching his red hair and tossing it elegantly. “Where’s Isaac by the way?”

I don’t answer his question. Instead I watch him and tread water. It’s a simple question, one that hasn’t been asked with any implication. He’s honestly wondering where his friend is, and yet I feel nothing but guilty.

“I think he went to take a shower,” I say, nodding to the hallway, where Dom follows my gaze. The light whoosh of the shower can be heard behind the silence and I swallow hard, realizing that if Isaac *hadn’t* questioned what I wanted a few minutes ago, we would both be in this pool right now. And Dom would’ve walked out here to find me spread between his friend’s thrusting hips.

The pool feels like ice. I swim to the edge and get out quickly, only to look up and see Dom staring at me, stunned.

I look down. I'm still wearing my bikini. I check behind me, noticing the city lights glowing and it hits me that from his angle I'm a silhouette. From his angle I must look naked. Sure, the important bits are covered with small scraps of fabric, but that doesn't change how indecent I feel under his gaze.

I stare back, unsure what to do. Part of me wants Dom to advance on me, assuredly and with the same determination that Isaac had. It wants Dom to tell me how many times he's imagined me naked and that his imagination never did me any justice. But the other half, it loves the flush of color that lights Dom's face as he takes me in. How he still takes the time to look at me completely before turning away, suddenly remembering to be polite. That's Dom, always the gentlemen.

"Did you, uh ..." He stares out at the city, rubbing his bottom lip like there's something on it that he must attend to instead of looking at me. "Did you have a nice night?"

"Just went for a swim," I say, picking up a towel and wrapping it around me, a gesture that allows Dom to look back in my direction.

"Did Isaac go for a swim too?" Again, his question isn't confrontational, but something about it feels loaded. I shake my head and lie.

"We chatted for a bit, but ..." I push my wet hair from my face. "Then he went inside, like you."

A shadow hoods Dominick's eyes and I can't gauge his reaction. I suddenly feel exposed in my bikini, even with the towel over me. I've never lied so blatantly to Dom before. Sure, we have our silly "always tell the truth" pact. But it was about business, or stupid daily agitations. It was never about us. And *that* is a lie we've danced around for

months, a thousand tiny omissions to keep our relationship clean and simple.

“Since when do you drink on these trips?” I ask, changing the subject. “I hope you didn’t send the board anything you’ll regret in the morning.”

He shakes his head. “When have you ever known me to do anything I regret?” He smiles smugly and I know that’s the whiskey talking. Of course, he’s talking about business, but that doesn’t make the undercurrent of what he’s said hurt any less.

“It’s good to regret nothing,” I say, nodding curtly and heading toward the suite. Only he reaches out as I pass and catches my leg.

Dom’s palm cups the front of my shin and his fingers slide around to tickle the sensitive skin behind my knee. A delicate pang of heat inches up the back of my thigh to tickle my core, and I’m not sure if it’s a reaction to the fact that my body is already awake and turned on, or if it’s because the one who’s touching me is Dom.

This is the most intimate way he’s *ever* touched me, and it’s like the rest of him—gentle and elegant. I wait, looking down to where he sits on the lounge chair, his hair is tossed and his shirt un-tucked, the sleeves uncharacteristically disheveled. He looks like a mess for Dom. And he doesn’t move. He doesn’t look up. In fact, he stares out at the horizon at the dark glitter of purple and blue that barely lights his face.

I should say something. Tell him it’s inappropriate for his hand to be where it is. I bite my lip and let his thumb graze my knee cap instead. I don’t know if the stroke of his thumb is deliberate or unconscious, but I tilt my head up to look up to the sky bruised with clouds. There are a hundred things I could say right now—about what I want, and how I

want him to touch me, how I've imagined the texture of his hair, and the smell of his skin.

I say nothing and close my eyes to savor the simple feeling of his hand on my leg. Dom's hand. It's almost innocent, except for the fact that he's kept it there longer than he should, long enough for it to be inappropriate, long enough that one of us should've said something.

But this is how we exist, caught in the heat of silence with his hand on my leg and all that's unspoken making my heart race.

"I'm sorry I drank," Dom says finally, his fingers dropping with his words and leaving my leg naked and weightless without them. A lump lodges in my throat with the fear that *this* will be the only time he will ever touch me and it's already gone. "I know we made a deal," he says. "And I broke it. I won't do it again."

He doesn't look up at me. He doesn't say anything about the fact that I too have been drinking. Instead, he stares out at that endless skyline with a disheveled sadness that makes me want to wrap him in my arms and squeeze that sadness away. I want to sit on his lap and thread my fingers through his hair and kiss him till the sun rises. Kiss him till he understands that I can't live in this silence. Kiss each tremble of his mouth and exhale of his breath that is hot and soft and his.

Are you in love with my friend? Isaac's words echo through my head, and in this moment I could almost convince myself I am. I care for Dom fiercely, and yet I can't seem to reach forward and actually touch him ... tangle my fingers in his hair ... take this leap—

Dom stands up abruptly and walks toward the suite. He does it so quickly its startling, and even worse he doesn't even look at me as he goes.

“Goodnight, Ilsa,” he says sharply, and I don’t know what to make of the edge in his tone. Maybe he came out and saw me in the pool with Isaac and all of this is all already ruined. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

He disappears down the hallway and all I can think about is how Dom regrets nothing

and I’m at the top of the world in the tallest high-rise in all of Hong Kong.

Completely alone.

MY FOUR-INCH HEELS pinch the delicate skin below my ankle, rubbing the flesh and threatening to blister. My whole day has felt like that tender strip of skin, wedged into a space that's too tight, and scraping with each painful step. The tension between Dom and me has felt like that exposed blister, raw and ready to erupt. From breakfast to the cab ride to our associate's office, to sitting in the stuffy board room where Dom smoothed out his suit and started the negotiation. Every step, every breath, has felt rigid and stiff. That cushion of distance and professionalism that normally sits between us has had an uncanny sharpness all day; as if Dom saw me with my legs wrapped around his friend's hips and now he wants me to pay for the fact that he can't shake the image.

I turn down the convention center hallway that leads to the ballroom where our new associates are throwing a merger banquet to announce our deal to their employees. The celebration has already begun. And it *is* a day to celebrate, a day to fist-pump the air and get drunk in honor of all the hard work we've done. Months of work leading up to

this point. This is a brilliant career triumph that will result in the promotion I've been salivating over for years, and yet that's not what I'm thinking about. No, instead every muscle in my body is knotted with fear, because something between Dom and me is *off*. And I can't shake the dread that pools at the base of my heart.

I don't know that Dom saw *anything* last night, but he's spent the entire day eerily chipper and "on." Over compensating and acting like the perfect lawyer with his smart suggestions that made it sound like he was giving our new associates everything they wanted while managing to stack the deck in his favor and getting everything he desired. Dom regrets nothing after all and he brilliantly stands his ground. And I was there by his side the whole time, and yet it was the first time I've ever felt invisible next to Dom, as if I was a complete afterthought. He hardly acknowledged me all day. He didn't ask my opinion. He didn't give me the space to wield part of the negotiation. He cut me off when I started to interject. And because he's Dom, each shut down was executed like a magician's sleight of hand, practically imperceptible to our new partners and seemingly unaggressive. Not overtly. Our new partners had no clue it was happening.

A string quartet strikes a powerful chord as I walk into the dazzling ballroom, silk and gold lanterns hanging from the ceiling and casting a red glow over the decorated space. Tables shimmer with crystal sculptures of swirling dragons and koi fish with exotic fins. There are lady dancers twirling on a stage in the corner, adding a bit of pageantry to what feels like an enchanted den of opulence. The gold color of my dress is perfect for the occasion, the flowy fabric hugging my hips before floating out with a twirl of layered gauze at my thighs. My hair is pulled into a twist of loose curls that

shows off the dress' low-cut back and the long stretch of my spine. It's the perfect balance of elegance and sin. At least, that's what I thought when I bought it, hoping Dom would be mesmerized when he saw me in it. I'd imagined him smiling beautifully when he saw the modest front—perfect for a business colleague—but then caught off guard by the exposed back, sending a wave of naughty thoughts through his head. Of course, none of that matters now.

I walk to the buffet and peruse the spread—oysters, sushi, fine caviar—a hundred things that will only make my stomach feel worse than it already does. It's stupid that I feel so unsettled. The deal is done. Negotiated and signed, with every detail outlined and double checked. It's exactly as we planned. Perfect in fact. Our bosses are going to be beside themselves. And yet ... it doesn't feel grand. There's an emptiness in my stomach that's rooted in whatever awkwardness is between Dom and me.

Of course, I know that itch of tension is all *mine*. This was a huge deal and whatever distance I'm feeling is all in *my* mind. I'm the one who is mixed up and confused. Dom knows exactly what he wants and today he went out got it. The way Isaac goes after women, Dom goes after business, slick and put together and absolutely on point. You'd never know Dom drank the night before. There was no hint of a hangover. No awkward silences. No prickle of confusion running up his spine when Isaac came into the kitchen for breakfast. Nope, Dominick was one-hundred percent sharp this morning. He was all, "Good morning, sunshine" and mega-watt smiles, then negotiation, and brilliance, and sign on the dotted line.

I'm the one who's standing in this banquet all by myself feeling lost and out of sorts. Me. Not him. This was *the deal* I've been working on for months, if not preparing for years,

and ... I nibble on a cracker from the buffet table, but it's dry and unsatisfying.

After the paperwork was signed, Dom mumbled something about calling the office and seeing me at the banquet later. His back was all I saw as he disappeared through the boardroom door hours ago. If this had been any other business trip, we'd have gone out for noodles or split a bizarre Hong Kong delicacy in a random restaurant near our hotel. But instead I went back to our giant presidential suite alone.

Isaac wasn't there either, even though his suitcases were still in his room. I assume the two of them went out and celebrated together. I really don't know. After a couple hours it became clear that Dom wasn't going to come back before the party, so I got dressed and ... here I am.

I grab a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and roll back my shoulders. Screw him. I'm not going to sulk. This was a great deal and if Dom wants to be ... whatever he's being, then fine. I'll represent the company. I can smile and dazzle and laugh at our new associate's bad jokes and throw back champagne. Clearly our previous "no-drinking rule" is off the table, and I ought to celebrate.

The bubbly burns as it goes down, I drink it so quickly. But who cares! I've been working this deal for months and now it's done. It's in the bag. This is the first time in ages that I don't have to worry about budgets and quarterly earnings and what our next move is. It makes me want to get drunk and go back up to our high-rise and throw my four-inch heels off the side of the building. That's right, chuck 'em off the balcony and watch 'em soar. I deserve to not have a care in the world.

I find the CEO of the company we've acquired and his business partners by the bar, and they raise a glass to welcome me. We congratulate each other and I expertly

brush off the question of where my boss is. We chat politely and share stories and laugh, and before I know it I've been twirled around the dance floor by at least four of our new associates. I'm sure I've had far too many glasses of champagne when I suddenly feel sturdy hands on my waist.

I expect to see Dom, but when I turn it's Isaac standing in front of me, dressed to the nines. He looks phenomenal, wearing a full tux that's cut perfectly for him. His hair is styled and the rugged I-hang-out-in-my-pajamas man that's been lounging around our suite shirtless is gone. This Isaac looks like he could own half of Hong Kong.

"Hi," I say breathlessly, completely taken aback, and he smiles at me above his black bowtie.

"Mind if I have this dance?" he asks, never taking his eyes off me, and the business man who was dancing with me nods graciously. Isaac takes my arms and wraps them around his neck, pulling me onto the dance floor. "You look incredible," he says, his hands dropping to my waist where he holds me firmly. "Though, I believe you wore this dress the other way around when we first met."

I shake my head at him. "You're such a putz!"

He smiles and twirls me, leaning into my ear. "You look great in both."

"Yes, well, for the first time you don't look like a homeless man, or some kind of beach bum who can't help but walk around our suite without his shirt on."

He smiles against my ear. "I didn't think you noticed."

I roll my eyes and ignore him. "You look nice in a tux. You might consider updating your wardrobe."

"Suits and ballrooms are Dom's thing," he says, twirling me. "I'm a lie-on-a-beach-in-flip-flops kind of CEO."

"Which reminds me, I have no clue what kind of business you're in."

“Not the glamorous high-rise kind,” he says, pulling me in close. “Dom is Mr. Big-Business-and-Mergers. I’m the forgettable entrepreneur with a laptop and an internet connection. Give me a glass of whiskey and I’m happy. I don’t need all this.” He nods to the glittering room.

“So, in your business, tuxes are optional?” I quip and he smiles against my ear again.

“Whatever you want is optional.” His breath is hot, rolling down my neck, and the tickle of his five-o-clock shadow brushes my face.

“You’re such a tease,” I jab, and his hands grip my sides intently, followed by his fingers wrapping around my back to cover my open skin.

“I think we established last night that a tease is the last thing I am.” His hands cradle my spine and my skin heats with how true that statement is. His palms burn into me as his fingers tickle my shoulder blades. The touch is a promise, telling me all the pleasure my body craves could be mine. “Have you seen Dominick this evening?” Isaac asks, continuing the conversation as if his hands aren’t teasing my spine and he didn’t just imply that he’d rather remove my dress and spend the rest of the evening in nothing but flip-flops.

I shake my head. “I haven’t, no,” I say, taking a moment to smell the salt of his neck. It’s a musky-dirt smell made of sweat. The kind I want to taste on every inch of him. “Dom disappeared after we signed the paperwork this afternoon,” I admit. “I haven’t seen him since. And frankly, I could care less.” That comes out harsher than I expect, anger prickling in me.

“You don’t mean that,” Isaac says softly, and I press my cheek into his neck, wanting the heat of this connection.

“Maybe true,” I admit. “But I don’t want to think about Dom when your hands are on me.”

Isaac’s grip flutters, his fingers tracing down my spine. “Now who’s being the tease,” he says in a dark voice, before pulling me so close and crushing my body against him. The fabric of my dress feels too thin and shocking for the public place we’re in, or maybe that’s the thought of the two of us being back at our high-rise with this dress pooled below my knees. “Have you decided what you want then?” Isaac asks, his breath on my neck, and I lay my head on his shoulder. We fit together so perfectly like this—swaying back and forth, man and woman, arm in arms. And we could fit together in all the other ways my body wants as well, I just have to nibble on his ear and say: *I choose you*. I want to.

Instead, I hold him tight and say nothing, dancing in a sway that feels like a hug. The kind of hug you don’t ever want to walk away from because at least for this one moment you feel like you’re somebody’s entire world, even if you don’t belong to them, even if you only get this one moment and its fleeting connection.

His fingers trace my back as the violins play a sad melody that makes me realize that saying yes to Isaac is saying no to something I thought I wanted for so long.

“I hardly know you,” I say finally, which makes him smile against my cheek.

“Are you the kind of woman who needs that? For us to have a history?” he asks, his hands dropping to small of my back. I lift my head and look at him, searching his brown eyes and unsure what I’m looking for.

“Not exactly,” I say cautiously. “The weird part is I *feel* like I already know you. Even though I *know* I don’t. And —” I swallow hard, trying to sort through the embarrassment of this truth. “I suppose that reveals an unspoken

desperation in me.” I admit, looking down at his chin for a moment. “I’m well aware that I’m projecting onto you.” I take a breath and look up. “Wanting you to mean something, to be something that—”

“Makes you forget what you really want instead?” he finishes for me, and my mouth is dry, not sure what to say to that. But then I shake my head.

“I wouldn’t put it that way, exactly. It’s really ...” He waits, watching me, and I search his eyes, not sure if there’s a way to articulate the familiarity that comes from sharing this moment—the touch of his hands, the confusion of something new in me waking, and how my heart brays with its uncertainty. “You make me hopeful,” I say finally.

His grip tightens and his eyes narrow. That’s not what he expected.

“It’s different than history,” I continue. “And there’s this weight that makes it feel important. You make me see someone else—someone new—another person I could become.”

Isaac slides his cheek up against mine, pressing his rough stubble into my cheekbone. It’s a hug again, but something more, something where we’re tucked into each other and wondering who we are.

“Your hesitation ...” he says softly. “You’re not sure who you’d leave behind?”

“Are you speaking of him or me?”

“Both.”

The word rings against my ear. *Both*. Choosing Isaac means walking away from two parts of my life. “We have a history,” I say. “Dom and I ...”

But Isaac shakes his head. “That’s not what I meant. I mean the possibility. The person you’ve wanted to become all this time. The life you’ve dreamed of having with him.”

I'm quiet for a moment, realizing there are three parts to this. There's the man I respect and adore and let steal my heart—the man with whom I have two years of past with. Then there's the team we are now, the two of us unstoppable and brilliant. Yet, I've clouded that with all the things I've imagined and wished for. Isaac's right, there's a third part to this. There's the future, the life I thought I always wanted. The future I imagined and—

"It's just a dream," I say quietly, and Isaac's hand runs up my spine again.

"So is this one, if you think about it."

A shiver runs through me and I pull back to look at him, realizing how unpredictable this all is, how there's no certainty in the future. Any future. Dreams are nothing but projections, beautiful illusions made of little more than faith and air. I look around us at the shimmering ballroom, sparkling with lanterns and tiny crystals refracting the light into a thousand tiny pieces—made of nothing solid—a thousand tiny rainbows that swirl and mesmerize me, but I cannot catch.

I look at Isaac and wonder what I've been chasing all this time.

"Maybe I didn't realize who else I could be," I say, realizing there's only one thing I can rely on and that's myself—who I choose to be. "Maybe I've been so singularly focused, I didn't know what else I could have."

He looks at me deeply, something torn in his eyes, and it's the first time I'm unsure if he wants to do this. "Ilsa, I have to be clear," he says. "I'm not offering—"

"And I'm not asking," I interrupt him, shaking my head. "I know exactly what you're offering, and I'm not expecting anything more than ..." I lick my lips and look at him squarely, spreading my hands over his broad shoulders.

“This isn’t about yesterday, or tomorrow. It’s about today and who I choose to be. And what *I* want.”

Isaac’s hands slide over my shoulder blades and a mist of desire breaks across my skin. The edge of his thumbs tuck under my spaghetti straps and this dress feels erotically sexy. It feels like I’ll soon be un-wearing it and shedding it along with this girl that I’ve been. A balloon of excitement surges through me. I’d forgotten what it feels like to be filled with the possibility of something new, to be wild and young and acting recklessly. It makes me realize how tired I am of waiting and calculating the risk, of keeping things lined up so perfectly. Suddenly, all I want is this spark of heat that is raw and rejuvenating.

“May I cut in?”

His words shock me.

His voice—the one voice I don’t want to hear, not right now—Dom’s voice.

I pull away from Isaac to see Dominick a few feet away. He’s perfect—always perfect, in his tux, with his red hair brushed and gorgeous. His green eyes lit on us.

I look at Isaac quickly, realizing I *want* to leave the banquet with him. That this is a choice I *can* make, that I want to make, and yet—

Isaac doesn’t miss a beat. He turns to his friend smoothly. “Of course, Dom,” he says, smiling broadly. “It’s a big day for the two of you. Congratulations on the deal. Please ...” Isaac twirls me away from him and I immediately miss the connection of his body. I land directly in front of Dom, weak and uneasy on my feet and staring into the eyes of the man I was ready to walk away from. My boss, my fantasy, the man I was certain I needed.

And do I?

I don’t think so, except ...

Dom's eyes are dark and brooding in a way I'm not used to seeing, making my throat tighten. How long has he been here watching us? How close was he standing? What did he hear me say?

"I've been looking for you all evening," I say softly, and the charm I'm used to seeing in Dom's gaze isn't there. It's replaced by a steely-green glare. I swallow hard, my skin tightening with a fear I don't understand. Not sure why I'm excited by the fact that he's angry with me. Only, I know the assertiveness blustering in my chest won't be silenced.

"You don't mind?" Dom asks me pointedly, referring to my dance with Isaac, and I shake my head to cut the heat of his glare.

"Of course not," I say. "Why would I mind?"

Dom's eyes darken, making my heart stutter, his gaze laced with jealousy. It's almost refreshing from Dom, though I can't deny the flush that heats my cheeks knowing he must have watched the intimate way Isaac's hands slid over my back. Anyone with two eyes would assume Isaac and I were lovers, or at least, soon to be.

"Please." I lift my arms and assume the stance of offering to take this dance, suddenly riled up by this change in Dom, who has no right to care if I let another man touch my skin.

"Good to see you showed up," Isaac says, patting Dom on the shoulder before heading toward the bar. I don't watch him go, even though part of me longs to. I keep my gaze fixed on the tall steely-eyed redhead in front of me.

My heart catches when he steps forward and slides a hand around my waist. His dark gaze charging the touch and making me lift my chin to look defiantly up at him. My whole body is on fire despite the formality of our posture, and Dom is always—always—the gentleman, allowing the

proper amount of space between us as he takes my other hand. For this is the formal and *appropriate* way to dance with your boss, despite the burn of his grip.

Dominick leads, moving us on the dance floor in the brilliant way that Dom has always led, with controlled refinement. There's a stiff elegance in our steps, my elbows locked, shoulders back, all of this an act that no one but Isaac is watching. I look into Dom's eyes, searching his expression for any of the sweetness that I'm used to seeing there, but distrust tints his gaze with uncharacteristic dominance.

"You were brilliant today," I say softly, and he doesn't smile. It's an uncomfortable harshness that makes me overly aware of the points in which we touch: his hand on my hip, my palm on his shoulder, my other hand clasped between his fingers. There are three points of contact, with a cavern of space between us hinting at all the careful steps and distance we've used to keep us apart. "I knew you'd be wonderful," I say pushing forward, and pretending—like always—that this is only business and this is nothing more than a formal dance at a celebration banquet. "All of this." I nod to the room full of our colleagues celebrating. "You did this. This is your victory."

"You like him, don't you?"

My eyes snap to him and his gaze is as sharp as his question. Dom is never this direct. Never. Not about personal things. In fact, he doesn't give a lick about the deal or the banquet, right now. No, the darkness in his eyes is asking one thing: What the hell was my friend's hands doing all over your back?

I hold his gaze for a long time without answering him. This is uncharted territory for us. Normally, we could talk about anything, but then, normally we're on the same side

and there isn't someone else between us. Dom waits calmly, perfectly stoic, which I've seen him do a hundred times with a client, and for the first time I see something wicked in Dominick's expression. He's not asking an innocent question. Dom doesn't want to know if I *like* his friend. Dom wants to know if I want to *fuck* his friend.

I tilt my head and try to decide how I want to answer that question. Only, I'm pissed off, because Dom is asking it with that polite polish that he's mastered. The rudeness of his question is masked by his cool unflustered elegance as if this is a perfectly respectable conversation.

"You mean Isaac?" I clarify, raising my eyebrows innocently. Of course he means Isaac. There's no one else he could possibly mean, but if he's going to play the polite game, I'll play back.

Dom nods with his regal features angling down on me, only he tries to do it nonchalantly, like it's no big deal and we could be talking about anyone. And it makes me so damn frustrated with him!

He's spent the whole weekend avoiding me. Pretending he has work to do, leaving me all by myself, leaving me alone with his friend, the friend *he invited* to stay with us in the first place! Was this some kind of test? Did he think I'd wait around forever for him? Maybe he did. Maybe that's exactly what this is and I've failed miserably, and he's expecting me to be the kind of woman he can string along and expect to always be by his side.

"What are you really asking me, Dom?" I say, turning the question back on him and watching his shoulders stiffen. "You and I are close," I remind him, stepping forward to slide my hand up his shoulder and back around his collar. "We made a promise once to tell each other

everything. So what it is you really want to know? You know you can ask me anything.”

Dom inhales slowly, and—no one else would know it, because he’s doing his best to hide his reaction—I can tell I’ve flustered him.

Good.

“You guys have been hanging out,” he says tentatively, like he doesn’t really want to ask. I’ve seen that sweet discomfort before, hiding under all that polish. It only comes out when Dom feels threatened, which I suddenly realize, is exactly what this is. Dom is threatened by Isaac, the bad boy who walks around shirtless with the wicked smile to match. Isaac, the kind of man who charms the panties off a girl before they’ve even gotten to the restaurant, or would fly her to Hawaii, hike her to the top of a volcano and fuck her next to the lava. Isaac is a man of thrills and action and ten shots of whiskey. He’s every masculine thing Dom is not, and that’s exactly why liking him is a problem. Liking Isaac means rejecting everything that Dom is.

“I just ...” Dom starts again, hardening his gaze. “I thought maybe something was there. Like ...” Dom’s eyes flick down to my lips and then back up. I feel the heat of where he fears Isaac has been and the judgment that will come with the knowledge that his hands have been on me. I can tell Dom will never look at me the same way if I’ve been with Isaac. Which isn’t fair in the least, but there it is. “I don’t know, like you two might ...” He’s fishing. He’s dancing around the question—as always—and I’m tired of this game.

“Come here,” I say keeping my tone soft, but serious. He wants to open this can of worms? Then I’ll let him. I pull him close and move both of his hands so they’re

wrapped around my back, flattening his palms against my exposed skin. I slide my arms up behind his neck so we're pressed together and he's holding me in the same way Isaac just did. Dom stiffens, the position decidedly intimate, his hands curling up so only the tips of his fingers touch me, as if he's not allowed to keep them there. The pads of his fingers are gentle and elegant, and completely different than Isaac, who takes my skin in stride, who asks to know my body without reservation. Dom's touch is a question; it's filled with breathless uncertainty from months of indecision. I let him idle in the discomfort of not knowing if he should touch me or not, even though I've deliberately put his hands in that position.

"Here's the deal, Dom," I say, tracing my fingers up his neck and teasing the base of his hair. His eyes dilate and I can feel the delicate pulse at his throat. His heart is racing. "You can ask me anything you want, Dom. But you have to promise not to get upset when you hear the answers."

His eyebrows shoot up. He pulls away slightly, but I pull him back against me, slipping a hand intimately into the back of his hair. I've dreamed of digging my fingers into his silky red locks, teasing their softness. But this is different. Aggressive.

"We can tell each other anything, can't we?" I continue. "We made a pact that we'd be honest with each other. Didn't we?"

His chin lifts and I see the concern in his eyes. He's got an excellent poker face, but I can tell he's unsure if he wants to finish the conversation he started.

"Especially when it matters," I press, and he takes a deep breath as if it might ground him.

"Of course," he nods. "Of course we can." He smiles weakly, like he's trying to keep in control, to be my boss, and

pretend this is a completely normal way for an employee to be pressed against him.

“Then ask your question again.” I nod, running my fingers back down his neck and enjoying the shiver that radiates off him. This new tension between us sits between the fear in his eyes and the heat of anticipation. We both know the way I’m touching him is not innocent, nor is his question.

“You like him?” he says finally, swallowing uncomfortably before he clips out his friend’s name. “Isaac.” His hands adjust on my hips as if he’s pulling his wet palms from the hot leather of a car seat that’s been broiling in the sun. “You—you like him, yes?” he repeats, but the words are almost breathless, having lost his earlier casualness.

I smile, appreciating the new weight in his tone. “If you’re asking if I think Isaac is sexy,” I say frankly, “then the answer is yes.”

Dom tenses and I tilt my head as if to say: *You asked.*

I palm his neck and keep going. “If you’re asking if I’ve been having fun drinking whiskey and hanging out by the pool and dancing with Isaac ... the answer is *yes*. If you’re asking if I’m intrigued by his whole broodish bad-boy vibe —*yes*, to that one too.”

Dom’s jaw clenches tighter with every word I say.

“*Everything* you’re afraid I’m going to like about Isaac,” I continue, twirling my finger into the locks along the back of his skull, “*I do like* about Isaac.”

Dom’s hands squirm against my back, falling to my hips, ready to let me go. But I wrap my arms tighter around his neck and don’t let him. His eyes shoot over my shoulder, because it’s the only thing he can do to get away from me.

“You asked, Dom.” I nudge him so he’ll look at me.

“Only, I don’t think that’s what you really wanted to ask. Is it?”

There’s a pinch in his brow as his gaze comes back to me. He’s seen exactly where this conversation is going and he doesn’t want more.

“Is it?” I push, holding him hard against me. “What you really want to ask is if I’m attracted to Isaac, isn’t it?”

“Ilsa—”

“Isn’t it?”

His gaze cuts over my shoulder again, his jaw tightening.

“Actually, that’s not what you really want to ask either, huh?” I press. “No, what you really want to ask is if I want to *fuck him*?”

“Jeez, Ilsa!” Dom’s eyes go wild, looking around quickly to see if anyone is listening to us, but I slide my hand over his cheek and turn his gaze back to me.

“We’ve played this game for a long time, Dom,” I say, when his eyes finally meet mine. “Why don’t we actually talk about it?” His cheek is hot against my hand, but I won’t let him look away. “In truth, I think you’re afraid Isaac is everything you’re not. I think you’re afraid I’m falling into his arms because he’s aggressive, and sexy, and charming. And you know what—you’re right. Isaac *is* all of those things and—yes!—I *am* attracted to him for it.”

Dom’s face goes white. He doesn’t want to hear this. Everything he’s afraid of, I’m saying out loud.

“But Dom,” I say sharply, and he inhales. I move my hand down his chin to adjust the bowtie at his throat. “Here’s where you’re waaaaay off the mark. I couldn’t wait for this weekend. *Our* last business trip together. And, I couldn’t wait because I was finally spending this weekend with *you*. *Us* in the same suite. Only, I didn’t know Isaac

would be here.” I move my fingers back up to cup his jaw and the muscles tighten where he’s gritting his teeth and saying nothing. “I wanted to spend this weekend with you. Only, you’ve been holing yourself up in your room doing God-knows-what, and Isaac’s the only one around for me to hang out with.”

“I had work,” he clips out, and I run my thumb over the bottom corner of his mouth.

“Great,” I say, shaking my head. “Do your work. Do your job if that’s what’s important.”

He lowers his eyes.

“Just don’t get mad when you find me sitting in the pool half-drunk with the guy you’re scared shitless I’m going to choose over you.”

His eyes snap up, and I tilt my head to the side in defiance.

“Get over yourself, Dom. You’re the one who’s been blowing me off. So, don’t pull me out onto this dance floor and ask me if I want to sleep with your friend if you don’t want to hear the answer – because the answer is *yes*. Yes, I one-hundred-percent want to fuck Isaac. And yes, I absolutely want to do it because he’s sexy, and aggressive, and takes what he wants.”

Dom pulls his face away from my hand, but I grab his chin and turn him back to me.

“But don’t for a *second* think I want Isaac because he’s better than you,” I say boldly. “When I fantasize about fucking Isaac, it’s completely different than when I fantasize about fucking you. Because you’re different people! *You* excite different things in me. But don’t you dare think I’d fuck Isaac because he’s sexier than you, or more interesting than you, or has something going on that you don’t. The only reason I’d fuck him is because *you* let me.”

Dom stares at me, shocked. We've stopped dancing and are standing in the middle of the dance floor, not moving. I can't read his expression, other than he's looking at me like he can't believe a single thing I've just said. It felt amazing to say it, but now I'm suddenly cold. And he isn't moving. I can't tell if he's pissed that I just admitted I want to screw Isaac, or if he's registered what I *actually* said.

"Say something." I say, laid bare, but he doesn't move. I loosen my grip on his shoulders, but he's like a statue with his hands fisted at my hips. I've just admitted that I want him, that I *fantasize* about him, and the only thing I know for sure right now is that he's pissed. A surge of red creeps up his neck and obviously I shouldn't have said any of it.

Tears burn behind my eyes and I bite my cheek to keep them from falling.

Fuck him.

Seriously, I've wanted to tell him how I feel for months and now that I have—sure, it wasn't ideal, but still—*this* is how he reacts?

Fuck him.

He doesn't move, and his gaze is so damn hard, I feel the tears falling. I yank his hands off my hips.

"Got it," I say hoarsely. "Loud and clear."

I uncage myself from him and stalk off the dance floor, heading straight for the bar. I need a fucking drink. Preferably ten. I wipe the rogue tears from my cheek and look back at him only once to see him frozen in the same damn position, staring out at the silk lanterns with that stoic look.

Fine.

Just ... fine.

I cut the corner around one of the tables and run straight into Isaac. He swoops back to avoid a collision, a large glass of wine in each of his hands. His eyes are wide

and I can't tell if he was close enough to the dance floor to hear what we said, but yeah—I'm definitely crying, so there's that.

I grab one of the glasses of wine he's holding and chug it. It's red and warm, and it slides down my throat with a chocolately deliciousness that tastes too good for this moment. I swallow it all down before looking back to Isaac.

"This is that expensive shit, huh?" I say finally and he nods. "Sorry."

"Nope, I'm pretty sure these are the moments when you're supposed to drink the expensive shit."

I smile for a second not sure what to say to that and Isaac catches my eye, but there's a sadness in it.

"Did you hear all that?" I ask and he shrugs.

"Just the important bits," he admits and I can't tell if he's upset or matter-of-fact about it. I just laid out my heart to the guy I've been in love with for two years—shit! I really am in love with him, aren't I? Brilliant. I look over at Dom, but he's walked to the far side of the dance floor and is standing with his back to us. Awesome. Sure, I won't deny that everything I said came out shitty. And yes, I absolutely admitted to wanting to fuck another man, but that's what he was asking wasn't it?

"I didn't know you were in love with him," Isaac says, his brown eyes soft and apologizing, like he knows he fucked up and made this worse for all three of us.

"Yes, you did," I say back, grabbing the second glass of wine and drinking it down too. "You just like to play with fire." Isaac's eyes cut to the ground. But really, we're both at fault. We both flirted and put on a show and tested the waters. And yes, there absolutely *is* something between us, but I'm hung up on Dom. If Dom wasn't here, this would all be very different.

I put both the glasses on the table beside me and step forward. I cup Isaac's stubble-covered cheeks and kiss him. It's soft and delicate and he's surprised at my advance. He knows Dom is right there. We both do. But then his arms wrap around me and the kiss deepens. His tongue finds its way inside mine and the pressure of it all is sad and impulsive and beautiful. I melt into his mouth, because I damn-well need to be kissed. His hands snake up and down my back and the kiss is hot and filled with desire—filled with need. And I taste everything I could have, if Dom wasn't here, everything that would overwhelm and fill me and burn me to ash.

When I pull away I'm breathless. This spark between us burns hot, kindled with a fresh anger I want to use to slap Dom.

"Damn!" I say under my breath, wiping my mouth with my fingers, my heart pounding. "You *are* good at that."

Isaac smiles at me proudly with a smirk that says, *If only...*

But I brush my wet cheeks and we both know that's not happening.

"I—" I start to explain, but Isaac shakes his head.

"I get it." He nods to the dance floor where Dom stands on the far side of the room with his back to us. "I should probably go apologize to my friend."

I smile weakly. "I don't envy that."

"Not your problem."

I squeeze Isaac's arm before retreating out of the ballroom, leaving the red lights and the sparkles behind me. I take a cab back to our hotel and when the elevator dumps me out on the top floor I kick off my shoes, pull down my hair and walk straight through the suite and out onto the terrace.

The wind is vicious and alive out on the balcony and it tosses my hair in a tornado of curls. I look out at the skyline and everything inside me feels wild and unhooked. My tears blur all the lights into a symphony of color. My heart rioting.

It's easy to stand on top of the world and imagine your life a different way: a life filled with fantasy and pleasure and possibility. It's easy to forget how much it hurts to learn your vision is faulty, and the things you thought were one way end up being a completely different color and shape. It's easy to forget the sobering effect of waking up in the morning and seeing the truth in sharp and brutal focus. It's dangerous to hope. It's dangerous to allow yourself to get carried away.

DOMINICK STANDS at the far side of the ballroom with a giant fish tank behind him. The glow of the tank turns him into a silhouette with his arms crossed, acting like the same old stubborn prick I know from college. He's pissed. Of course he's pissed, but for all the wrong reasons.

I walk up to him and his jaw clenches, an angry tendon protruding from his neck.

"You're an idiot," I say, and—

BAM! Dom cracks me one across the jaw in front of all his fancy business associates.

I stumble back, pain pounding through my face. I look through my burry vision to see Dom shaking out his hand and saying something in Chinese to the men who've started to gather. They motion toward me, alarmed, but Dom is waving his hands to calm them.

I swallow the blood in my mouth and shake it off, standing straight again. My ears ring, but I still grab Dom's arm. "I deserved that," I clip out. "I admit that. But now that you've got that out of your system, I'm going to ask politely for you to walk out of this ballroom and talk to me."

“Fuck off,” Dom growls, glaring at me before turning to his colleagues to assure them this is nothing to be worried about.

“No, Dom,” I say, gripping his arm tighter to get his attention. “I have no qualms about punching you back in front of all of these men, which isn’t going to matter to me, because I’m not some big fancy lawyer anymore. But it’s gonna look pretty damn bad for you. So, I can throw you down and we can wrestle this out like dogs, or you can walk the fuck out of this ballroom and talk to me like a gentleman. It’s your choice.”

Dom glares at me and the blue light from the fish tank makes his features look severe. He’s doing his best to weigh his options and not explode. Suddenly, he barks out something in Chinese that I don’t understand and he tosses my hand off of his arm, heading for the door. I look at the semi-circle of men in their tuxes, their eyes wide and faces pale. This is exactly why I got out of the corporate world. Because right now, I don’t give a shit what any of them think.

I race after Dom. He’s walked so quickly out of the ballroom that he’s clear down the convention hall corridor before I can catch up.

“Hey!” I tap his shoulder and he whips around ready to throw another punch. “Hey! I know you think this is college all over again. But—”

“What about ‘fuck-off’ do you not understand?” he steps forward, furious, squaring off with me. There’s ten years of angry shit he wants to say to me in that glare, which I don’t deserve, but he thinks I do.

“How about we start with the part where I tell you the girl you’re nuts about just told you she’s in love with you.” I toss back at him. “And then there’s the part where you were

standing in that ballroom fuming like a fucking asshole instead of going after her.”

His face bunches, his skin fuming red. “That’s *not* what she said,” he snaps. “Actually, I’m pretty sure she said she wants to bang *your* brains out, so ...”

“Which *you* gave me permission to do, by the way,” I point out. “And—oh yeah—I’m not actually doing right now!”

“And what? You want a fucking metal?”

I shake my head at him. God-dammit! He can be a real prick sometimes.

“What is wrong with you? Did you not hear me say Ilsa is *in love* with you?”

“Yeah, I heard *you* say it.” His forehead creases angrily. “But all she said to me was she’s thought about us together, which, as I recall, was the same sentence in which she talked about wanting to fuck *you*.” Dom rolls his shoulders and glares at me like he’s made his point, the lights of the hallway hooding his eyes.

“Right.” I shake my head at him. “And *that’s* the whole damn problem, isn’t it? The fact that she’s even considered me? Right? And what? Does that taint her in your mind somehow? Is your perfect little image of her completely ruined now because she’s capable of being attracted to another man—and, of all people, *me*?”

Dom stares down the hallway, frowning and avoiding my question. Music from the ballroom pumps down the corridor, muffled by the carpeted walls and filling the silence. He doesn’t want to admit he’s held this grudge for years. He’s never said it to my face, but I’ve seen it in how he reacts. Any woman who’s ever given me a glance has become polluted in his eyes, because ... Hell, I don’t even know why. After all, he’s supposed to be my friend.

“Does it hurt more to know I want her back?” I say, throwing salt in the wound. His eyes cut to me something fierce and at least he’s starting to admit his own bullshit. “Well grow up, Dom!” I snap at him. “We’re adults! Stop being childish and living in some fantasyland where the only person Ilsa wants is you. And guess what, we’re all animals. And animals want to fuck. So, when she can’t fuck you, she’s gonna move on and start thinking about fucking—”

“Do you ever shut up?” Dom grabs the front of my tux and gets in my face. He’s pissed as shit, gripping my lapel and seething, but I’m not about to back down.

“Trust me, Dom,” I say, inches from his face. “If you don’t fuck her someone else will.”

“Stop talking about her like that!”

“No,” I say calmly as his hand tightens. “You want to know why? Because Ilsa just told you in so many words that she loves you and you’re standing here pissing a fit with me. So, you can either go back to our suite and *do something about it*, or you can let me do it.”

Dom’s second hand slams down against my chest and his eyes are a spitfire that’s about to throw me against the wall.

“Good,” I push back. “Get angry at me! That’s how you’re supposed to feel about the girl you’re in love with!”

His jaw tightens and I can tell he has no clue how to deal with what I’m saying.

“Look, you’re my friend, Dom,” I continue. “Which you may not believe right now, but it’s true. And I fucking *asked* if you’d have a problem with this ... and guess what? *You do!* So who are you really pissed off at right now? Neither of us did anything you didn’t give us permission to do.”

His gaze flutters with anger and recognition, not liking the truth.

“Yeah, exactly,” I say, grabbing his hands from my shirt and tossing them aside. “So, here’s the deal. I’m going to go back into that ballroom bar and get drunk off my ass, and then I’m going to go back to our suite, lock myself in my room, put on my headphones, and pass the fuck out. You can forget I’m even there. Then, I’ll get on a plane in the morning and be out of your hair.” He lifts his chin, but I’m not done. “Only—” I continue. “That’s not the last you’re going to see of me. Because in one month, if you don’t call me up and tell me that you and Ilsa are fucking like bunnies, then I’m going to look her up myself and get the job done.” I stab a finger into his chest and he stiffens. “And I mean it. I’m going to swoop in and make that girl scream like she’s never screamed before. Because Dom, she isn’t yours until you make her yours.”

Dom steps back like I’ve punched him. Sure, what I said is brutal, but it’s the truth. And cliché or not, the truth fucking hurts.

Ilsa doesn’t belong to anyone.

“You can hate me all you want, Dom,” I say, stepping back and adjusting my tux. “You can stand there and sulk and fume all night. But what you should actually be paying attention to is Ilsa.” I point back to the ballroom door she ran out of. “Ilsa doesn’t have to *say* she’s in love with you. All she had to do was run out of that ballroom crying and walk away from a sure thing.” I point to myself. “I’m the sure thing. So, the only person who’s allowed to sulk in his whiskey tonight is *me*. You, on the other hand? I don’t know what to do with you if you don’t pull your head out of your fucking ass and look at what’s in front of you.”

Dom is a fist of bunched up nerves, his face stricken. He stares at me like I threw champagne in his face.

“Seriously?” I say, wanting to slap him. “How many times do I have to say it? Ilsa is in love with you.”

Dom bunches up his fists again, like he might punch me for telling him the one thing he wants to be true, which just shows exactly how stubborn he is.

“Why are you still standing here?” I ask, baffled. “Everyone in that ballroom already saw you punch me for dancing with the co-worker you’re in love with. No one expects you to walk back in there. Your deal is signed.”

“That shows how little you know about business,” Dom clips out.

“Or it shows how little you know about women,” I throw back. “This is exactly the reason Ilsa believes you’ll always put business before her. You get that, right? Because, you always do. Like right now. And hey, maybe that’s your first and only love anyway, and I just took a punch from you for no fucking good reason at all. Ilsa deserves better.”

I turn and walk away, my jaw aching. I don’t know if he heard any of that or not. Maybe it doesn’t matter. People don’t change, right? People always stay stuck in a rut with their head up their ass and never give a shit that they’re miserable, because it’s easier and more comfortable for everything to just stay the same. Right? Which is exactly why I quit my job, because if you don’t grab life by the balls, then what have you got?

Safety? Comfort? Stasis?

Fuck that.

I LIE on my bed and stare out the floor-to-ceiling window at the skyline, exhausted. Curled up with the pillows, my face is tender from crying and my hair wind-blown and wild. I'm still wearing the dress from the banquet, which I should take off, but somehow I know that when I do this will all really be over.

I've thought about changing my flight, packing my things, and flying back to the states tonight. Alone. I could avoid Dom altogether and go straight to the office and ask for the promotion. This deal went beautifully. All I have to do is tell them I'm ready and I want to start as soon as possible. Show initiative. Explain that I'm eager for new responsibility, a change of pace, a fresh start.

That's all I wanted with Isaac in the first place, wasn't it? To start over? To be someone else? It's an alluring proposition until you realize what you want is the man who quietly stole your heart ... but somehow doesn't want it.

I sigh and get up, walking to the window. At least I know how Dom really feels and I can get over it and move on.

Of course, that doesn't make it hurt any less.

A soft knock comes at my door and I look at the clock. It's almost midnight and I haven't heard either Dom or Isaac come back from the banquet. I toss my wrecked hair out of my face and drag a finger under my swollen eyes. I probably look like a terror, but at this point, I'm sure it doesn't matter.

I open the door tentatively and my skin prickles when I see Dom on the other side. I don't regret saying the things I said. I don't regret telling him any of it, but ... my stomach turns at the sheer fact that now I have to face him.

Dom looks as distraught as I feel. His face is grim and his green eyes are hidden in the dark. I open the door wider to let the room light illuminate him and see that his hair is a wreck. His tuxedo coat and bowtie have been discarded and the top of his collar is askew. I'm surprised to see that even a few of the top buttons are missing.

"I have four questions," Dom says quietly, his voice almost a whisper, and he looks to the ground as if he's not sure if these are questions he should ask. After all, he didn't like the answers to the last ones.

"Okay," I say softly, catching the storm in his eyes, but it's a new storm that's windblown and uncertain. It's not the stone-cold fury from before.

"First, I need to apologize," he asserts, leaning his hand against the door jamb. "I've been caught up in my own ..." He frowns, his thumb tapping against the door with a surprising nervousness. "Caught up in my own psychosis," he says finally. "I suppose we all live in our heads sometimes. And me ... maybe I do a little too much."

He runs his other hand through his hair, strangling the wisps between his fingers, causing them to stand on end. Those elegant fingers clutch the back of his head intensely, and I catch the wobble in his breath. It makes me want to

reach out and cup his face to comfort him. But, I can't. I'm too wrecked and confused about what he wants and why he's standing here.

"I did hear everything you said back there," he continues and I swallow hard, unsure if that's a good thing. We all have our own distorted filters. We tend to see the world the way we personally want to, rather than as it is. "I don't know why I was so resistant," he continues. "But I heard you. I was just ... I was caught up in proving that you and Isaac ..." His words catch and a sheen of emotion softens his eyes.

I force myself not to react. I know those emerald eyes are the death of me, and my instinct is to reach out and brush the hair from his face. But that's not how this works, not after what happened in the ballroom. I laid myself bare and he didn't say anything. In fact, he let me walk away. Yes, it's possible I shouldn't have said those things to my boss. But right now, this isn't my boss I'm talking to.

"Four questions?" I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Was there something you wanted to ask?"

Dom nods curtly, grabbing the hem of his untucked shirt and pulling it down with a raw awkwardness. His shoulders hunch as he tries to find the words and I see the quiet Irish boy I fell for. Not the man in the board room, but the one who'd sit on the floor and laugh over noodles and let his guard down, the vulnerable man under all that polish.

"Yes, right." Dom nods again, but when he looks up his eyes are harder, less sweet and more determined. A fist in my belly twists and I'm scared of what he's going to ask. "I want to get my facts straight," he says and my skin breaks into a sweat, my back still exposed from the cut of this dress. His jaw sets and he looks right at me, his expression a mix of determination and wounded pride. I lift my chin, telling

myself I have nothing to hide. I have feelings and desires, and I won't be ashamed of them.

"Go ahead," I say softly, stepping closer to the door-frame, which causes the strap of my dress to slip down my shoulder. Dom's eyes flick to my skin and I've half a mind to right the strap, but I don't. I've spent months being polite and prim. Every night I've closed my eyes and imagined what would happen in a moment just like this one. Will he tell me the strap has fallen like a gentleman? Or will he use it as an excuse to touch me?

Dom's jaw twitches. "If I'm not mistaken..." he says, his eyes flicking over the column of my throat before licking his lips as if the words need lubrication. "You made it clear that you like me."

He looks up. It's such a simple thing to say. Such a tiny inconsequential thing, like the strap on my shoulder, yet it holds everything.

I lean against the door frame and let the strap inch lower. My head tilts against the door and the hair falls off my neck, my mess of hair that's already been gripped by the wind. And here Dom is—at my door—asking me to admit how I feel—again.

"Yes," I say softly, not denying him, but I'm not rewarded with a smile. In fact, he doesn't even nod to acknowledge what I've said. Instead, he's still standing there calculating.

"Two," Dom continues. "You were only interested in Isaac because I made you think I wasn't interested? Isaac was on the table because you thought I was off it ... yes?"

His clipped tone ties a knot in my stomach, only I've heard this tone before, and suddenly I realize what he's doing. He's laying down the terms and clarifying the agree-

ment. He's making sure he has all the information before negotiating a counter offer.

This is how Dom takes what he wants.

I tip my head up and lock in his stare, tilting my body forward slowly, and daring him to look down the front of my dress. "Yes," I agree again, catching the crisp scent of soap that he washes with. It's a fresh, bright smell that makes me ache. How many more questions are there to this negotiation? Four, did he say?

"Good," he gruffs out, and my lips part at the thickness in his tone. Dom's eyes sparkle as he gears up to ask the next question and my skin tightens. He's beautiful. His disheveled look makes him more gorgeous to me somehow, like we've broken through all of our pretenses and are finally seeing each other. "Have you really fantasized about fucking me?"

His words are so direct my mouth falls open. The question feels like he's reached inside my dress and pulled my tits out. In fact, I'm so caught off guard I wish that's exactly what he was doing.

"Yes," I say hoarsely, in answer to his question. After all, fantasizing is exactly what I'm doing at this moment, imagining the erotic tickle of my long hair brushing against my back as my head rolls back and his hands thrum my nipples. "Yes," I repeat, the word a breathy moan that makes Dom's eyes dilate. I never imagined Dom would ask me anything so directly. I never knew that one word—yes—could make me so hot.

"One more question," Dom asks thickly and I lift my head. He's no more than two inches from me. He could take me with a kiss if he wanted to, and I lock my gaze on him to egg him on, giving him permission. Kiss me, Dom. Taste me. Fuck me. Ask the damn question!

“Yes?” I encourage, knowing there’s a pivot that happens in all negotiations, a point where the power turns and you realize you will bend to all of your opponent’s demands. And right now, Dom could ask me anything.

“*How do you fantasize fucking me?*”

I bite my lip to hide my whimper. Dom didn’t just ask that, did he? And yet, I’m so turned on that he did. My panties are so wet that my mind clouds with every dirty fantasy.

I step forward and we both hiss as my tits brush across his chest. I tilt my head up and my lips graze his chin. It’s barely a touch, but the whisper of my mouth on his skin has my pussy aching.

“Sometimes it’s sweet, Dom,” I admit, dragging my lips up and across his jaw and braving the consequences of letting him into this private place in my mind. “And sometimes it *rough*.” When I reach his ear I suck his lobe into my mouth. His hands grab the sides of the door jamb as I bite him softly. “I’ve imagined your mouth on every inch of my skin, Dom. I’ve imagined your hands digging into my hips and the weight of your body on top of me.” His throat lets out a needy growl and I can’t stop myself, drunk on how this is affecting him. “And sometimes ...” I hum softly, pressing my face into his neck to muffle my voice, not sure if I should say it out loud. But then I taste the salt on his neck and realize I’m already all in. My mouth is already on him. “Not sometimes, Dom.” I pull back to look him in the eye. “All the time. *All* the time—I go home at night and fuck myself with my fingers, imagining it’s your cock.” He hisses, his gaze turning to pure lust, with every part of him animal and shocked. “It’s dirty sometimes, and it’s hot. You flip me over onto my stomach, wrap your hands in my hair, and fuck me from behind. And other times it’s sweet, Dom. It’s so

freaking beautiful and tender, that there's no man on earth who could ever touch me the way that *you* touch me." I lean forward and brush the barest of kisses over his lips and feel him tremble beneath me. His hands are still on the doorframe, probably wondering who am I to talk like this, and where this uninhibited and dirty woman has come from. But he asked, and I'm tired of pretending. "Two years, Dom. Two years of naughty fantasies and romantic fantasies, and working by your side, and being polite and quiet as my body ached. The two of us always avoiding this conversation, because I know you love your job, and you respect me too much. But believe me Dominick Pierce, the one thing I want right now is for you to tear off my panties and—"

Dominick grabs my hips and crushes me against him. He does it so fast that I'm moaning as his mouth closes over mine. His tongue slides inside before I can stumble back and register that he's pushing us into the bedroom. The door slams and I'm lifted, my spine slapping against the wall as Dom slides his hands under the folds of my dress to palm my ass, making me whimper with how close his fingers are to my wetness.

His mouth is fire, teasing and demanding, and my fingers dive into his red hair to deepen the kiss. I want all of him—this demanding, taking, perfect man. I lift my knee to hook it over his hip, when Dom moves suddenly, lifting me up and moving me over so I'm sitting on the desk next to the door. His lips never leave mine as he pushes my skirt up over my hips in a hot frenzy that has me aching. Who is this? This is *not* the refined and controlled man who's always so polite and calculated. It's not the man I imagined seducing me with a hundred innocent kisses. No, this Dom grabs my knees and spreads my thighs wide, opening me

with a forcefulness that makes me wild. Then, he yanks my ass forward to the edge of the desk, where he positions his hips and—I dig my nails into his neck—his erection presses between my legs, his thick, hard cock aroused and bulging beneath his pants and making me aware of the fact that he’s wearing far too much tuxedo.

“Oh God, Dom, you feel—” I bite my lip, not wanting to say something so crass. Only, I’ve already said so many dirty things that I don’t know why I’m shy now. Perhaps it’s the fact that this is real and I’m not imagining it. Dom’s cock is rubbing against the thin fabric of my panties, shooting electricity straight through my core. “You feel ... huge,” I whisper, trying out the word, and he smiles against my mouth. I’ve imagined Dom being rough and aggressive like this, but the act of him actually doing it is so much hotter. I put one hand on the desk for leverage and lift my hips, dragging my throbbing center against the thickness in his pants. He growls and clutches my thighs at how completely indecent and primal it is. But I’m past the point of caring if it’s appropriate to dry hump his leg. “You’re wearing too much clothing,” I complain, reaching for his collar with my free hand, and moving my hands frantically against the buttons—when Dom pulls his hips back and looks straight at me.

“Too bad,” he says roughly, his tone hot and commanding. Then suddenly he yanks my panties to the side and thrusts two of his fingers inside me.

“Oh, God!” I cry out as my pussy clenches wickedly over his fingers, delirious with his entry. This is *not* how Dom was supposed to first touch me. It was supposed to be sweet, with us making love first, *then* something rougher and more—Dom’s fingers pull out and slide back in—and oh fuck me, yes! My head rolls back as he increases his rhythm.

“You like that?” he growls, rubbing his thumb over my

clit and making my mouth fall open. He thrusts a third finger inside me and my hips lift off the desk to meet his entry. "I'll take that as a yes," he says into my neck, and all I can do is nod because it's so fucking amazing. "Damn, you're wet," he curses, and I almost laugh through the gasps.

"Weren't you listening," I manage. "I'm always wet around you. My brain is constant porno when you're in the room." He rings my clit and I dig my nails into his back. "Jesus!"

"Is this how you imagined it?" he asks, his voice husky. My head falls back as my cunt clenches over his pumping fingers.

"Better, Dom. Definitely better!"

"How fast do you come in your fantasies?" he demands and I look into his green eyes. His expression is so determined that I need us to be naked. I run a hand up the front of my dress and I grab the spaghetti straps. I yank the front down to my waist, letting my naked tits pop out. Dom groans at the sight of them and I immediately run my fingers over my hard nipples.

"I imagine you doing exactly this in the middle of our conference meetings," I say naughtily. "I imagine straddling your office chair, popping open my blouse, and watching you pull back the cups of my bra and—"

Dom tears my fingers away from my tits and he replaces them with his mouth. He sucks hard, ripping an erotic moan from my throat. His tongue twists over my nipple and he rakes his teeth across the soft flesh. My back arches as he moves from one breast to the other, his fingers still pumping inside me.

"Tell me your other fantasizes," he orders and I stare down at him gasping. "Now!"

He bites my nipple and white spots of pleasure rake over my vision.

“I, I—” I pant. “When we were in San Francisco, I imagined you fucking me on the mahogany conference table. I imagined you sandwiching me between your cock and the hard wood, and my ass sliding across the varnished table as you fucked me from one side of it to the other.”

He bites my nipple again and I cry out.

“And, and—” I try to find words, delirious. “When we’re at your house, I imagine you taking me up to your bedroom and removing all of my clothing slowly, sensually.”

I lift his head from my tits and start unbuttoning his shirt. He gazes at me, his mouth open, as I slowly undress him. His fingers still pump inside me, but his pace slows as I run both my hands over his shoulders and push his shirt off his back.

“And I like the way it feels to be stretched out under you,” I say softly against his lips. “My arms pinned above my head.” Dom slips his fingers out of me to take both my arms in his, doing exactly what I’ve just said and pinning my wrists against the wall. “Fuck, that’s so much hotter in person,” I pant as my knees cup his ribs and my wet nipples brush against his chest. His lips hover above mine and I feel prone and perfect under him.

He kisses me softly, in the delicate way I first expected him to, only my tits brush his muscles and make moan for more. My cunt pounds, achingly empty, and when I lift my hips his belt buckle brushes against my swollen clit. “Oh wow!” I whimper against his mouth as the cold electricity makes my hips buck. “I want to touch your ...”

He kisses me again, softer this time as he takes one of my hands and drags it down his chest to his pants. When he lets go, I caress the bulge in his trousers, delighting in his

moan as I undo his buckle and slide my hand over his hot skin. His cock is huge in my fingers and it hits me that I'm touching Dom. For real. Not imagining it. Not wishing it, but actually stroking his beautiful cock.

"Fuck," he curses as I pull him out of his pants. I look between us to where he's thick and extended, running my fingers over his length. Dom's drops my other hand so he can clutch the edges of the desk, leaning his head against my forehead. I explore him with both of my hands, pushing his pants down over his ass and hips, before sliding his velvet head through my soaked wetness. He groans again and I use his tip to tease myself, swirling him over my clit and moaning as I drag this cock across my aching entrance.

I tilt my gaze up and chastely kiss him. "Where do you want me?" I ask. "The wall? The bed? Right here?"

Dom cups my face in both hands and kisses me passionately. It's the type of kiss that feels like it holds every moment I've ever lusted over him in it.

I lift my hips, taking in his tip.

"Wait," he says hotly, pulling back, and I hear him kick off his shoes and pants, then he lifts my ass and pulls my dress down off my legs. We're both completely naked as he bends forward to pick me up, lifting me from my bottom and forcing me to grab hold of his neck to keep myself upright. He strides to the glass window where all of Hong Kong glitters, and my heart races when I realize he's going to fuck me against that sea of turquoise glass, against the skyline, with the whole world sparkling at my back.

Cold shoots through my shoulder blades as my spine presses against the flat expanse, his body a fire that envelopes my front as he kisses me passionately, spreading me between man and sky.

Then his hips thrust.

His cock parts me and I gasp his name—"Dom!"—clutching his shoulders as his thickness fills me in one swift plunge. The connection is intense and he looks me in the eye as he starts to pull back slowly, making me feel every inch of him. God, he's big, and I bite his lip because all of this feels too expansive and overwhelming. Especially as he slides back into me, slower and deliberate, making me feel the thick and powerful way we connect. My feet press against the glass and my knees open wide to accommodate him.

"Dom," I whisper, becoming conscious that *this* is actually happening. Not just in my mind, but here against the glass Dom is increasing his pace and pumping deeper into my pussy. "Dom, you're fucking me!" I say it out loud in a wicked rasp to make it real, acknowledging it. "Jesus, Dom, you're fu—" he kisses me and it's so primal and hot, I whimper and cling to him, my pussy clenching and stroking his cock.

My back sweats as I slide up and down the glass, my tits swollen and raking against his chest. When he breaks our kiss and pulls back to look in my eyes, it feels like he touches a whole new piece of me. The connection is fierce, his gaze as intense and as turned on as mine. Neither one of us thought we'd fuck for the first time against a window like this, and all I can do is stare at him in delicious reverence, savoring the way he drives into me. He tilts his head down for a minute, breaking our connection and burying his face into my neck. His muscles tense as he continues to fuck, concentrating, holding me up, making me focus on the movement of his hips and how his cock builds friction in my cunt.

It's unbelievable.

He works me into a frenzy, making my whole body slip-

pery and wet, then he lifts his mouth to my ear and in the naughtiest voice imaginable says: “How does it feel to be fucked by your boss?”

My pussy clenches, those words turning me on in a way that puts me right at the edge. “Naughty,” I gasp, attempting to cling to the back of his neck, but my palms are too slippery. “Sexy. Perfect. So ready, and so hot, and—Oh God, Dom! I’m going to—”

My body clenches and I cry out.

The orgasm steamrolls me, pounding through my pussy in wicked pulses that make me stiffen in his arms. Only, he doesn’t slow his pace, he fucks me harder. He pushes me past the edge till heat shoots through my limbs and air fills my lungs and has me gasping. I look up through the glass to where the sky is brilliant with a thousand stars. I can feel them exploding through my body as Dom clutches my ass and comes with me, roaring into my neck as we both fly into the stars—a detonation of heat and fire and weightless infinity.

Our bodies melt into each other as aftershocks rock through our skin, both of us panting. He holds me pinned against the window, our bodies slick and intimately connected. I’ve never felt anything like it. The rush through my lungs makes me lightheaded as I cling to him, his expression wrecked and beautiful as I lean forward and kiss him softly.

I belong to him.

“It was never like that,” I whisper against his mouth. “I can fantasize all I want, but...” I kiss him again, feeling the sparks of our delicate connection, and how I’ve broken all the barriers in my world, which makes me love him right now more than I ever have before. Because *everything* feels possible.

He smiles against my lips, and I hope he can finally see what I see in him. What I've wanted all along. What I've yearned for.

"You think I can make you scream like that again?" he asks playfully, pumping his hips to remind me of the thickness that still connects us. I laugh and kiss him deeply.

"I think you can do anything."

He shifts our weight away from the window and carries me to the bed. The sheets feel soft and delicate as he lays me back, my muscles relaxing into this new horizontal position and releasing all the tension they held from being pressed against the window. My head buzzes from the orgasm, and the aching softness from the sheets only inflates my mind's clouded senses. His fingers skate over my skin—which is incredibly sensitive—and when he pulls back and slides out of me it feels almost as erotic as when he first entered. I moan, the intimacy causing me to clench as he pulls out.

He moves his mouth down my front, kissing my wet skin, moving lower and lower till I feel his breath on my wetness.

"Dom," I sigh, not sure if my words are audible, for it's a whole new sensation. My back and hips are cupped in softness as his fingers trace the inside of my thighs. I just came so hard that when he blows on my aroused and swollen skin, I moan.

He blows again and his fingers slide up my thighs to my swollen lips. The motion is intoxicating, like he's moving the blood inside my body in soft waves that lap against my pussy.

"Dommmmm," I moan his name. "You can probably make me come from just whispering against me."

“Oh yeah?” His words exhale against my folds and make me quiver.

“Uh huh, like that,” I pant.

“Should I tell you a story?” he asks, breathing deeply and taking in my scent.

“Yes.”

“How about I tell you about the first time I saw you.” I feel the closeness of his mouth and how it hovers over my aching entrance, and I’m so sensitive I can barely handle how his breath caresses me. “You walked into the conference room wearing that floral sundress that hugged all your perfect curves. You remember?” I murmur audibly to say yes, thinking of the flowy dress. It was way too sexy for a business meeting. “And you were late,” he continues. “I was pissed that you were late, but you explained you’d come from your sister’s baby shower, and you didn’t have time to change. And I wanted to reprimand you in front of everyone, except I couldn’t take my eyes off your damn tits.” His tongue circles my clit and I cry out. He only does it once; just enough to make my entire pussy throb with the knowledge of what his tongue feels like. “You talk about fantasies, Ilsa, but I got hard right in that conference room that first time I saw you.”

He blows on my clit like it’s an ember that needs cooling, only it does the exact opposite—feeding the fire with hot oxygen.

“And then you smiled at me,” he says. “Do you remember that?”

“Mmmmm,” I breathe in agreement, nodding. “You had such a friendly smile.”

“Well, I was hard, Ilsa.” His rough words ache over me. “Under the table, I was hard and pissed at you for wearing that sundress and making me want you so badly.” He blows

down the length of my slit and my thighs tremble, my knees falling wider open. “I wanted you from the very beginning. And after ten minutes of sitting in that room I had to excuse myself from that meeting. Do you remember that? I faked a call because I was so hard I couldn’t sit there with you so close to me.”

I bite my lip, remembering it now, how he *did* get up and leave the meeting awkwardly. And now that I know the size of his cock, I can’t believe I didn’t notice what was happening.

“You have no clue how many times that’s happened,” he says hotly, and suddenly his mouth covers my pussy.

“Dom!” My hips buck as his tongue lashes me, teasing my clit, before he sucks me so hard I’m writhing against the sheets and panting. My hands are in his hair, my body arching. How is it possible for my body to be this turned on and — “Oh, God! Oh God!” —his lips flutter, his tongue dips, and my hips arch into a curved bow and once again I’m coming. It’s a wave of pleasure that softer and longer and more drawn out than before. It’s a wave of music moaning through my skin with a thousand aching notes of possibility. And all I can think is it feels fresh and new and like it’s just starting. This—with Dom—is our new beginning.

ILSA

I WRAP myself in my bathrobe and head for the bathroom. A dim trickle of five AM light inches down the hallway as I turn the corner and run right into Isaac. We both laugh awkwardly as I pull my robe tight. This is the same exact moment as when we first met, only, he's dressed and wheeling his carry-on suitcase behind him.

I smile awkwardly. "You're leaving?"

"Of course," he says, nodding kindly. "Always on to the next adventure."

I grip my robe and we look at each other quietly, both of us knowing how close it came to him being the one who's passed out and naked in the other room.

"I—I didn't mean to lead you on," I say finally, clutching the soft terrycloth and looking at the floor. "I really thought Dom wasn't ..."

I trail off and Isaac shakes his head. "It was my fault," he admits. "I shouldn't have done anything. I knew better."

"Friends?" I offer and he gives me that gorgeous smile.

"Of course," he agrees, stepping in to give me a hug. His arms are warm and comforting when he wraps them around

me, and I can still feel that tickle of attraction between us, even though we both know nothing is going to happen. Isaac holds me longer than he should, tilting his head into my neck and smelling it. “God,” he groans. “You smell amazing after sex. Lucky bastard.”

I pull back and glare at him pointedly, to which he just shrugs. “Hey, can’t fight your nature,” he explains, releasing me. “And bonus, now I know exactly how you sound when you come.” He nods to my room, where Dom is sleeping, and a hot flush heats my cheeks.

“You could hear—”

Isaac shakes his head with faux innocence. “Yeah, quiet is not really your forte.”

“Oh jeez! I can’t believe—I’m so embarrassed!”

Only, Isaac smiles sweetly, as if this is just another tiny thing he and I get to share.

“Like I said, Dom’s a lucky bastard,” he says.

Our eyes connect and there’s a comfort between us, but there’s also a charge under it. It’s as if we both know how close we came to happening, so the only way for us to deal with it is for him to point out every awkward thing in the most overtly sexual way he can.

“You are a trouble maker,” I say, and he lifts his hands.

“Guilty as charged.” He smiles, laughing, before leaning in to kiss my cheek. He hovers over my skin longer than he should, that tiny spark of attraction still flaring, but somehow less charged. It’s as if we’re tied together by something else, by how close this came to being a disaster for both of us. “And uh ...” he says cheekily, breaking the moment. “Now I have some dirty audio to remember you by.”

I slap his shoulder as he pulls back laughing. “Don’t *ever* tell that to Dom!”

He nods and smiles.

There's a sparkle in his eye as he steps back to pick up his luggage. He walks past me and I watch him open the suite door and walk out into the main corridor. He turns back before the door shuts and looks at me one more time.

"It's been a pleasure, Ilsa," he says. "And, I want to make sure you understand. Dom's my friend. I know it doesn't seem that way with how I acted, but the truth is he's one of the best guys in the world. And I'm really glad you're the one who's going to make him realize just how great he is."

I'm stunned to hear him say that and he nods like I better remember it. I step forward to tell him there's someone out there waiting for him, someone perfect, but he winks and shuts the door before I can say anything. I stare at the closed door and know he's not the kind of man who needs to hear something like that. I have no doubt Isaac will walk fearlessly into his life ready for the adventure, and there's a woman out there somewhere—someone far more adventurous than me—who will brave that wildness with him.

My adventure is lying naked in the next room. He comes in business formal, with a briefcase and a brilliant mind, and the ability to leave my skin bruised with the smell of him.

And tomorrow, my adventure will take me home.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elle Berlin loves writing smart, sexy stories that get your pulse racing. She's been traditionally published in other markets and is now venturing into the wild world of indie publishing. She writes contemporary romance and fantasy romance, and is inspired by travel, old cities, delicious food, gorgeous dresses, and fairytales. When not writing, you can find Elle sipping wine, oil painting, wandering through art museums, rocking out to Taylor Swift, and binge-watching *Game of Thrones* (yes, again).

Learn more about Elle's books at: www.elleberlin.com

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