



TIED TO THE  
TYCOON

A CLUB VOLARE NOVEL

CHLOE  
COX

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# **TIED TO THE TYCOON**

A Club Volare Novel

By Chloe Cox

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## *A quick note...*

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I can't seem to stop making my characters do these crazy things. I suppose that's what fiction is for in a lot of ways, right? I told one of my friends what these two get up to in Chapters 16-17, and she said, "well, my reaction is a combination of 'OMG lol' and 'um that's really hot,' so I definitely want to read about it."

That pretty much sums up my thoughts, too. If you're interested in ropes and rigging and such, that is maybe not totally realistic. At least if you don't want to get arrested. Also! This stuff requires a lot of training and such, which I don't really go into in the book. Jackson's done that, been there. Ava doesn't know how good she has it. ;)

About Jackson and Ava: I really, really love this couple. They are both more messed up than I thought they'd be, even though I know that makes little sense coming from the author. I just love that they try so hard for each other, no matter how dysfunctional or damaged or screwed up they are, they just...somehow find it easier to try for each other, and they come through because of it. I love them for that.

I hope you do, too. :)

*Chloe*

## chapter 1

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Jackson Reed hadn't always been a gambler. Well, maybe he had. But if so, it was just one of many parts of himself that he'd worked hard to hide from the rest of the world. In the past, he considered it his responsibility not to play with risk, not to toy with the emotional ups and downs that risk demanded. Not because he was afraid of what the world might do to him if he lost, but because he'd always been afraid of what he might do to the world.

Well, not anymore. And he had one person to thank for that.

He sipped his bourbon, rolling the fire on his tongue and savoring the burn. It helped to focus him. Not that he really needed it; when he got like this, Jackson had the specialized perfection of an apex predator. And he was at the end of a hunt. A long, long hunt. The rest of the world would fall away and all that would be left would be...her.

He knew he was being antisocial, standing on the fringes of the great room at Volare NY, nursing his bourbon and simply watching. He also knew no one would care. A casino night-themed engagement party at Volare NY, where most of the table stakes were of the carnal variety, meant no one gave a damn what Jackson Reed or anyone not wagering their bodies or their services did. Besides, a casino night in the middle of Christmas party season was like an unexpected oasis of actual fun. So the hanging lanterns sparkled, the champagne flowed, the live orchestra played a few torch songs, and the women laughed while the men watched with hungry eyes.

Jackson smiled, shaking his head. He didn't know many of these people very well, having come down on his visits to Volare when his growing company demanded it. Which was why he'd had no idea that Stella Spencer had taken a job as a hostess, or that she'd fallen in love with one of the members and was apparently getting hitched. When he'd finally heard the news—where had he heard it? He didn't pay much attention to that kind of thing; he guessed it had been Lillian who had told him—she'd recognized the name immediately, and it had meant only one thing to him. He wouldn't have recognized Stella Spencer's face, he couldn't have told you anything about her at all, except for the one thing: she had been friends with *her*, in college. And so there was a chance that *she* would be here at this engagement party, at a legendary sex club.

The woman he thought about every day. The woman he owed *everything*. The woman he hadn't seen in the flesh in almost ten years.

That was all he'd needed to know.

He'd called his brand new publicist—the one everyone had insisted he needed ahead of his new product launch—and demanded that she get him an invite. “This is the only thing I'll ask you to do, Arlene,” he'd said. “And if you can't do it, find me someone who can.”

It hadn't been a problem. Jackson Reed, founder and CEO of ArTech, artistic patron and tech wunder boy, now rated in the same social circles as the billionaire sheikh groom. Wasn't that a scream? The publicist had made one call to Roman Casta at Volare and it was done. Jackson hadn't told anyone the real reason for his interest, and he was surprised that Roman hadn't asked—Roman had always been sharp. But fuck it. None of that mattered now. He didn't give a damn if they threw him out, so long as he found her.

And just as he killed his bourbon, he saw her. Standing there on the other side of the room, silent and unmoving in this swirling, drunken celebration, arms folded up around her like a wounded bird. She was wearing something thin that draped over all the right parts of her beautifully, reflecting shimmering shards of pale blue at him in the dim light, and her hair, piled atop her head in some artistic arrangement, was already starting to come down and frame her face. Her face. Christ, I

hadn't seen...he hadn't been prepared to see her face again. He felt weak. Looking at her was the one time he could abide feeling weak. He couldn't help but marvel at her, the perfect symmetry, the connection still unbroken, after all these years—even here, totally ignorant of his presence, she matched him: present, but standing apart. He stood apart because he had a singular purpose. But what kept her apart? What kept her standing on the sidelines, the discomfort evident in every line of her body?

This was something he'd remembered, too, from that one all-important senior year at school, when she'd transferred in. She had this impenetrable mask of cool, of charm, of flirtatious wonder, the beauty who could make anyone who talked to her feel interesting, and important, and like they belonged right there, talking to a woman who looked like that. Sometimes it seemed like he was the only one who could tell it was a mask at all. But he'd lived for the moments when the mask slipped, those precious few nights when she took it off in his presence and was just herself. All awkward, she wounded, thoughtful, funny, and frightening intelligence. And eyes. Those beautiful blue eyes that could see everything, whether she wanted them to or not. She didn't, for the most part, let people know that she could see most of the things that they tried to hide. On one of those nights, she explained it to him: she couldn't help it, she'd said, she was perceptive, but it was kind of rude in that way. People needed their fictions. They needed their defenses.

She almost never let her defenses slip. And she almost never let them down voluntarily, not all the way. And then, the one night when she did...

Well, he was here to make up for that now, wasn't he? He was here to repay her for everything she'd given him, whether she knew about it or not.

He put his glass down and tried to think of the best way to approach her. She would be wary, the way she was now, like a hunted animal. And he didn't like how uncomfortable she looked. It had been ten years; he'd have thought she'd have a different reaction to a place like Club Volare by now. There was something that he hadn't accounted for.

But then he watched it happen right before his eyes: she assembled herself. The version of herself that most people saw. She stood up straight, held her body like a dancer who'd never known injury and only knew how good it felt to move. Her eyes flashed. Her face became that mask. It was like watching someone put on a beautiful suit of armor, and it both impressed him and made him sad.

And then he watched her walk over to the baccarat table.

The baccarat table with the very unusual stakes and several very interested looking men sitting around it, like a waiting pack of wolves.

He put his glass down and moved out into the crowd.

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Ava Barnett had just started to find her old, familiar groove, holding court amongst these elite men she didn't know, holding them all in the palm of her hand and far away from anything that really mattered to her, when the stranger sat down in the darkness across from her and ordered the rest of the table to clear off. Except he wasn't a stranger, even if she couldn't see him well enough to place him—she *knew* she knew him. Yet, on what planet would she forget a man who moved like that?

On what planet would she forget a man who simply sat down and said, "Clear off," and people actually did it?

Ava herself had started to get up, an instinctual reaction to that tone of voice, when he'd stopped her. "Not you," he'd said. "Sit."

And she had done that, too, and had been irritated at herself for it. Irritated, a little turned on, and very confused.

She wished now that she could see him properly, but he was in silhouette, leaning back towards the lantern that hung behind him. She could see his hands, his large, rough, calloused hands, deftly playing with the deck of cards. The rest of him was a dim shadow, the suggestion of a square jaw, high cheekbones, and close-cropped hair reclining there with confidence. Maybe he was famous? A celebrity? That would explain this haunting familiarity, but it wouldn't explain anything else.

"Sit?" she finally said.

"We're going to play."

"Oh, we are, are we?"

"Yes."

"And who the hell are you?" she said.

He sat in silence, just toying with those cards. His fingers were little wonders, doing unconscious tricks, flipping cards, making them flutter and dance. Ava couldn't help but wonder what else he could do with those hands.

She imagined he smiled as he said, "You didn't have the stake to play with those other men."

Ava narrowed her eyes. Who was this man? He spoke like he'd swallowed a bunch of gravel, or like he was trying to disguise his voice. But that was ridiculous; people didn't really do things like that. It was just that the familiarity, the sense that she knew him, was intruding on every other thought like a persistent itch. It was driving her crazy.

Maybe it was just his manner that made her crazy. She could tell already, whoever this man was, he belonged here. He was utterly dominant.

Ava thought back over the entire, bewildering night. In context—in this absurd context—it almost made sense that some sexy, smoldering man would sit down across from her in the dark and say incomprehensible things. Of course that would happen. This was Club Volare, and so far, it had been the weirdest night in Ava's recent memory.

It had started off badly for Ava, with an unwelcome reversion to the shy, frightened version of herself that she thought she'd conquered long ago. It was just the sight of all these Doms or Masters or whatever they were, all of these good looking, wealthy men, knowing they were into BDSM and all the things Ava secretly fantasized about but hadn't had the guts to pursue in ten years. Both times she had taken that chance, it had blown up in her face. She didn't believe in fairy tales enough to think the third time would just magically work out.

So she'd wandered around this crazy fancy party, at this crazy fancy club she'd never known existed at the top of a crazy fancy hotel—and really, who expects that? A super exclusive BDSM sex club, or whatever it was, at the top of a five-star hotel? And who would have expected Stella Spencer to be into this life, of all people? Ava never would have predicted that, not in a million years, and that just added to her sense of disorientation. Ava was used to being able to read the people around her, to an almost uncomfortable degree, and now there were surprises popping up left and right. It was enough to make her question everything.

But her old friend Stella seemed happier than Ava had ever seen her. And marrying a sheikh. A *sheikh*. A sheikh who was obviously a Dom. Ava couldn't help but wonder if she and Stella might have been able to talk about this stuff, if so many things might have gone differently if Ava had felt like there was someone who understood her.

For the brief moment when she had felt like there was someone who understood her, ages ago, she'd been truly happy.

But Ava had steeled herself, determined not to think about ancient history and the exact memories of heartbreak she was trying to leave behind by coming here tonight. She was surrounded now by rich fancy Doms, some obvious submissives, and other types she was embarrassed not to be able to recognize—and hell, it was a party. If she ever wanted to indulge her fantasies, this was the place to do it. So why was she so scared? Hiding on the outskirts of the room like a wallflower? She hadn't done that in *years*. And it was especially stupid, considering that this might be the place to secure her promotion at work, too. There were plenty of Fortune 500 faces running around the place, and at least some of them might be in need of a new advertising firm.

But she hadn't been able to make herself mingle. It was all just too raw. Everywhere she looked there was something that suggested sex, or bondage, or bondage *and* sex, and it all reminded her of a night she'd rather forget, and a man she'd never forget, no matter how hard she tried. Funny that it didn't primarily remind her of Peter, the terrible ex she'd fled, the one who'd confused dominance with being an abusive jerk, and who she'd actually dated for a long time. Instead, it reminded her of the guy she'd spent ten years trying to get over.

Up until tonight, she'd thought she *had* gotten over him.

But she'd been frozen on the outskirts of the party, too busy grappling with her own stupid issues to enjoy herself. So, obviously, it wasn't all ancient history, and she hadn't figured it all out. So what? She'd never been a coward, either. Which was when Ava Barnett had found the strength to become the person she'd learned to be—witty, charming, gracious, beloved—and ventured out to the one thing that looked familiar: a poker table. At least she'd assumed it was a Hold 'Em table when she'd seen two cards being dealt out, and Ava knew damn well that she was good at Hold 'Em. That talent for reading people came in handy, and there'd be no better way to regain control of her night than to whack some rich guy's butt at cards.

Which was how she came to be sitting at this table with cards that didn't look like any poker cards she'd ever seen, and with a mystery man sitting across from her. A man who hadn't moved. A man whom she felt like she knew. A man whose eyes...she could *feel* them on her skin, like the gentle slide of sheet being drawn across her naked body.

*Wow, Ava, do not blush.*

She pulled herself together, remembered the arrogance of the last thing he'd said.

"What makes you think I don't have the stake to play?" she said.

"I didn't say that."

Was he being willfully obtuse? She summoned her patience, and said, "If I don't have the stake to play with them, what makes you think I have the stake to play with you?"

"You're the only one who does."

She felt him smile again. Just subtle shifts in his posture, his body language. It was like she'd known him all her life, and yet she didn't even know his name. Or what his face looked like.

Still, Ava was getting annoyed. "What the hell does that mean?"

"You don't know what the table stakes are, do you?" he said. Now she knew he was smiling in the dark. There was no disguising the amusement in his voice.

"Fine. I don't. So what are the stakes?"

He finished another shuffle and started to deal out the cards.

"You," he said.

Ava covered her surprise with a laugh. It was absurd. "Oh, really?"

"Yes. That's the nature of this table. All of those men assumed you understood that when you sat down to play. I knew that you didn't."

“You knew that I didn’t? How condescending. How could you possibly know what I understand and don’t understand?” The fact that he was right only made her angrier.

“Because I see you.”

Ava’s heart stopped. There was something in the way he said that...and that *voice*...

The man in the dark continued, “This is Volare. If you don’t have chips, you bet with yourself. It’s a sexual game. And you don’t have chips.”

“I was going to buy some.”

“How many thousand dollar chips were you gonna buy, exactly?”

Ava stared dumbly at the cards that lay before her. She did not have chips, and yet, she was still in the game. She looked up, even though she knew what she would see: a stack of chips in front of the mystery man.

“I’m sorry,” she heard herself say. “You are going to have to explain this to me like I’m an idiot. What, exactly, do you think I’ve bet?”

“You heard me,” he said. “You’ve bet yourself.”

And before she could object, the man reached out, leaning over the table, his face still in the dark, and grabbed her hand. It burned where he touched her. He pulled her toward him, raking her breasts across the table, and whispered: “One week. If I win, I can have you for one week.”

Ava could scarcely breathe. She didn’t know how she spoke. She knew less why she said what she did.

“And do what with me?”

“Anything I want, *Frida*.”

*Frida*. The memories flooded her mind, too many, all at once, the exact ones she’d been holding back all night. She’d been struggling to hold up under the pressure of all those memories, and this last one, the heaviest of them all, added to the weight was just too much: *Frida*. Only one person in the world had ever called her that. Only one person in the world knew what it meant to her.

Jackson Reed.

The man she’d been trying not to think about all night.

Of course, the first memories that came crashing through all of Ava’s heavily fortified defenses were the ones she’d tried hardest to forget: one incredible night together, after a long, simmering friendship, the first time she’d felt as though she didn’t have to be this carefully constructed new persona, when she’d felt as though she could just be herself without danger of being swallowed up, crushed, abused or forgotten, one night when she’d confessed her fantasies to Jackson and watched him react with horror and shame, and the way he hadn’t wanted to look at her...

That Jackson Reed, apparently now a member of Club Volare, was sitting in front of her, telling her she’d bet herself. Wanting a chance to win her for a week. Wanting a chance to do anything he wanted with her. Her brain almost couldn’t process it. And it was only because her brain couldn’t make sense of it that she said what she did. Obviously it wasn’t her brain doing the talking.

“I accept,” she said, and reached for the cards.

They definitely weren’t poker cards.

“Do you know how to play baccarat?” he asked, moving his chair to the side so she could finally see his face. He did look different. More confident, assured. He was still strikingly good looking, still chiseled from granite or whatever it was they said about men like him, still with that Greek god athleticism that had won him a football scholarship, but he no longer tried to hide it beneath scruffy hair and a slouched posture, like he had in college. He no longer tried to be anything. He simply was.

*Wait. Baccarat?*



“No.” She tried hard not to sound foolish as she said it.

“You thought it was poker, didn’t you?”

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“Shut up.”

He flashed her that grin that she’d always loved. Truthfully, she still loved it, even now.

“Then you’re just going to have to trust me, aren’t you?”

She swallowed. It was hard to look at him. It made her feel too many things all at once. She wasn’t used to feeling so much; she’d worked hard to avoid having to do so. Jackson Reed—of all people—should see that.

“I guess so.”

“Flip over your cards.”

She did. She saw that he did, too. She had no idea what any of it meant.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now,” he said, that light drawl coming back into his voice, “now you’re mine.”

She felt her eyelids flutter. She had to look at him now. “That’s it?”

“That’s it. My cards total eight. You lost. You’re mine.”

Ava shook her head slowly. This was all so fast, an insane confluence of events, of feelings, of memories. It was almost more likely that it was a hallucination than that it was actually happening.

He reached across the table, this time letting his savage, handsome face fall fully into the lantern light, and grabbed her hand again. His thumb caressed her skin, his fingers dug into her flesh.

“I intend to collect, Ava,” he said, his grey eyes seeming to glow from within. “Starting now.”

For a second, Ava felt herself melting toward him, into the desire she felt flowing around her, into the burning touch on her hand. She might have lost herself completely, simply fallen into an uncharted abyss, except that that moment of falling, of suspension, terrified her so much that it jolted her back to reality. She snatched her hand back and fled the room.

## chapter 2

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Jackson watched Ava run through the glittering ballroom of Club Volare like a scared rabbit and was filled not with panic or worry, but with a sense of the inevitable. Of course she'd run. Just like she had years ago, when he'd woken up to find her gone. Not just gone from his bed, but *gone*. She moved out of her dorm room for the final weeks before graduation, hadn't answered her phone by the time he got the courage to call, hadn't even walked in the ceremony. Maybe he'd waited too long to reach out to her, but she'd made it impossible when he finally did.

And now she was running from him again. *No*, he thought, rising from his seat with slow deliberation, *not again*. He would not let her run away *again*.

He knew Club Volare. She didn't. That much was obvious, from what he'd seen earlier. You didn't stand around like a piece of mismatched furniture if you knew where you were. There were only so many places she could go, and the security guys would tell him if she left—for a price.

And if that didn't work, well, he had money now. All that money bought a whole lot of private investigators, if it came to it.

Because Jackson Reed was *not* going to let Ava Barnett get away a second time. He owed her far too much for that. He had too many things to tell her, too many things to show her, too many things to do for her. Too many things to do *to* her.

He made his way through the increasingly buzzed couples, now all happily dancing to some kind of retro swing number, and found the door. The hall was deserted, but she'd made it pretty easy for him this time. The door to one room at the end wasn't closed all the way.

He walked to it quietly, not wanting to startle her in her hiding place. He moved the door open a silent inch and peered through. She stood by a window, the city lights from below wrapping her in a soft nimbus of filtered blue light. She held herself, her hands visible on her sides, as though she was cold or in need of comfort. He thought he saw her shoulders shake. She might have been crying.

No. He wouldn't let her get hurt again. He wouldn't let them hurt each other, wouldn't let them both spend another ten years like this. He hadn't been able to take charge of the situation back then, but he was a different man now. And he had her to thank for that. He opened the door and stepped inside.

She heard him and stiffened, but didn't turn around. He saw one hand disappear, move to her face, probably to wipe away tears. She wouldn't want him to know that she'd been crying.

She spoke first. "I don't think this is going to work out, Jackson," she said.

"Man, can you hold a grudge," he said, advancing another step. "Ava, trust me, I'm different. What happened then—"

"People don't really change."

"Bullshit. I have." *Because of you*, he thought to himself. He didn't think it was right to say it yet, wasn't convinced that something that intense wouldn't send her running off screaming into the night. But he had to remind himself.

"Really? Since when?" she asked. Her hand was balled in a tight fist at her neck while her eyes studied the glittering skyline. He could tell she wanted it to be true, but she would take some convincing. Well, he wasn't one to beat around the bush.

"Since the last time I saw you naked."

He could actually see the shiver run up her spine in that backless dress. He was suddenly struck by the fact that he hadn't touched her in ten years. Ten years. He had waited all that time, but now he knew he couldn't wait even one second more.

He came close to her, let her feel his breath on her neck. Then he slipped his hands in the sides of that backless dress, fanning his fingers out over her bare waist and the edges of her taut belly. She shuddered, jolted a bit in surprise. Her breath hitched, and he felt himself begin to harden. He breathed in deep, and pressed his fingers into her warm flesh. He prided himself on his self-control, but Ava.

Ava made it hard.

“What would...” her voice wavered, and she swallowed. “What would the rules be?”

“You come stay with me for a week. You’re mine, the entire time.”

She was still tiny, compared to him. If he stretched his hands, he might just reach down far enough. It was all he could think about, how close she was to being naked. How close he was to being inside her again.

“What does that mean? I mean, are you...?” Her voice was small, uncertain. She had taken off the mask.

“I’m a member here,” he said. “I’m a Dom. You’d be my submissive.”

He held her close, pulling her body into his. He saw her face in the reflection of the glass in front of them and knew she was scared. Not in a mortal way, but in the way people are scared of new things, of powerful things. He wanted to dominate her—he wanted to fuck her, yes, but he wanted to wrap her in his arms, too.

“I don’t really know that works,” she finally said. Her tight stomach fluttered under his fingers.

“Course you do. It’s what you are.”

She started to speak, but Jackson decided it was better to show her what he meant. He spun her around and pushed her up against the cool, thick glass, grabbed her thin wrists in one large hand, pinned her hands above her head, and kissed her.

She tasted just as he remembered. Sweet. Her lips were just as soft. They parted for him as he crashed into her, and Jackson Reed felt himself begin to slip under, swept away in every remembered touch, every remembered sensation of Ava Barnett. He kissed her like he might not get a chance to do it again for another ten years, and then he wanted more.

So did she. Her tongue met his, hungry as he was, and her back arched, chest pushing up toward him. He ran his fingers down her arm, the side of her face, her neck. He wasn’t gentle. He pushed aside her flimsy dress and grabbed her whole breast in his hand, wanting to feel the full weight of all of it, his once more.

He heard himself growl.

He tightened his grip on her wrists and ran his hand down the length of her body, reminding himself of every curve. Her body reacted to his touch in shuddering waves, her muscles betraying him each and every time they made contact. He felt her come alive under his hand, her breasts, her belly, her hip, all rose, fell, breathed. Suddenly there was nothing more offensive to him than her dress, that thin, stupid piece of fabric. He leaned down low to grab as much as he could, decided to let her keep it on at the last minute, and slipped his hand underneath instead. The skin of her thigh was hot and smooth, and when his hand found her panties, he was glad to find something he could take.

He ripped them off, vaguely aware of how absurd that was, but not giving a damn. He felt power by some inescapable force, his momentum almost unstoppable, so close to what he’d dreamed about for years. She moaned into his mouth and raised her leg tentatively against his and he pushed on, his mouth moving to her nipple. He felt her rise against him, and then, a moment later, felt her begin to shy away. He didn’t think; the most primal part of him felt her slipping away and reached out to catch her. He had her pinned against the window, and his hand was already at his belt when she pulled her hand free of his grip.

“Stop,” she said, choking on her own voice.

She brought her free hand to his chest, turned her face away. He was stunned.

“What’s wrong?” he said, his words pulled tight over his panting breath. His cock strained against his pant leg, and Ava...Ava...she looked so sad. Ashamed.

What had he done?

“You said it’s what I am.” Her own breath still came fast, and she wouldn’t look at him. “But I’ve never done it—not properly, not the right way. Any of it. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

Jackson shook his head. “It’s been ten years since I was a total fuckwit, Ava. In all that time, you never told anyone else what you wanted?”

“No,” she said quietly.

If he’d known that was really the answer, he might not have been so incredulous. He might have been a bit more fucking thoughtful. Because in that one admission was a whole knotted, seething mass of deeper, sharper, more painful admissions, the most important of which was surely this: she’d never been that close to anyone ever again. She’d lived her life alone since then, never being fully herself.

It was worse than finding her married to someone else. It meant he’d hurt her more than he’d imagined.

She squirmed under him, trying to get free. He held her fast.

“Ava, wait,” he said. “Please. Just...ten fucking *years*.”

She stopped. They were still pressed tight together, her face hovering below him, blue light creeping across her saddened cheek. All he wanted to do was make her happy. He had always been the smartest guy in the room, but now he couldn’t figure out how to make the woman he’d always loved happy, even for a goddamn moment, even when he was trying. Some fucking genius.

“Is this who you are now?” she eventually said, smiling a little, trying to break the tension. “A guy who buys things? A rich guy who just...”

“I would pay to make you come,” he said, without hesitation.

Her eyes grew wide.

“What?” she said.

“You heard me.” He took her chin between his fingers and made sure she was looking into his eyes. “Of course, I don’t have to, now that I’ve won you.”

There was a beat before she burst out laughing, and he grinned. He could always make her laugh. He loved to make her laugh.

“Oh, shut up,” she said.

“I wasn’t kidding, though, *Frida*,” he said softly, and she looked back up at him, the laughter gone but the memory of it still strong, a reminder that she was safe with him. “I wasn’t really kidding at all. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do...”

He touched his fingertips to her cheek and felt his own voice cracking.

“Stop,” she said. Now she struggled against him again. “Just...stop. I can’t just...after all this time...”

“You owe me,” he said.

There was a silence.

Finally, she said, “You can’t say things like that to a woman.”

“You can say it if it’s true. You owe me,” he said again, bringing her captured hand down to his side and pressing it to her lower back. With his other hand he held her face. She wasn’t going anywhere. He could feel how much she liked it. “You owe me a chance to show you how much I owe you. To make it up to you.”

She furrowed her brow in irritation or exhaustion, but which one, he couldn't tell.

"What the hell are you talking about, Jackson?"

He didn't answer her, not right away. Slowly he dragged his hand down her body, to the side of her right hip, where his fingers began to pull up her dress, inch by excruciating inch. He bent his head to hers, both of them quiet, waiting. The dress rose. Soon it was bunched in his hand, her leg bare.

He wanted to tell her, *you owe me because you're mine, because you belong to me, because it's only fair if I have to belong to you, because you made me what I am.* He wanted to claim her right there, make her his, the way she was supposed to be. Christ, he wanted her. And he could have her now, he knew it, *knew* he could drive her to the point where she screamed 'yes', where she would beg him to come inside her. And knew just the same that if he did it that way now, she'd wake up regretting it. She'd second-guess herself. And he didn't want that. He wanted her to *know*.

She'd never know the self-control it took not to spread her leg and slam full into her against the bright, clear window, to hear her scream as he filled her, to feel her tighten and close around him.

Instead he let the dress fall back over his hand, smoothed his palm over her hip, ran his thumb over the ridge of bone that flared out from her pubis. He savored it. Then he slipped his hand between her legs, and heard her groan.

"I know what I am now, Ava," he said, running his fingers along the length of her. She was already so wet, before he'd even parted her lips. "And I know what you are. I can show you what you are, you'll let me."

She shook her head, but lifted her hips and slid her leg up his, hooking it around him. She had spread herself for him, but it was like she didn't know how to feel about it.

"Jackson..."

"You don't have to think about it," he said gruffly, slowly circling the entrance of her vagina with his finger. "You don't even have to think at all, if you don't want to. This whole week, I'll be in charge. I'm in control. I'll take care of you. You don't have to think about what anyone else will think. No one else has to know..."

He realized he was pleading with her. He leaned his forehead into hers, silently begging, and drove two fingers deep into her. She gasped, and a little moan escaped her throat. She kept moaning, low and soft, and he suddenly needed to see her face while she did it. He reached back up, letting her hands be free for the first time, and threaded his fingers through her expensive hairstyle. When he pulled his head back, her lips were parted and her eyes were wide, limpid pools that seemed to pulsate in time with his thrusts.

He curled his fingers then, stroking her from the inside. She quivered against him and her eyes half-closed.

"No," he said, swirling his fingers and rubbing his palm into her clit. "Look at me."

He jerked her head back again, gently, and said it again. "Look at me, Ava."

She did. She looked desperate.

"Jacks, please..."

He almost hated to say it, but he had to. He had to make sure she knew. "You're not the only one with regrets. You're mine, Ava Barnett, whether you know it or not. I'm going to have you. You will come for me now, and you will come to me later, and you will submit."

And then he curled his fingers around as far as they would go, his thumb rubbing her wet clit in fast, tight little circles, and twisted inside her until she came for him, quaking over his hand.

He kissed her again, and wished he could go on kissing her. Instead he waited until she was done shaking, until he was sure she could stand on her own two feet. Then he smoothed the hair on her head.

kissed each closed eyelid once, and murmured, "One week, Ava. No strings."

He gave her his card, and left.

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## chapter 3

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Ava Barnett arrived home feeling like she didn't know what. She had no frame of reference for something like this. Like she'd been in a boxing match, maybe? Twelve rounds or whatever it was. Maybe, but honestly, that seemed preferable right now to whatever this was. She felt drugged. Hypnotized.

Ensorcelled?

She couldn't decide on a metaphor. First had been the avalanche of memory and emotion upon seeing Jackson Reed again, right when she'd been trying her hardest to forget him. It had been like one of those great seismic events that moves giant slabs of earth and grit and mud around to reveal something unexpected and terrible buried underground. Then he'd just plowed right through her and turned her inside out. Like someone had broken into her house and emptied every single one of her drawers, then gone outside and unearthed something awful on her lawn.

Except that didn't make any sense either. She was totally disoriented. She didn't have a house, or a lawn. She had a crappy apartment in Alphabet City of dubious safety, the only place close to work where she could afford space for her secret painting studio. She did, however, feel that something terrible and frightening had been irrevocably revealed. *That would be my stupid issues*, she thought grimly, tossing her keys on the dining room table and kicking her high heels clear across the room. That's what the bastard had unearthed. Every damn thing she'd been working hard to bury for the past ten years.

She didn't really mean to call him a bastard. When she closed her eyes and concentrated, she could still feel him on her. And she didn't want to shower, even though she should, because she knew she'd smell him on her skin.

*Ridiculous.*

It wasn't just that Jackson Reed had reappeared out of nowhere; it was that he'd reappeared out of nowhere exactly as she'd always wanted him to: as a strong, sexy Dom. And apparently a wealthy one, too. How often did that happen? How often did someone actually rise beyond one's expectations and meet one's hopes?

*Well, let's not get carried away*. If experience had taught Ava anything, it was not to trust people who were too good to be true.

She wished she could stop thinking about him. About what he'd said. *You will come to me. You will submit.*

Ava called her voicemail and put her phone on speaker. Three new messages. She got excited for a second before she remembered she hadn't given Jackson her phone number; he'd given her his card. With an address.

Right, because she was coming to him.

The annoying, vaguely British robot lady recording droned on about voicemail from her phone. Ava slipped out of her dress. There had been a moment, when he'd pressed her against the window when she'd thought he would rip it clear off. And she'd wanted him to.

She stood still for a second, stark naked in her bedroom, and let the ghost of that orgasm rush through her once more. Just thinking about it, about his hands on her, *in her*, she could almost...

"Ava, it is I, your favorite." Her boss's nasal voice intruded on her thoughts. Damn, she'd told Alain about the engagement party. He'd been *very* interested in such an exclusive event. "I am a little disappointed you did not call tonight, but I am sure you did well and got many new contacts, yes? I am out late, call. Perhaps we meet up."

Ava grimaced. She spent almost as much energy deflecting Alain's creepy advances as she did doing her actual job. She was beginning to suspect that he was demanding that she land a big new advertising account before the end of the year mostly as an excuse to give her another option when she failed to meet that impossible deadline: sleep with him.

As disgusted as she was with her boss, the thought of sex immediately brought her back to Jackson Reed. And what he could do with just his hands and a thick glass window. She still thought about the night they'd shared together, just before graduation. The one night. It had given her a total, unrealistic expectation of sex; before Jackson, she'd only ever slept with two guys—one in high school, who she'd more or less shanghai'd into the experience just to get it over with, and then Pete who had been a cheating jerk and who had been her big reason for transferring for her senior year. Jackson made her think she'd just had bad luck. Jackson made sex make...sense. He'd made it seem like vital necessity, like a basic human right.

Maybe she'd only convinced herself that there would be more like him because it made it easier to walk away from him. *Not walk*, she reminded herself. *Run. You ran away, and you hid.*

Not her proudest moment.

*Don't think about it.* She actually flinched, even though she was alone. It still made her feel ashamed, still made her feel small, all these years later.

"Second message," the British robot lady voice intoned.

"Ava—"

Ava immediately recognized her mother's voice and leapt across the room to grab at her phone. She pressed madly at buttons until her mother's voice stopped.

"Message erased."

*Thank God.* If the memory of Jackson's face could reliably make her feel ashamed, her mother's voice could do a whole lot worse with a whole lot less. Her stress response was just instinctual. There was nothing to be done about it; she just had to stand there, waiting for it to filter through her system, waiting for the fear and anger to drain away.

Ava was so damn tired of being afraid. She'd been afraid of making the final leap into being submissive, and then Jackson had found her.

He'd said one week, no strings, he'd be in charge. He'd take control and show her everything. It sounded like a free pass to explore all the sexual stuff she'd never trusted anyone else with, but was she really free? The man had already broken her heart once. And as much as she'd tried to forget Jackson Reed, in her worst moments, when she felt most alone, the memory of him had been a comfort to her late at night. Her friendship with Jackson was the closest she'd ever felt to being safe, and cherished and treasured. The closest she'd ever been to anyone, ever. What if it had been an illusion? What if one week with Jackson revealed that she'd been wrong all along?

"Stop thinking about Jackson Reed!" she said to the empty room. Maybe if she said it out loud, it would actually take.

She pressed a button on her phone to replay the last message. She'd missed it completely, thinking about Jackson, and fear, and being alone forever. *Good job, drama queen*, she thought, and snorted. She was glad to hear her sister's voice, finally.

"Hey, it's me. Um, don't hate me, but I'm just calling to remind you about dinner with Mom." Ava cringed. What Ellie was too sweet to say was, 'Please, for the love of God, don't make me go alone.' How could Ava let her little sister deal with that all on her own? Ellie was stuck with their mother the rest of the year, but she shouldn't have to bear the burden alone during the holidays.

"And it's Christmas, Ava," Ellie's voice said. "And don't roll your eyes, I'm not being sweet."



just want to see you.”

Ava laughed, rooting around for her pajamas. Ellie couldn't help but be sweet, even when she was trying to be a bitch. Ava tried to tell her, *you can't fight who you are*, but Ellie was a stubborn little sister.

*Wait, who can't fight who they are?* Ava stopped halfway through getting her pajama pants on and nearly fell over. *Did I just accidentally give myself good advice?*

Jackson had told her he knew what she really was. That he was going to show her.

She shivered.

The most infuriating thing about Jackson's offer was that it had shown her how much she was missing. The thing was, not finding anyone she could trust meant that Ava hadn't been able to be fully herself—ever. She couldn't fully be herself at her job, she couldn't fully be herself with her family, she didn't even feel like she could share her painting anymore, which she did in secret in a tiny little second bedroom in her apartment. But this was something there was no outlet for. This was sex. And the kind of sex where she definitely needed someone else to be there.

And it hadn't been an offer so much as an order.

Which was damn sexy.

And he'd called her *Frida*.

“Damn it!”

She plopped onto her bed, her comfy pajama pants still half around her ankles. She was always telling Ellie not to fight who she really was, and yet Ava had been doing that for ten years. At least she was still doing it. The universe had gone ahead and plonked the best man she'd ever known in her lap, and he had told her he wanted to fulfill all of her fantasies for a week, and her reaction was... freak out? Who does that?

Maybe she was just rationalizing the fact that she couldn't stop thinking about him, that she felt an inescapable pull whenever she remembered his hands on her body, as though there were an invisible cord that tied her to him. Maybe it was that she'd never wanted anyone so badly in her entire life. Maybe it was that he'd said that she belonged to him.

She knew from experience what it meant to trust Jackson Reed with her heart, and she wasn't about to do that again. But she'd never had the chance to trust him with her body. Until now.

It was almost like she didn't have a choice.

*It's ok, Ava. No strings. Just sex.*

She grabbed her running shoes, coat, and purse, and ran out the door before she could change her mind.

## chapter 4

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Jackson Reed did his five-hundredth sit-up, lay back, sweating, and waited.

*Fuck.*

It hadn't worked. He'd had at most a moment's respite before his dick demanded access to a woman who wasn't there. He'd been like this all goddamn night, ever since he'd left Ava Barnett breathing hard in an empty room.

He flipped over and punched out quick twenty chest-to-deck push-ups, then switched to one-handed when the burn wasn't enough. *Might never be enough.* It was out of character for Jackson to vacillate like this—or at least it had been for a long time. Realizing how damaged Ava had been had thrown him. He'd hurt her more than he'd known, years ago, and then he might have done it again tonight by pushing her. Jackson worked hard not to be a man who hurt people, not to be a man who pushed people past where they ought to go just to show he could. Not to be a bully, not to be...

He worked very hard not to be like *him*.

The idea that he'd become what he feared in the very process of trying to become the opposite like some stupid Greek myth, angered him.

*Where the hell is she?* he thought, sitting up, the sweat dripping down his chest. He was sure she would come—as sure as he'd ever been of anything. They still had that connection. He'd seen it in her eyes when she came all over his hand.

He felt himself getting hard again, and groaned.

The thought of her, *any* thought of her, was enough to get him going. She'd tripped some wire, snuffed off some sort of damn fuse left over from ancient history, and now he was like a caged bull.

It made it hard to think. And Jackson had a lot to think about.

He had to think about how much he didn't know about Ava Barnett. He was willing to bet he knew more than most—maybe more than anyone, the way she kept herself closed up tight. But that didn't mean much. He knew she must have been rubbed raw already, even more so than he'd thought, by a woman who'd already been battered by the world, or maybe just some of the people in it. She had to be, if the one metaphorical blow from Jackson that stupid night was enough to knock her out for the count for ten years.

He thought back and tried to remember details from the late nights they'd stayed up after study sessions for their shared art class. Details were hard. He remembered the vague outlines of a relationship that went bad for her just before she'd transferred in at the beginning of senior year, a relationship she'd never wanted to talk much about. And he remembered the way she had mostly changed the subject whenever anyone had brought up family, but half the time, Jackson'd been right behind her, no more eager to talk about his family than she had been to talk about hers. And they were both scholarship kids, both of them working outside of class. But it was difficult to recall the hard facts of her life before him, because that's not how he thought of her. She wasn't a dry biography or a cold psychological profile. Every time something useful started to float to the surface, there'd be something else, something of far more interest. Her laugh, or the way she smirked at him at a party, or sharing some private joke. The look she got on her face when she was listening to someone else talk about problems, like there was nothing more important in the world than whatever was making her friend sad. All those things you notice when you're in love.

*Goddamn it.*

He'd just been too self-absorbed, too concerned with his own bullshit. She'd been too good at hiding. And they'd both been too enamored at that connection they'd felt to do much more than enjoy

it. And he'd let her slip through his fingers because of it.

~~There was, of course, the one night he remembered in crystal clear detail, one night he'd carried her home with him since then, and would until the day he died. The night she had given him the two most precious gifts he'd ever gotten.~~

*You owe her.*

That was all that was important. He couldn't just wait around, hoping she'd come to her senses. He'd waited ten years to become a man who was good enough for her, and he wasn't going to fuck it up by waiting around any longer. He wasn't going to give either of them a shot at ruining their second chance.

Jackson jumped up, possessed with purpose. He was going to go out there and find her; there was just one thing he needed to hide first. No point in scaring her when he did finally bring her back here.

He barely had time to find a hiding place before the doorbell rang.

## chapter 5

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As soon as Ava's finger touched the stupid bell—which, this was the only door in New York with an actual bell on it, wasn't it? Of course it was—as soon as she did the one thing that was completely irrevocable, she was beset by doubt. Not when she'd given the cab driver the wrong address, twice, her nervousness; not when she'd stumbled into Jackson's swanky lobby, all ready to give the doorman some crazy story, and had simply been waved through because he assumed she must have gotten locked out while feeding a meter or something; not when she realized in the elevator, *Oh, hey, I'm wearing pajamas, a winter coat, and running shoes, and it's two in the morning, what the hell am I doing.* Only when she'd actually rung the bell in the middle of the night, surely waking up the man she'd come to see, had she remembered to doubt herself.

Well, not just any man. Jackson freaking Reed.

She was about to turn around and slink away when the door opened wide to reveal Jackson shirtless, sweaty, in low slung pajama bottoms.

*Oh God.*

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

"Come in," he said. It didn't sound like an invitation. It sounded like an order. Ava was grateful for the direction. The sight of him had just leveled her.

She obeyed.

His apartment was dark, except for one area right by a couch in a corner, where there were a few dumbbells and other exercise-looking things strewn about in a pool of lamplight. She couldn't see much else, but she could see that while he might not have been asleep, she had definitely interrupted something. She was just turning around to apologize and explain when Jackson grabbed her by the waist and kissed her.

He did more than that. He pressed her whole helpless body against his, wrapped his arm around her like a vice, grabbed her hair, and took her mouth with his. He was hard against her. His cock pushed into her belly as he sucked on her lower lip, and every muscle in Ava's body gave out. The tension and doubt rippled and left her, as though he had sucked it right out of her, and now she only craved more contact. Her chest rose, her breasts trying to reach his chest, and her hands ran up and down his shoulders and back, feeling the muscles and the sweat that was already starting to cool. In one stroke he smoothed his hand down her neck, to her breast, her belly, her hip, her ass, and then he pulled away leaving her gasping.

There was a hint of a smile in his grey eyes.

"That said it better than whatever you were going to say would've done, didn't it?" he said.

She nodded and looked down. She couldn't help herself. He looked huge, bulging through his pajama bottoms. She remembered him as big, but...damn.

He said, "I'm glad you're here."

"Me, too." Her voice sounded hoarse.

"If you hadn't shown up, I was going to have to come out and find you." He pulled her peace pipe down over her shoulders. His hands brushed her bare arms, and she jumped. Now she had on only a tank top and her own pajama bottoms.

Ava was feeling woozy, being around him, and she fought it. She desperately wanted to keep the conversation in the realm of the sane. Somehow, every interaction between them threatened to veer into crazytown almost immediately, and Ava was suddenly feeling like she needed to keep her wits about her. This was more troubling than she'd thought. She wasn't just feeling lust; she was feeling.

she was *feeling*.

~~“How were you going to come and find me?” she asked. She tried to sound nonchalant, but her voice shook anyway. “You don’t even know where I live.”~~

He looked at her, completely serious. “You know I would find a way.”

She felt herself crumbling, felt her senses leaving her, felt... No. She couldn’t fall already. Whatever it was between them had short-circuited her brain, wired itself directly to her gut, her heart. This was the power of the man: he made her forget everything she’d promised herself.

He moved closer and slipped his hands under her tank top, resting them for a moment on her bare skin, preparing to take the top off. She inhaled and fought through the pulse roaring in her ears.

“Wait,” she whispered.

*Please don’t make me say it again,* she thought. *I don’t think I could say it again.*

He bent his head toward hers and traced the line of her jaw with his finger. She could smell his musky and strong. It did not make her resistance easier.

“We should talk first,” he finally said.

She exhaled with relief and nodded. Not just because she needed talk, but also relief that he was still just as sensitive as she remembered. That connection was still real. She was right to feel safe, and as soon as she felt that, the words just came tumbling out.

“How does this work? I mean...what are the rules? I have no idea, I’ve never...like, I mean, are there safewords? What happens if—”

Lightning quick, he snaked his arm around her back, reached down, and grabbed her ass hard enough to shut her up. He pulled her up toward him, his fingers slipping into the fold between her buttocks. Her clit screamed, and her whole body heard it.

He said, “Slow down.”

It’s not as if she had a choice. There was hardly any oxygen going to her brain.

He began to caress her up and down with his free hand along the length of her body, almost petting her. It made her both calm and incredibly...the opposite of calm. Whatever that was. She could barely think.

“Yes,” he said, his hand grazing her breast, “you’ll get a safeword. Something you’ll remember but something that won’t come up otherwise. It’s not something you want to get confused about. Pick one.”

Ava tried hard to think of the least sexy thing she could. Must keep the boundaries. Must keep the strings. Maybe that would calm her down, make her feel in control of herself. She could almost hear her mind lurching into gear, like an old manual transmission that hadn’t been lubed up in... *Oh, God, don’t think about lube.*

“Garlic press?” she said, breathlessly.

He burst out laughing, his grey eyes sparkling.

“Yeah, that’ll work.”

His voice was soft, but he was done waiting. He let her go only to lift her arms and push her tank top up over her breasts and off her body. He threw it somewhere without even looking, his eyes focused only on her, standing half naked in front of him. He let his gaze rake her up and down like he wanted her to *know* he saw her. Her breath caught in her throat, and then he caught her by the waist again and pulled her close.

“But if you ever want to use that safeword,” he said, pinching one nipple, “I won’t have done my job.”

Ava closed her eyes and tried to breathe. He was toying with her nipple and her breast, his iron

grip holding her motionless.

“Your job?” she finally managed.

“I told you: I’m going show you what you are. I’m going to show you that you’re mine.”

Ava’s eyes flew open, and her heart thudded hard in her chest. She was so far gone that she couldn’t tell what was lust, what was panic, and what was...something else. When she spoke, her voice sounded small.

“You said no strings,” she said.

“And I meant it, *Frida*. You are mine for one week. After that, you can do what you want.”

He was so close, his eyes gentle, and his hands rough. Ava kept opening and closing her hands, balling them into little fists in an effort not to use them. She wanted to touch him so badly, but didn’t trust herself at all. If she didn’t have ground rules, she’d fall completely.

“What does that mean, I’m yours?” she said.

“It means what I said it means. You are mine, in any way or any place I want, at any time I want. You obey my orders. You accept my discipline. You come for me,” he said, squeezing her breast hard. “Over, and over, and over again.”

*Oh.*

“No strings,” she said again. “Just sex.”

“No strings.”

She bit her lip and nodded.

He didn’t hesitate. He knelt down and stripped her pants off. Now she was completely naked. He lifted her feet out of the useless pants and slowly worked his way up. His hands inched up the backs of her legs and his mouth kissed a trail up the front. She shuddered as he got closer, closer, kissing his way up her tender thighs. His hands gripped her buttocks, and then he nuzzled his face between her legs. It was so strangely intimate, so...

She nearly collapsed. He caught her.

In one swift motion he stood, cupping her ass in his hands and lifting her up so fast she had no time to react. She spread her legs and wrapped them around his waist, as they had almost nowhere else to go. His cock, straining against his pants, pressed against her naked flesh, and she felt herself see through the thin cotton of his pajama bottoms. She didn’t have time to be embarrassed while he carried her off into the dark.

Ava gripped his neck, as though they were on some wild veldt somewhere and not a luxury apartment in the West Village, and just held on. He busted through some door she couldn’t see, navigating his way in the dark, and then she was on her back, her legs still wrapped around him, his weight pressing her into a soft mattress. A bed. He ground his erection against her, and she caught her breath, grasping at his back.

“I remember,” he said, and for the first time, his voice sounded choked. “I remember what you asked me for. I’ve always remembered.”

Ava couldn’t say anything. She was torn between wanting to scream yes, wanting to tell him to shut up and get inside her, and wanting to run away from the things he’d just brought up.

“You wanted to be tied up,” he said roughly, unwrapping her arms from around his neck.

Ava felt her chest constrict. She did. She’d said that. She’d meant that. She still did. But it was too...

“Not yet,” she whispered. “Please just get inside me.”

He rumbled low deep in his chest. “Not yet,” he said, and pinned her wrists up above her head with one large hand. He ran the other down the length of her body again, stopping only to lift her left leg u

and out, spreading her as wide as she could go. She heard the rustle of fabric, the little sounds that let her know what was about to happen, and felt her back begin to arch in anticipation. *Jackson Reed*.

He pressed his mouth to hers and sank into her.

“Ava,” he said, his breath on her cheek, and he began a steady rhythm, controlled at first, but growing wilder with each beat. He filled her, more even than she’d remembered, pushing deeper with every stroke, saying her name over and over until it sounded like a chant, or a prayer. She couldn’t escape, wouldn’t have wanted to if she could. She wanted to be taken, completely, by Jackson Reed.

Soon she was bucking wildly against him, wanting to feel fuller, if that were possible, wanting to drown totally in him. He plunged into her with abandon, driving out all her worries, pushing aside her anxieties, and leaving room only for the swirling force that gathered in her core. He tilted her up and pistoned against her g-spot until she closed in around him like a sleeping flower and then exploded, unfolding outwards again and again, until she had nothing left.

## chapter 6

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It took a second for Ava to realize where she was. It obviously wasn't her apartment. The sheets were too nice, for one, and the light was all wrong, in that there was so much of it. No one she knew had windows this big.

*Holy crap, that all really happened.*

She buried her face in a sinfully soft pillow. She couldn't turn over and look. She knew what she would find: Jackson Reed.

This was basically her best dream and her worst nightmare all rolled into one. *That actually really, for serious happened. Stella's engagement party. The stupid bet! The best sex of my life.*

Just the thought of facing Jackson this morning, of facing everything they'd done and the way they had made her feel, put an iron knot of anxiety in her stomach. He had already been deeper inside her both physically and metaphorically, than any man since...since him. This was terrible. Ava was in no way prepared for this kind of...

Well, saying she wasn't prepared for this kind of vulnerability sort of made her seem like not the most well adjusted person. But this was a legitimate shock. She had completely misjudged her ability to just keep it sexual, to just explore that one side of herself. She needed time to think, to collect herself, to decide what she really wanted and how she should proceed so she wouldn't get her head broken by Jackson freaking Reed—*again*.

She needed to get the hell out of there.

Slowly, Ava worked her arm out from under her pillow and used it to push herself up on the bed. She could feel the weight of Jackson right behind her; she'd have to be stealthy if she were going to get out of this without waking him up and making a scene. She would come back. She would call him. She just needed to think.

But she couldn't bring herself to look at him. He'd be sleeping, looking beautiful and good, and totally unaware that she was leaving, and she couldn't face that, either.

*You are thirty-two years old, Ava Barnett. You are supposed to be a grown up. Grown ups do not sneak out of beds.*

She really did feel like a dumbass college student again, but it was her only option. The only option she could bear, anyway. Using every abdominal muscle she'd ever earned at the gym, she lifted her legs and swung them over the edge of the bed. She couldn't see her clothes, which, she remembered now, weren't even proper clothes, but freaking pajamas. And they were out in the other room. Perfect. She'd just get up without moving the bed, and...

Ava's dismount was perfect, but a tug on her left arm pulled her back to the bed with a definite bounce.

*What the hell? And then: crap, did I wake him up?*

Cringing, Ava turned to look.

And she saw Jackson Reed, one sleepy eyebrow raised, holding the end of a black leather lead that was fastened to a black leather cuff on her left wrist.

"Going somewhere?" he said, and yawned. Then he pulled on the lead, dragging her back down until she was flat on her back, her nakedness very much on display for him.

"What the *fuck*?" she said, and tried to sit up. Jackson put two strong arms on either side of her head and kissed her back down.

When he finally let her go, she was breathless. "Not fair," she said.

He was admiring the view of her naked breasts, but apparently his mind was still working.



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