

# ALPHAS UNLIMITED

A COLLECTION OF BESTSELLING ALPHA EXCERPTS



LISA LANG BLAKENEY

WRITERGIRL PRESS

LISA LANG BLAKENEY  
Copyright © 2018 by Lisa Lang Blakeney  
All rights reserved.  
<http://LisaLangBlakeney.com>  
Published by: Writergirl Press

Thank you for downloading this collection. This book is a work of fiction. Any similarity to real events, people, or places is entirely coincidental. All rights reserved. This book may not be reproduced or distributed in any format without the permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations used for review.

The author acknowledges the trademarked status of products referred to in this book and acknowledges that trademarks have been used without permission.

This book contains mature content, including graphic sex. Please do not continue reading if you are under the age of 18 or if this type of content is disturbing to you.

*NOTE: All characters in the book are 18+ years of age, and all sexual acts are consensual.*

## WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ABOUT LISA

"Lisa writes books that are intense. Explosive. Panty Melting. Raw. Exposed. Angst. Multifaceted."



"Cover to cover, page by page every word was amazing. This author is amazing and her work is even more amazing. She really can get all the details and words to sound great together."



"As soon as I picked up book 1 I was addicted to this series. I couldn't wait for this one to come out!"



"I definitely recommend this series to readers. It was the first of its kind that I have read, and I was not disappointed. 5 Stars!"





## BOOKS BY LISA

### **The Masterson Series**

Devour this addictive series about the possessive bad boy, Roman Masterson, who falls hard and fast for the girl he's promised his family to protect.

Masterson

Masterson Unleashed

Masterson In Love

Masterson Made

Joseph Loves Juliette

Masterson Box Set

### **Masterson Next Generation**

The crazy hot fruit doesn't fall far from the tree. Dive into this second generation of Masterson men!

Knox - Knox & Gigi

Bronx - Bronx & Karma

Seven - Seven & Sasha

### **The King Brothers Series**

Dive into this series of interconnected standalones featuring 3 alpha hot brothers and the women they lay claim to without apology.

Claimed - Camden & Jade

Indebted - Cutter & Sloan

Broken - Stone & Tiny

Promised - All King Brothers

King Brothers Box Set

### **The Nighthawk Series**

Sexy & sweet sports romances set in the professional world of football. All standalones.

Saint - Saint & Sabrina

Wolf - Cooper & Ursula

Diesel - Mason & Olivia

Jett - Jett & Adrienne

Rush - Rush & Mia

You can always find the most recent list of releases at Lisa's ebook store.



*The Masterson Series*

**She's a sweet girl in trouble. He's a bad boy asked to protect her. Their chemistry is undeniable, but it's an attraction that's completely off-limits to explore...or is it?**

After Elizabeth Hill is brutally attacked in her apartment by an intruder and then unceremoniously dumped by her ex-boyfriend, she moves in with family that she barely knows for protection. All she remembers about her aunt's stepson, Roman, is that he was the moody, mean boy who played a cruel trick on her when she was just six years old; but soon learns that he is now a complex and multi-layered man who has the ability to protect her, ignite her, and challenge her like no one ever has before.

Wealthy Roman Masterson makes his fortune by fixing celebrity problems for big money and by any means necessary. He is a foul-mouthed, bad-tempered, manwhore who doesn't have the time or inclination to babysit a gullible little

MASTERSON

brat from the suburbs...until he unknowingly spots her in the middle of a crowded dance floor and decides right then and there to claim every one of her orgasms from that moment on.

Little does he know that the woman he's laid claim to is the same girl he's been sworn to protect.



## ELIZABETH



*I* NOTICE THAT ETHAN HAS an unusually glazed look in his eyes when he pops his head up from under my tangerine strapless sundress, which he has leisurely pushed up right above my hips. He has been licking and lapping between my legs for several minutes in a grand effort to get me primed for what is to come next, and he looks like he is definitely ready to give it to me as soon as I give him the go ahead.

"You like that, Bitsy?" His mouth turns into a goofy grin. One that I've always been unable to resist. Although I thought I had made it perfectly clear that I hadn't waited all this time to have sex with Ethan just to give it up casually, unplanned, or on a whim. Yet somehow I find myself spread eagle, on top of my brand new tufted pink comforter, panties God knows where, and nervous as all hell. I know full well that having sex will change everything between us, which is why I've been especially careful about the when and the where ... up until now. We weren't even supposed to be here tonight, but Ethan's car was acting funny; so it was either chill at my place or end the night early.

"Don't pull your top off yet," he whispers in my ear as an attempt to sound seductive. Unfortunately Ethan's attempt at being sexy comes off somewhat awkward, and his request for me to keep my top on seems just wrong.

"Why?" I ask while lowering my arms from above my head. "You haven't even touched my boobs yet."

"Don't need to touch 'em right now. Relax and just trust me."

Don't need to touch them? What the heck was he talking about? Ethan had been rubbing, kneading and sucking on my breasts since we started going out, getting me ready for what I guess was this very moment. Usually when we played around in his dad's old Audi after one of our dates, he couldn't keep his hands off of the girls, and I loved it. I thought he did too. I know he chugged down a beer or two when we were watching television earlier but something seems off with him. I'm just not sure what it is. Yet when he says those last three words, "just trust me" and flashes me a smile with his lips still moist from earnestly eating me out, my decision is already made.

As far as boyfriends go, I know that I've hit the jackpot, at least among my small inner circle of friends. I've known Ethan since my freshman year of UPenn, and girls have always fallen all over themselves when they're around him. Not much has changed since graduation; they still do.

When our friendship started to evolve into more during our senior year, I made the decision to take things super slow, because I am quite aware of Ethan's sexual history. Not wanting to be just another one of his conquests, I've been making him wait for over a year to have sex with me, and he's been quite patient, but I'm not sure how much longer he's going to wait for me. Truth be told, I'm not sure how much longer I can even wait. I mean I'm not a virgin. I'm just very selective about who I give it to, especially since I seemed

to have picked so badly in the past. My high school boyfriend was a Grade A jerk.

"Okay," I murmur softly. Wait over.

I lower my lids in an effort to do as he asks and simply relax and enjoy the moment, but Ethan's cell phone starts ringing for what is the third time in the last 15 minutes. He stops touching me and reaches over the side of the bed to check the screen. Immediately I imagine the worst, and I think he notices the distrust written all over my face. While Ethan has been a pretty good boyfriend to me, being with him has made me the target of dirty looks from girls we went to school with and beyond. He's definitely good looking, but he's also a very promising swimmer who is training for the next Summer Olympics. Many girls see fame and endorsement dollars when they look at him, and I know that many have the capability of being downright ruthless in order to get who and what they want. So I keep my eyes and ears open. Constantly. It's exhausting sometimes, but my mother once told me that every man has their Achilles heel, and my fear is that the vagina is Ethan's.

"It's just Thomas. I'm going to turn it off," he tries to assure me in an effort to keep me present in the moment.

"That was Thomas who called you all three times?" I ask knowing good and well it was probably that slutty girl Penny from my old Econ class calling him. A total sorority slut, she was notorious for throwing what was between her legs at every halfway decent looking boy on campus, and I'd heard that she was just as busy with the graduates. Especially jocks like Ethan.

"Yeah but he doesn't want anything. I'll call him later. We're busy, right babe?"

I assume that question is Ethan's not so subtle way of checking to make sure I'm still on board, so I nod my head in agreement. He smiles and continues his seduction by slowly

gliding the palms of his smooth hands up my thighs while pushing my dress up even further under my breasts to deliver a few feathery kisses around my navel.

Just when I think he is going to actually take my dress completely off and continue with his leisurely stroll around my body, he skips ahead and makes his way to my lips, shoving his tongue inside, rapidly moving it back in forth in my mouth. Kissing Ethan is typically a nice experience, but like I said, something is off. His kisses seem sloppy and amateurish, and as he is getting more excited, I am starting to feel smothered under the weight of his large body and the faint smell and taste of beer on his breath.

"You ready for me, Bitsy?" He asks using my nickname in his deepest baritone voice.

Reluctantly I shake my head yes, although all the flashing signs in my head are telling me to STOP! I don't want this to be my first time with him. Not here, not like this, but then I consider what would happen if I attempted to stop him. Would he be angry with me? Would he want to end things? Would he tell his friends that I'm frigid? Would he start taking Penny's calls? Wouldn't it just be better to get it over with? Rip the band-aid off so to speak.

Trust me, I am seriously considering slapping my own self for having these sorts of insecure thoughts, but I have little control over what pathetic things pop into my head at any given time. I know that these are totally the wrong reasons to have sex with someone, but is there ever truly a perfect moment? There hasn't been one yet. Maybe I'm over thinking this whole thing.

Ethan stops and looks wildly in my eyes for a moment. I've never seen this look before. It's as if he needs me in a way that he never has. I've been pretty quiet this whole time, and God knows he's waited a long time for this to happen. So I decide to go ahead and give him the assurance he needs.

I touch the right side of his face gently with my palm. "Go ahead Ethan."

His face relaxes since that seems to be just what he needs to hear. He reaches in his back pocket and pulls out a condom, opens the foil packet, and rolls it onto his long but rather slender penis. I do my best not to ruin the mood by asking him why he even has a condom so conveniently on his person. I can't imagine that he thought that this was going to definitely happen, but I don't want to sound like the insecure girlfriend.

I worry for a split second about pregnancy because the condom seems really thin, like it could easily snap like an old rubber band pulled too tautly. But maybe that's how all condoms look. I never really watched the only other guy I've had sex with put his condoms on. I was in high school and too embarrassed to really look. Obviously I had no business having sex with him either.

Ethan lowers himself back down and gently starts kissing the side of my neck. It feels relaxing, but as he starts to slowly poke and prod his way into my opening, the muscles in my neck and shoulders begin to tense up. I'm not sure why this hurts so much, like I said I've done this before, but I am seriously thinking about pushing him off and running the hell out of my own bedroom. I feel like a virgin all over again. Yet as soon as I go to open my mouth to say the word wait, he kisses me deeply and mutters in my mouth, "Hold on tight, Bitsy."

So I do.

As he pushes further inside me with several hard thrusts, I flinch from the unfamiliar fullness, but he doesn't notice my discomfort because his head is burrowed so far into the side of my neck now. He groans while methodically pumping and pushing inside me for a few more minutes, then he speeds up for a few seconds, right before

he completely collapses on top of me. He's so frackin' heavy.

"Oh shit!" he cries out. "Bitsy, you're amaz—"

Before I can even process whatever that anticlimactic moment was that just passed between us, we both jump at an unexpected loud crash. It sounds like someone has just rammed their head completely through one of my front windows. Ethan jerks his head up, leans his torso over the side of the bed, and reaches underneath for his phone.

"Fuck!" he starts furiously texting someone.

I'm frozen in place as quick, thunderous footsteps are moving towards our direction while Ethan quickly pulls up his sweatpants and fixes my dress. They're moving so quickly down the hall, I know it's just a matter of seconds before they reach us.

"Hide in the closet!" Ethan frantically orders.

My heart pounds with brute force from fear.

They're inside the room, before I have a chance to move.

A man in an all black sweatsuit and wearing a Shrek Halloween face mask (of all cliché things) bellows the words, "Don't fucking move."

I freeze in place and so does Ethan. There are two other men, also dressed in all black with black knit ski masks standing next to the one doing all the talking. They are silent, but the two of them are holding sleek metal gray handguns aimed at Ethan's head.

"Sit," Shrek orders.

I'm not sure who he's talking to, but I immediately sit straight down on the edge of my bed with my mouth closed and my legs shut. I smell like latex and sex, and my body trembles with fear when I take a brief glance up at the intruder's face. Even behind his mask, I can tell that Shrek is dead in the eyes. His cold glare makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and shiver.

"Where is my shit?" Shrek asks Ethan.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he replies without enough fear in his voice in my opinion. Does he know who they are?

"I don't know what you're talking about," Shrek parrots back in a sing-song voice. "Oh yes the fuck you do know what I'm talking about. You're high on my shit right fucking now, and if you don't give me ALL my product and I do mean all of it in the next five minutes, I'm going to have to hurt your very pretty girlfriend over here. And I promise you that she won't be pretty no more after I'm done. Then you're next."

I'm silently crying at this point and paralyzed with fright. I strangely consider all of the crime and cop shows that I have mindlessly watched all my life and wonder what the victims would do in this situation. I've always thought that if I were to ever find myself in a compromised situation, that I would be smart enough to save myself. Yet now that the time is upon me, I'm not sure what the hell to do. Should I make a run for it? Should I beg for our lives? Where's my cell phone? Hell, I'm really frightened, and I have no idea how to get us out of this. I'm just seriously praying that Ethan will give these guys whatever the hell it is they want so they'll leave. I'm very much invested in living another day with my face intact.

Ethan puffs his chest out. "Like I said man, I don't know what you're talking about."

Shrek grins sinisterly.

"That was the wrong answer Aqua Man."

And that's when a black leather covered fist cracks me square in the jaw.

Then everything fades to black.

## ELIZABETH

### THREE WEEKS LATER



VIBRATIONS OF BASS HEAVY techno music pulse throughout my sweat covered body as I twirl and gyrate my body in the middle of the dance floor. I'm a pro at this, so I'm careful not to spill a drop of the merlot that swishes around in my wine glass as I get my groove on. I just hold the glass high and close to my ear while my hips and feet do all the work of keeping to the monotonous but primal beat that is driving all the demons right out of my soul. It's been three weeks, give or take a day, since I woke up with the worst headache of my life and my life in shambles. For just one night though, I don't want to think about any of that. For just one night, I want to dance.

I'm starting to think the deejay is my soul mate or a simply brilliant human being, because when my favorite part of the song comes on he performs a variety of scratches on his computerized turntables to extend that portion of the song, and I frackin' love him for it. I throw back my wine glass and take a long final sip, placing the empty glass on the nearest littered high-top table; and then I begin to truly offer



myself like a Santeria sacrifice over to the music. All I need is a long white flowing dress and a live chicken.

Unlike some of my body thrashing counterparts who basically lose their minds when the computerized beat comes on, I close my eyes, raise my arms high above my head, and slowly sway my very pear shaped hips to the bottom of the song. The bass. As I do, I can feel the vino traveling intravenously through my veins relieving me of all my anxiety and insecurities. It feels good. No it feels great.

Unfortunately my euphoria comes to a screeching halt, when I start to feel the large body of an intoxicated stranger slowly dancing up behind me. Initially my body tightens in fear, but because I don't want to overreact in public, I decide not to respond immediately to his presence. Not every stranger is out to hurt me. I need to remember that if I'm going to live in the world.

I consider the fact that in a club where most dancers are moving at the speed of a Zumba class, my dancing can appear more slow and sexual than the average person's, and that's why I make the decision to cut the drunk guy some slack. Plus this is the best part of the song. I want to finish enjoying it. Unfortunately the dickwad takes this as some sort of approval to move things a step further, and that's when I feel the drunken stranger up on my ass.

I know his hands are probably going to be next.

Sure enough, I feel a hand firmly start to grip the left side of my hips, and can feel one of his sweaty fingers touching the exposed skin above my waistline (thanks to the halter top I'm wearing). So I stop dancing, turn around, and see the red-nosed face of a kid who probably isn't even twenty-one yet and hasn't quite learned when he's reached his limit. I use my pointer finger to call him over even closer so he can hear me. He doesn't seem to understand that I'm annoyed, because he

has a wide grin plastered across his face, when it's blatantly obvious that I don't.

"Are you drunk?" I ask him like I'm his older sister.

"Not yet gorgeous." He says in a drunk, flirty voice.

"Well listen junior, this is a solo gig," I tell him in his ear. "I don't need a partner."

The look on the kid's face is priceless. He's embarrassed, and I think he starts to look around to make sure that no one heard what I just said to him. As if someone could actually hear me over the high decibel level of the music or even see us in this dim lighting. He's not a jerk about what I just said to him though. He gives me a slight head nod, turns, and walks off the dance floor. Confrontation averted.

It's at that exact moment that I consider just for a moment that maybe the kid had it right. Maybe someone was watching us, because I swear that I can feel the stare of a faceless shadow in a far corner of the club. To the left of the main bar. You would think that I wouldn't notice a shadow based on the many moving bodies around me, but that's the thing; people are dancing, laughing, talking, ordering drinks, walking around. Even people at the bar are fidgeting, adjusting their seats, talking to whoever is next to them or trying to grab the bartender's attention. Everyone in the whole place is moving. Everyone but that one solitary faceless shape in the corner.

A chill runs down my spine and I turn away. I'm a little freaked out, but I know that I need to shake it off. Ever since the attack I've been jumpy and on edge. What I need is another drink. That will calm me down.

Now that I am entirely out of my zone and know that the deejay will be changing the song soon, I decide to head back over to the bar and straight towards the handsome bartender in the white tee. I spotted him earlier and liked the looks of him. He looks safe. I grab the last remaining stool and scan

the crowd for my partner in crime, Sloan. I have no idea where she has wandered off to and while we're both grown, I think it was breaking the girl code for her to just leave me to fend for myself inside a club. Especially after everything that I've been through over the last few weeks. I take another quick glance to look for the creep in the corner, but notice that whoever or whatever it was is no longer there. I'm relieved.

"He took you out of your groove huh?"

I raise a curious eyebrow, because I mistakenly think the bartender is talking about the shadow in the corner, but soon realize that he's referring to the beer boy from the dance floor.

"Here you go. Another glass of red on the house. I don't know where these club virgins are coming from all of a sudden. They're ruining the vibe in here. The doorman isn't doing his job. That kid doesn't even look old enough to be in here."

Another glass of wine? Oh I am definitely headed into hangover territory, but I smile, accept the drink, and start slurping it down as if it were my first of the night.

"Thank you umm—"

"The name's Marco and you are?" He asks showcasing a set of pearly white teeth while wiping down the bar top. Was he flirting? Hell, I don't know and I don't want to know. I'm sure he's just being friendly like most bartenders. Men are completely off the menu for me now.

"Elizabeth."

"You're not here alone are you?"

"No, I came with a friend."

Some friend. Where the hell is she?

During the cab ride here, my best friend Sloan bragged for twenty minutes that she was bringing me to the uber-exclusive Club Lotus. Per her words, it was, "beyond the red

velvet rope." There was no rope. In fact there was only an inconspicuous looking gray metal door that you knocked on, which was then answered by a very unhappy looking man who asked very gruffly for your ID. Three minutes later the man either let you in the door or he told you to scram. Sloan's ID must have checked out, so we were permitted inside once he jotted down my driver's license information inside a red, leather covered journal. Another thing that gives me the jitters, but which Sloan assures me is totally safe. Once past the forgettable gray door, I couldn't believe the unforgettable and intoxicating world that we stepped into.

Club Lotus is a beautifully designed dance club, housed in a hundred-year-old but expertly renovated center city bank, with broad, polished mahogany bars, massive pillars, and intricately carved high ceilings bathed in soft champagne colored chandelier lighting. It is everything that I imagined it to be. The grandness. The sexiness. The exclusivity of it. While there are definitely cozy little seating areas and an elevated VIP section, it doesn't seem like an overly pretentious club, although I know that most of the people in here probably make at least six figures or better. I'm fascinated watching many of the high-powered corporate women enter through the metal door and walk straight back to a large locker room, where they hang their very expensive designer suits and change into their very small, body conscious dresses for the night. Most of the men look like new money as well. Powerful but definitely not uptight.

Sloan fits right in. She's on the fast track as a pharmaceutical sales rep for one of the biggest companies in the country and makes a great living. I don't fit in as much, but I strive to one day. I can't wait to blend into the shiny and slick fabric of the city and it's people, and to be able to afford to buy five dollar lattes everyday, although it feels like nothing is clicking into place for me these days.

I continue looking for Sloan as I take several more sips of wine, but she is still M.I.A. Fortunately the deejay is doing a fantastic job of keeping me distracted and begins inter-playing two songs that are calling me back to the dance floor, but I have an off feeling that I just can't shake, so I decide to stay put and flirt with the sun-kissed bartender. After about ten minutes of polite conversation between us he asks me, "So you're not going back out there gorgeous?"

I grin. "Nah, I'd rather sit here and enjoy the music."

"Hard day at work?"

"Not exactly ... more like a hard week. A bad break up."

Marco nods in understanding and then a text comes in from my mother. I don't feel like reading it, but I figure I have to because well, it's from my mom.

**Mom: Where are you?**

**Me: I'm out with Sloan.**

**Mom: That means you're dancing very inappropriately somewhere.**

**Me: That's very possible:)**

**Mom: I've come up with a solution to your situation.**

**Me: Really?**

**Mom: I called your aunt.**

**Me: Aunt who???**

This topic really deserves a phone conversation, but there is no way I could have a meaningful conversation with my mother, half-drunk, in a noisy club. I'm surprised she's actually this good at texting. They're coming in fast and grammatically correct.

**Mom: You know who I'm talking about smarty. Aunt Juliette. The aunt I told you to give a call three weeks ago when you decided to stay in that godforsaken city after almost being murdered.**

**Me: When did u learn to txt like this mom? I'm impressed.**

**Mom: I didn't. I speak into the phone and it translates what I say into a text for me.**

Aaah, of course.

**Me: Very nice mom.**

**Mom: Her number is 215-555-7890. Call her tomorrow. She has room for you until whenever.**

Whenever I come to my senses and move home she means.

**Me: It won't be long. I'm figuring things out and will have a place soon.**

**Mom: Is business doing better?**

**Me: Yep.**

**Mom: Are you really okay Bitsy?**

**Me: Yes mom. Don't worry.**

Lies.

First of all there is no way on God's green earth that I'm going to admit to my mother that I am scared shitless after being brutally assaulted by my boyfriend's frackin' drug dealers. She doesn't even know everything that happened. She'd literally drive down to Philly, pack up my stuff, and force me to come home if she did.

When I woke up in my bedroom three weeks ago, Ethan and the assailants were gone; my head hurt like hell, and my apartment had been completely ransacked and robbed. I'd been saving tip money for over two years from my part-time job at The Tavern and storing it all in two empty tampon boxes under the bathroom sink. (I've got an issue with paying bank fees.) It was over seventeen thousand dollars, and my plan was to use that money to live on while I worked on building my business full time; but now that money is gone and I need a Plan B.

I was too frightened to call the police when I finally woke up, so the only person I called was Sloan, who promptly took me to the emergency room. Physically I had only suffered a

minor concussion, but emotionally I was ruined. My home had been violated, I couldn't concentrate on work, I was scared to be alone, and my boyfriend's phone was going straight to voicemail. His father, who I had only met once before, finally called me a few days later and told me that Ethan was fine and resting in a drug rehab in Arizona.

When I told him everything that transpired that night, then asked him (politely) why his son saw fit to leave me unconscious on the floor of my bedroom without even a 911 call, his father totally sidestepped my question and blatantly offered me twenty-five hundred dollars if I remained quiet about everything.

To add insult to injury, he also said there was another twenty-five hundred in it for me if I refused any and all of Ethan's calls. Something about codependency, blah, blah, blah. Needless to say, I turned down his highly offensive offer and told him to go fuck himself. I didn't need to be paid off to avoid having any contact with Ethan, considering that he had been ignoring all of my calls and texts for days anyway.

Assholes.

Both of them.

And as far as my business is concerned, that is laughable at best. About eighteen months ago, I built and launched a smartphone application that helps connect college students with scholarship money. I named the application School Bucks, and I charge ninety-nine cents per download for it. The app generates about three hundred dollars a month, which is a pretty decent start, but it doesn't pay the bills. I need to make some major improvements to the app and develop a marketing plan to make some traction in the marketplace, but now that my entire frackin' savings is completely gone, I'm going to have to come up with a Plan B.

All of this on my brain is what has brought me here

tonight. I'm trying to forget about how I can't get a decent night's sleep in my own home, because I'm too afraid to close my eyes. I am also trying to forget how any little bit of money I earn now has to go to bills, not savings, and that I don't have enough money to put down a security deposit and first month's rent on a new place. So I guess living at my aunt's house would be a great way to feel safe for a moment and stack some money while I figure things out. Work on my Plan B. Maybe I do need to bite the bullet and accept some help, regardless of the source. It's not like I have a lot have options. It's either this or go home to my parents and start all over again.

Oh hell no.

**Me: What would she charge me to stay there?**

**Mom: Nothing you're family.**

I wasn't exactly comfortable with that. I'm not a deadbeat.

**Me: I'll call her to discuss it. I gotta go.**

**Mom: Call me after you two speak.**

**Me: I will. Bye mom:)**

I finally have a nice buzz and am totally fine bobbing my head seated right where I am. I don't mind hanging around and flirting with Marco either. It's easy. While I am not quite sure if he likes men, women or both, I definitely enjoy his company as he talks about his childhood in Miami, his dream of visiting family he's never met in Cuba, and why he moved to Philadelphia. He is totally taking my mind off the fact that I may be moving in with a family, that I haven't seen since I was a kid.

"Damn." Worry lines begin crinkling Marco's forehead.

"What?" I ask.

"Those two over there." He points. "See the one blond in the dress. They're arguing. When those two argue, the shit always ends badly."

"Who are they?"



"They usually come on Sunday nights. That's a whole different crowd. Younger. More hip-hop and radio. Not as exclusive of a crowd. They must not have realized that tonight is techno night. Stay here for a minute, I need to go grab Larry. I wonder how they got in here tonight?"

In the short time I've been chatting with Marco, he's explained to me the entire employee dynamic of Club Lotus. Larry is the weekend manager of the club, the younger brother of the owner, and an absolute no nonsense prick. Marco doesn't seem to like him very much, but admits that he does a pretty decent job of running the club.

My glass of merlot is beginning to settle in.

All the telltale signs are there.

My lips and tongue are beginning to feel numb, my eyes are becoming a tad more sensitive to the intricate lighting caressing the dance floor, and I have a permanent goofy grin on my face. I'm a little past buzzed but not quite plastered. Amazing. I thought for sure that this third one would set me right on my ass. Maybe I'm building up a wine tolerance; which I guess isn't something necessarily to brag about.

As I bob my head to the rapid fire beat of the latest song, I can't help but watch the scene unfold out of the corner of my eye towards the end of the bar. The woman Marco mentioned, a strikingly beautiful blond woman with a horrendously tacky turquoise colored dress on is arguing with an average looking redhead. The redhead has on a pair of ultra skinny jeans (way too small for her) and some sort of weird, retro flowered top. Both women are clearly out of their element. Their clothes seem really cheap and overall they just appear to be oddly out of place. Even more so than myself or beer boy. At least I dressed the part tonight with Sloan's help.

The music is blasting entirely too loudly for me to understand what is being said, but sometimes you don't need to

hear the actual words to understand what is transpiring between two people. If I had to guess, I'd say that they were "frenemies" for some ridiculous reason that goes way back to high school, and that they were looking for any excuse to argue with each other. A couple of drinks and loud music has a way of creating an atmosphere ripe with negative possibilities. In this case, it was a high possibility that someone was going to get their face smashed in. My money was on the redhead.

I spot Marco talking to Larry and then the two of them start fast-walking towards the two women. It was actually hysterical, because I don't think I've ever seen two men walking across a club with arms and elbows pumping like that. I decide right then that Marco more than likely likes boys and was in no way flirting with me earlier, unless the wine is making me a little judgy.

As if everything is unfolding in front of me like a movie in slow motion, I continue to watch the two women arguing. The level of their voices seems to be rising as I watch their facial expressions grow increasingly animated and contorted. I still can't make out what they are saying, but the one with the itchy bitsy jeans on starts moving closer and closer towards the other woman's face. I whip my head back towards my right and watch as Larry and Marco continue to move toward the scene, trying to draw as little attention to themselves as they can, but also trying to get to the girls as quickly as possible. Larry's eyes seem to now be fixated on one particular point. The beautiful blond's lap. I watch as she reaches into her silver clutch, which is lying across her lap, and she pulls out what looks like to be a clunky set of car keys.

Thanks to the wine, I am still swaying and bobbing in my seat to the pulse of the music as the whole scene plays out. The music basically serves as a soundtrack for the drama

unfolding in front of me. I am just waiting for the first punch. I know it's brewing. I can see it in itsy, bitsy's eyes. Like I said, my money was on her.

Larry and Marco are sprinting across the club at this point. Gently elbowing their way through the writhing bodies on the dance floor, making their polite "excuse me's" as they do. I'm not really sure why they are so frantic about reaching the two women. No blows have been thrown yet, and as far as I can tell, it all seems to be a lot of loud name-calling and neck rolling. Total girl shit.

And that's when it happens.

Pure pandemonium.

## ELIZABETH



I AM CHOKING AND GASPING for breath. The air around me is thick and heavy. Tears start to pool in the corners of my eyes, because the burning sensation of the chemicals is so overpowering. I reactively blink and squeeze my eyelids tightly to stop the stinging, but all that does is start to give me a dull headache at my temples.

I'm not sure what to do with my hands first, as I indecisively alternate between rubbing the corners of my eyes and grasping at my throat, almost breaking the delicate gold chain hanging around my neck. I desperately need fresh air, but my lungs are being denied what they crave most and like the idiot I am, I haven't paid any attention to where the exit doors are located. This is exactly what I deserve for not listening to my inner voice. My instincts. My gut. The voice that told me to just keep my ass at Sloan's, eat ramen, and watch Netflix.

Panic starts to swell inside of my chest. Was it those girls that did this? Although I know that a little pepper spray never killed anyone, I am also well aware of the pandemonium that spraying it in a confined location can cause. I

wonder if people feel this type of dread right before they meet death, like in the final five seconds before a fatal car collision or a plane crash.

While I can't see very much, especially at a distance, I can definitely hear the quickening click-clack sounds of women's stilettos and the growing chant of deep male voices straining the words, "Push! Push!" in unison. After a few high pitched screams, I realize that the hysteria around me is starting to mushroom, and I am certain that the shrieks are coming from young women being pushed and crushed not only at the front doors but through the other exit side doors as well. Without consideration of others, people are running, pushing, and stepping on top of other people's bodies to get out of the club as fast as they can.

Not. Good. At. All.

The level of danger in the room is starting to rise at an accelerated pace, and I realize that I need an exit plan and fast, because getting out of the club through the main doors unscathed doesn't seem to be in my immediate future. I don't see her at first, but am relieved when Sloan grabs me from behind by the shoulders.

"It's me Bitsy."

"Thank God," I exhale.

Sloan coughs a bit while spitting out her idea of an exit plan. "We'll get trampled if we stay by the bar or if we try to leave now. Let's hide behind the speaker over there. When it thins out we'll leave."

I mutter under my breath, "I can't breathe."

And frankly I don't really like her exit strategy. Hide in the middle of a chemical apocalypse? So at this point I am freaking out, but I also don't have any other better ideas, especially with the three drinks I've consumed clouding any coherent judgment I have left. Since I don't want to compound the issue by totally losing it, I take a few deep

yoga breaths (not easy since the air is filled with pepper spray), while I continue to consider her suggestion. I can feel Sloan carefully studying my face. She knows I'm on the verge of a melt down.

"I can't see the exit Bitsy," she explains slowly to me like I'm an idiot. "But I definitely hear people getting mashed. Trust me, the best thing to do is to wait this out. We'll be fine. Take shallow breaths and hold onto me." She pats my shoulder in an attempt to calm me. I'm pretty sure she can see the fear all over my face and oozing out of my pores. I hate who I've become since that night. I reluctantly offer a soft, "ok" in agreement and follow her lead. Both of us moving low to the ground.

Sloan's plan to get us out of the club in one piece includes having us, much to my horror, crawl on all fours to hide behind a huge sound speaker that I pray is unplugged or blown out, so that I'll still have my hearing by the end of the night. In my favorite and only pair of two-hundred dollar jeans, a halter top, and platform heels we start our trek towards the speaker by crawling our way across the gritty, sticky, concrete floor of one of the most exclusive clubs in the city. Or so I've been told.

Sloan turns her head. "Don't stare at my ass Bitsy. I'm going on a Paleo diet on Monday."

I grin at the fact that Sloan is either trying desperately to make me laugh or that she's extremely delusional. There is nothing fat about her ass. I wish I had that ass.

As we hesitantly creep across the floor of the club, we discover all sorts of disgusting surprises with the palms of our hands. Flattened pieces of chewing gum, small puddles of beer, droplets of wine, bits of paper, grit and dirt. Really gross stuff and somewhat surprising considering where we were, plus it wasn't even that late yet. How can all this crap

be on the floor already? I just pray to myself that no one has spit on the floor.

That would be IT for me.

"I can't believe this nonsense." Sloan stops crawling for a moment still slightly coughing. "I can't believe I paid a hundred bucks a piece for this."

Sloan mentioned in the cab ride over that there was a pretty steep cover charge to get inside the semi-exclusive club, but that there were always plenty of attractive men inside to buy us drinks to offset the cost. Her words not mine. She didn't tell me how much the cover charge was, because she was treating me to a night out to cheer me up, plus she makes a lot of money selling some sort of generic version of Viagra to doctors. Two hundred bucks for a night out is normal for her, but regardless of that she's right. This is nonsensical. Who pays through the nose for a night out only to end up having to scramble around on the floor like we're in the middle of some drunken frat party?

I nod my head in agreement and agree with her. "Yep, this is real dumb."

We finally make it to our destination and crouch behind the gargantuan black sound speaker. Luckily the sound seems to have been cut by the deejay, so I'm relieved that we will at least still have our hearing when this is all over. I decide that it won't hurt to say a little silent prayer to myself, and that God will forgive the fact that it is something that I haven't done in a long while. Between the pepper spray burning my eyes, the drinks fogging my brain, and the sounds of pure terror all around me, I'm getting pretty close to losing it. Someone is definitely going to get hurt tonight. I just hope like hell it isn't me. I can't afford another hospital visit.

As if on cue, in the middle of my "amen," I hear a very clear and distinct set of heavy footsteps advancing towards

us. Whoever it is, isn't panicked like the rest of us. He or she (no it was definitely a he) is moving calmly and very deliberately towards our direction. I experience a brief moment of alien-like movement in my stomach warning me of something. I'm not sure what. Maybe to be on guard or perhaps to run. Suddenly I feel five very warm, strong, and calloused fingers grasp my upper left arm and pull me up on my feet.

"Stand up," the deep voice orders with a rumble. His lips just inches away from my ear. His breath smells of peppermint, chocolate and cognac. A yummy mixture. It's familiar. Reminds me of Christmas.

His distinctive voice reverberates throughout my body, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, and then settles in as if making a home in between my legs. I'm shocked at my body's reaction and frankly embarrassed. Typically I would never blindly follow the commands of a stranger, but this isn't a usual circumstance I find myself in. So for once I decide not to over think things (like he may be a serial killer) and instead just follow his lead.

With his hand still firmly clasping my upper arm, he notices that my feet are unsteady and quickly adjusts himself to place his other hand loosely around my middle to balance me as I stand. His massive hand almost spans the entire length of my torso and although my clothing serves as a barrier, to me it feels like I have nothing on. His thumb nearly grazes my breast, which sends my nipples into a hard alert, while his pinky finger comes dangerously close to the waistband of my panties. I am so overwhelmed by all the sensations of him touching me, that my body probably feels heavy to him, as I inadvertently sway slightly forward and allow him to bear more of my weight. My heaviness doesn't seem to be an issue though, as he effortlessly guides me upwards onto my feet with one sweeping movement.

"Easy." He murmurs softly by my ear.



Even with all hell breaking loose in the club, that one word, the stranger's raspy voice, and his unforgettable hands are all I can concentrate on. His touch feels personal, careful, and intimate, as if we already know each other or as if we are definitely about to. As he continues to direct me, his commands all of a sudden turn somewhat clipped, almost like he is annoyed with me for some unknown reason.

"She with you?"

"Yes."

"Grab her hand too."

"Wait I-" I start to protest. His terse tone throwing me off.

"Grab her." He orders again.

As he continues to hold onto me, to help me keep my balance, I reach down to grab Sloan's arms and lift her up with me. "Come on Sloan."

"Walk." Is all the stranger says next.

And we do.

I trust that he knows where he is going, because I still can't see much. Between the pepper spray up my nose and all the wine that I had earlier, standing up so quickly makes me feel a little light headed. I've been rubbing my eyelids and contact lenses for about ten minutes, but now they are starting to feel like little dry circles of sandpaper scraping against my pupils, so I decide to just pluck them out and toss them as we walk. Things would be fuzzy until I got home, but that was better than the permanent scars I was sure to have on my corneas if I left the little suckers in any longer. It was actually a really gross thing to do since there wasn't enough Purell in the entire state of Pennsylvania to get my hands clean from crawling across the floor of a nightclub, but I just don't really seem to care at this point.

Without saying another word, we walk for about seventy-seven more steps (yes I count the steps, because I do weird counting things like that when I'm terribly nervous) further

into the club and then down a short corridor, until I feel a sharp gust of cool evening air blow on my face. The breeze feels absolutely life affirming. That's when I know that we must be close to an exit. We're actually going to make it out of here. I just hope that we have reached an exit door that we won't get trampled walking through.

The stranger positions Sloan and I in front of him as we continue to push our way through the door. When two guys dressed in button down shirts and dark slacks walk swiftly towards us and start pushing us roughly from the side, it takes the stranger only several seconds to wrap one of his massive palms around one of the guys throats.

"Step the fuck back," he growls, and then both of them jump back as high and fast as two high school cheerleaders.

"Sorry man." One of them mumbles.

We finish elbowing our way out the set of steel double doors in front of us, with the stranger's help of course, and I'm actually wondering why there aren't more people at this exit. I really want to round back and tell some of the people inside about the exit doors over here, but I know that Sloan would try and fight me first, before she would let me go back inside Armageddon. And I'm starting to think this guy wouldn't let me do it either.

"Don't stop. We're crossing the street." The deep voice orders while expertly guiding me across the street with his hand ever present on the exposed small curve of my back. The halter top Sloan loaned me gives him easy access, and so with every step I take, my entire body can't help but be laser focused on the spot where his warm hand rests. I don't want to obsess about it, but I can't help it.

Once the three of us make it to the other side of the street, I bend myself over at the waist and rest my hands on my knees, silently grateful for the crisp midnight air that's seeping up my nostrils and down my throat. Utterly relieved

that I made it safe and sound out of another life threatening situation ... again. I must have a guardian angel watching over me or a mischievous one who enjoys tormenting me.

"Take a few deep breaths but slowly." The stranger directs both of us while still only touching me. Is he ever going to stop touching my back? It's driving me bat shit crazy.

Finally I begin to feel some real relief from the burning sensations of the pepper spray, and my skin and eyes start to feel better as well. As I stand to a full stretch with my palms clasped together, inside out and above my head, my lungs delightfully begin to fill again with oxygen and then...

I freeze.

## ELIZABETH



*I* THINK I HEAR SLOAN asking me with worry in her voice if I've bumped my head, but she could be speaking Greek to me right now, because at this moment I am face to face with the most intimidating set of beautiful midnight black eyes I have ever seen. They are bottomless and they move and dance like dark pools of liquid ink. Once those deep-set eyes lock intently on mine, they render me what could be embarrassingly described as "stuck on stupid," because a million thoughts are racing through my mind (mostly dirty ones), which fortunately for me, I am unable to communicate.

I can't talk.

I can't smile.

I can barely breathe.

He's wearing a suit jacket, and not just any jacket, but what looks to be a custom tailored, midnight blue, very expensive looking one with a white Henley shirt underneath, dark jeans that fit him like a glove, and a pair of black Doc Martens. I notice part of an intricate, black tattoo that I imagine swirls and trails from God knows where, all the way

up to the side of his neck. What's visible to the eye is the very curved tip of the tattoo, teasing me, as it peeps out from the top of the round collar.

He looks hard and strong, but not steroid beefy, and stands well over six feet tall (my guess is 6'2"), with a broad back and shoulders, a narrow waist and sleek, diamond cut biceps flexing through his suit jacket. He wears his jet black hair in a very short buzz cut and looks like a badass who reluctantly decided to dress up for a night out at the club.

Still mute; I quietly drink more of him in.

I am even more drawn to this man's imperfections, because they make him unmistakably beautiful, as well as a lot more interesting than any other man I've ever seen in my life. Most noticeably, the rather wide and deep crescent shaped scar under his left eye, which I decide to create a story about in my head (which I do often) on how I think he managed to acquire it. Definitely from a fight. A fight that he won of course, because he looks like he hasn't lost a fight since he was about twelve years old. If even then. Adding to his appeal is his strong angular jaw and a nose that looks like it may have been broken once or twice, sort of like a boxer's or a hockey player's, as well as the one deep dimple in his left cheek.

One amazing frackin' dimple.

His magnetic, black sable colored eyes are so deep and intense as they trace the lines of my face, I feel as if I could fall into them and end up somewhere in the land of Oz. He looks weathered, and frightening, and delicious all at the same time. The air seems to have been completely sucked out of the atmosphere, and I feel like I'm going to throw up, but in a good way—if that's even remotely possible.

"You all right?" The stranger asks while softly running two of his knuckles along the side of my face.

I nod my head up and down, speechless from his touch.

"You okay?" He turns to ask Sloan.

Sloan looks a little green around the gills but unlike me is able to find her voice.

"Yes—I just need a minute thank you. You ok Bitsy?" She asks me with one eyebrow raised. I can tell that she's trying to communicate with her eyes for me to, "get my shit together" in front of this man. This god. This man-god.

But that's Sloan. Confident and cool under pressure. Even under duress she still manages to look absolutely flawless. With her modern, auburn-dyed pixie cut which pops against her creamy caramel colored skin, God-given size D breasts, and a killer smile; for a moment I'm worried that the stranger is going to realize that he has his hand on the back of the wrong girl. Any given night of the week if we're hanging out, I'm Sloan's "wingman", never the main chick.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not a slouch by any stretch, but I'm also a realist. I'm attractive, but like most women there are things that I wouldn't mind changing about myself. Like maybe the size of my very wide bell-shaped hips and probably my big hair. Sloan on the other hand doesn't need to change a thing. Heads turn when she enters a room. Men fall all over themselves to buy her a drink. She's Top Model beautiful and typically gets major attention when we hang out. So I'm kind of confused as to why the stranger doesn't seem to be as interested in her as most men are. But I guess the bigger question is, why do I even care about this? This is part of what's wrong with me. I worry about all the wrong things sometimes. I should just be happy that I've made it out of Club Lotus alive and with 20/20 vision. Not concern myself with who the man-god is interested in. Hell, my boyfriend just dumped me two seconds ago. I need to stay clear of all men. Especially ones like him.

"I'm good." I assure the two of them.

But I'm not good.

The stranger keeps staring at me in a way that is so electrically charged, that I am sure my skin feels hot to the touch. Flushed. I look away, because I feel like a colony of bats are swarming around in my gut. Blindly banging around inside my body like they're trying to find a way out but can't. I reluctantly look back up to meet his deep set eyes as he moves a few steps forward and gently lifts my chin with his strong, calloused pointer finger. It's like he knows that there is something else that I want or need to say.

"Thank you." I manage to fumble out softly. "You know for helping us out of there."

He grins in what I assume is a, "you're welcome" but says nothing. He just keeps staring at me.

Hard.

Sloan lets out an obvious fake cough to break the tension between us, but I am too flustered for it to do much good. My attention waffles between shifting my eyes from the stranger's perfectly shaped lips, to his ears, to the small mole on his neck, to the tip of his tattoo and everywhere else to avoid those eyes of his; clearly calculating every breath I take. I have a deep suspicion that if I stare into his eyes long enough, that he could tell me to jump off of the nearest bridge and I gladly would.

"Tell me your name." His tone has shifted. It seems more urgent and darker.

Suddenly I begin to nervously coil a few strands of my shoulder length hair around my fingers. I don't have a huge amount of experience with guys, but I know with great certainty that I'm in way over my head with this man. He looks hard and seasoned, like he's been around the block a few times, but in the best way possible. Every woman that walks by is gawking at him, and I imagine that most women are drawn to him like moths to a flame. Clearly I'm no better, since it's glaringly obvious that the stranger has the unique

super power to turn me into a complete moron. I have yet to say one intelligent thing in his presence so far. It's ridiculous. I graduated on the Dean's List for goodness sake.

He reaches over to untangle the hair that I have unwittingly twined around my fingers and then moves forward to tuck the loose strands gently behind my ear. As his fingertips lightly brush the small area of skin behind my ear, I slowly blink my eyes and struggle for shallow breaths. His strong fingers move to raise my chin in order to refocus my attention on him, and when my eyes meet his gaze this time, my body betrays me in a most unmerciful way. My nipples tighten underneath my flimsy halter top and are on full alert like a pair of headlights. I don't know how he knew to take a look, but the stranger takes a sweeping glance at them, takes a small swipe of his bottom lip with his tongue, and smiles suggestively at me. That tongue move of his makes me wonder what it would feel like if he touched my taut nipples with those strong fingers and then next with that beautiful mouth. I bet it's deliciously warm and wet.

So as if it isn't enough that I am completely embarrassed by the fact that I've allowed a complete stranger to touch me twice, not to mention my body's response to his handling of me-- I've completely forgotten what his original question was.

I feel seriously discombobulated.

This is six degrees of all kind of wrong.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" I ask annoyed with myself.

While I manage to somehow articulately ask him to repeat the question, I squirm while waiting to hear it repeated, as he lazily rakes his eyes from my neck, to my breasts, to my hips, legs, and then back up to my eyes. When he is finished eye fucking me, he smirks as if I'm already smoking a post-coital cigarette, and then he speaks to me in a way that requires a definite response.



"Your name."

Oh that's right moron.

"Elizabeth."

He flashes a delicious small grin on his face, which showcases his gorgeous dimple, and I am actually pleased with myself that I was responsible for putting it there.

Oh. My. God. What is my problem?

"Were you having a good time tonight Elizabeth?"

"In the club? Sure, it was all right." Why does he say my name like that? Dripping in seduction. Like we've already done something very wicked with each other.

"Did you two come together or did you come alone?" He asks with mild curiosity.

"Together." Sloan interjects.

This is the first time I notice that Sloan is staring at the stranger in almost the same way I am. Lustfully. He is sexy as hell; there is no disputing that. I can't even blame her, although I'm starting to not really like it.

"Is this your first time?" He smiles when he asks me that. I assume he is talking about visiting the club, but the question is loaded with sexual innuendo.

"I'm a regular," Sloan interjects again. "But it was her first time."

I'm not exactly sure what's going on here. Sloan is acting strangely. I need her to shut up and stop speaking for me. I can't believe that I'm even considering this, but is it possible that she could be a little miffed that the stranger isn't giving her the usual attention she receives from men? Or maybe she's just being a good friend and answering for me, since I seem to be incapable of talking for myself. It's probably the latter. That's what I choose to think anyway.

"Is that right—" He holds his finger up and turns his back to us to take a call on his cell phone. "Excuse me one second ladies."

"Yes," I hear him answer gruffly to the person on the phone. "It's done."

Still feeling slightly shell-shocked and buzzed from a combination of everything that has taken place over the course of the evening, I stop trying to eavesdrop on the stranger's phone call, and glance across the street towards the entrance of the club in disbelief. What a strange night.

I see small clusters of men and women in assorted states of disarray. Some people were clearly hurt and nursing wounds from being nearly trampled. Others were hunched over making calls on their cells or sitting on the ground coughing and rubbing their eyes which were no doubt still smarting from the pepper spray. The police have finally arrived and have started the business of clearing the club, tending to the injured, and questioning staff.

I scan the crowd to look for Marco, but notice someone else. The same blond from the bar who was wearing the really cheap looking, tacky off the shoulder turquoise mini dress with ruching on the side. She's a very pretty girl but was dressed and acted like she didn't know it. She was also the woman who I suspected to be the cause of this entire evening from hell. I'd bet someone a hundred dollars that she had a bottle of pepper spray attached to those keys that she pulled out in the club. In fact I was pretty sure that I saw her pull it out and press the button, although it is hard to say for sure due to my vantage point at the bar. I wonder if the police have questioned her yet.

I watch her reservedly as her eyes squint in my direction and then hone in on the person speaking on his cell phone directly behind me. The same man who was responsible for commanding my nipples to attention just moments ago. He notices her staring at him too and abruptly finishes his call. At least it seems abrupt to me, but maybe that's his usual phone etiquette.

When he walks back over and stands directly in front of me, I don't like how completely out of my own body I feel. I bravely look up into his eyes thinking maybe the words will come, but now I wish I hadn't. My breathing slows and my chest locks up. His eyes are like magnets. Pulling me into some strange vortex. I've read novels featuring characters that have an instant attraction to each other, and I roll my eyes every time I read one of those plots. I've been attracted to several guys over the years, and seriously dated two of them, but never experienced anything like this. I didn't think this really existed.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He asks with concern.

"Yes." I nod while rubbing my arms.

"Cold?"

I can't hide the fact that I'm slightly shivering. The nights are getting cooler as the summer starts to wind down, not to mention the fact that I'm totally underdressed. Last time I'll wear Sloan's skimpy tops.

"A little."

He takes off his jacket and wraps it around my shoulders, allowing his hands to linger across my shoulders a little longer than necessary. The lining of his jacket is a midnight blue satin, which smells uniquely like him and it warms me quickly with his residual body heat. I was just about to let out a small audible groan, if I hadn't caught myself. I'm pretty sure he notices.

He pushes up the sleeves of his shirt and holy mother of god there are more tats. Two intricate arm sleeves worth on strong, corded forearms. A simple but very expensive looking silver watch adorns his left wrist. I can't help but stare and once again, he notices.

"May I ask what you do?" He asks me.

"What I do?" I nervously rub the thin horizontal gold bar necklace I'm wearing between my fingers.

"Most of the women that come to the club on techno night are tightly wound corporate types looking to let loose."

"And I don't look like the corporate type?" I take slight offense. Why I'm not sure.

"I know you're not one of those types."

"I work in the tech industry."

He nods his head. "Interesting."

"What do you do?" I ask.

"I am a consultant."

With all those tattoos? I highly doubt that.

"Can I give you a ride home?"

"Umm, no we're fine." Right now almost every man looks like a potential drug addict or drug dealer to me. Including him. Especially him.

"Well he could drop us off—" Sloan adds her two cents, but I quickly cut her off.

"We're. Fine." I state firmly.

"Sheesh. It's not like we live that far Bitsy." Sloan mutters under her breath like a bratty teenager whose mom just scolded her.

She's definitely annoyed with me, but it's been a long night, and it's just dawned on me that I still don't know the stranger's name. I was too dumbstruck to remember to ask him, and he never offered it. This is just one of the many obvious red flags waving directly in front of my face about how lost I could become in a man like this. An attraction like this. I barely escaped the last relationship I thought I was so careful with. I'm definitely not doing that again. So I decide to listen to my mind and not my hormone driven body. If I accept a ride home or go anywhere with this guy, I may just barely survive it. Do I think he's a serial killer? No. But do I think he is someone with the capability of destroying me nonetheless. Absolutely. No thank you.

I finally see a yellow cab that looks empty and raise my

hand to hail it. I slip the stranger's jacket from around my shoulders and hand it back to him. It's so weird that I feel like I've lost something important when I give it back. I already miss his scent and his warmth. Sloan jumps in the backseat of the cab and gives me a moment while I say my goodbyes to him.

"Thank you again for everything tonight," I say sincerely.

He nods silently at me with an expressionless look on his face as he holds the door for me. I hope my refusal of a ride didn't offend him. Not that it matters. I'll never see him again. Once I'm inside the cab, I exhale the breath that I have been holding, and that's when he thumps the hood of the car twice signaling for the cab driver to drive away.

As we pull away, I turn my head like a child to watch him through the back window; and as his silhouette grows smaller in the distance, my body weeps for the many orgasms that will never be.

## ROMAN



SUNLIGHT STREAMS IN THROUGH an unfamiliar window, warming my face, and I'm pissed about it. I just need twenty more damn minutes of sleep. Just twenty. Grumbling profanities, I pull the sheet over my head to block the sun's rays and notice a pair of bare oversized breasts close to my chin. They are beautiful, perky, round globes that no doubt have been perfected by a surgeon's skilled hands; but I have no fucking idea who they belong to, even though they were in my mouth not less than five hours ago.

Doesn't matter. It never matters. I'm not built in a way that it would ever matter.

A month or so ago, a woman whose name is escaping me at the moment, gave me remarkable head and got so upset that I was disrespecting her like some two dollar whore, because I got up to leave as soon as she wiped her mouth. She told me I committed a "hit and run" and that I was trying to leave the scene of a crime without exchanging information, which was a major offense. I'm not kidding. She used those exact damn words. Did I mention that this woman was

in the police academy? (I went through a phase of law and order types.) So to shut all that down, I swiftly cuffed her ass to the headboard and fucked her hard doggy style while calling out each number of my cell phone with each punishing stroke.

Over and over and over.

Funny thing was that she never did quite remember the number. I guess it's kind of difficult to concentrate when your eyes are rolling back inside of your head. I'd say it was a win-win for both of us.

The woman I'm lying next to right now doesn't seem to mind a little hit and run. I can tell that she is awake based on her breathing pattern, although she's pretending to be asleep. It's rare that I hook up with someone who is embarrassed about the night's sexual escapades, so it must be that she's as anxious for me to leave, as I am to go. Maybe she has a boyfriend. I don't give a shit. This was a mistake anyway.

I just needed something to help me clear my head of all things Elizabeth. The woman I spotted immediately as she entered The Lotus. The woman I couldn't keep my eyes off of all night. As I watched her (more like stalked her), a foreign vibration snaked through my chest that was new and powerful and alarming. Threatening to choke the ever-living shit out of me.

I think it was ... possession.

I watched Elizabeth like a hawk as she ordered and drank three glasses of red wine, danced like no one was watching, flirted with a bartender who is on my short list to beat the fuck up next time I see him, and then as she almost got herself trampled. Alcohol isn't helping me forget her, so I thought maybe pussy would. It's been a week, but I can still see her sexy ass curves, feel her soft hair, smell her. Like cinnamon and sunshine. It's an attraction I don't begin to even understand, nor do I want to explore. I can't remember

the last time that I thought about the same woman for more than seven days.

Wait ... maybe because it's been never.

I glance out of the mystery woman's bedroom window and realize based on the age and architecture of the buildings surrounding me that I'm clear across town. I'm going to need a little extra time to make it to my morning meeting. A meeting that I called.

Shit.

An incoming text vibrates my phone to life. With one eye open, I scan the surrounding area for my cell. It's in the bed, tangled in the sheets.

**Jade: The old man is waiting.**

Double shit.

**Me: Stall for me.**

**Jade: Long night?**

**Me: Mind your business**

**Jade: I'll give you a \$100 if you can tell me her name:)**

**Me: I'll give you a \$1000 if you quit.**

**Jade: Give me \$10,000 and you have a deal.**

**Me: Just stall. I'll fire you later.**

**Jade: ☺**

My clothes are strewn all over the floor of what's her name's bedroom floor. I'm not really sure what that's about since I'm not typically a rip my clothes off in the heat of passion kind of guy. That's some soap opera shit. Mostly because passion is for pussies in love. I don't do passion, and I damn sure don't do love. I fuck. And that doesn't require a whole lot of demonstrative hoo-hah. Just technique. Which I have plenty of.

As I pick my jeans up and yank them back on, what's her name's body shifts and stretches as if she's finally waking up, when I know good and damn well that she's been awake for hours. What theatrics.



Then regretfully, she speaks.

"Hey good morning," she says with a somewhat scratchy deep voice. She must be a smoker, and I must have been really drunk to miss that. I don't like smokers. Especially when they're sticking their tongues down my throat.

"I added my number to the contacts in your phone. It's under—"

"Why?" I demand to know flatly.

I swear that I'm not purposely trying to be an ass, okay maybe I am, but I'm annoyed that she was handling my phone while I was sleeping; and I'm even angrier that I was sloppy enough to spend the night here and not have my passcode on. I've got to ease up on the Jack Daniels. I'm slipping.

"In case you want to call me."

"I won't," I say sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling my t-shirt over my head, with my back still turned to her. Just gotta find my boots, and I'm out of here.

"You may change your mind."

When she sits up and the sheet falls, I turn my head and get a good look of her entire body. She's definitely my usual type. Big perky boobs. Flat stomach. Slender hips. Extremely long legs. Plus, she knows she looks good. Confidence is always attractive, but that doesn't change anything. We're both grown and this was what it was.

"I don't do second dates," I tell her honestly.

She pauses for a moment. "What ... Why?"

"Not interested in more than once."

She served her purpose. Well ... then again maybe she didn't. The whole point was to use this chick's body to forget another woman's. But that shit didn't work, because all I seem to be thinking about is the woman who is not my usual type, clear as day. Elizabeth's petite, soft, curvy ass body in those tiny jeans. Hugging her hips and ass so sweetly. That

barely there halter accentuating her rounded shoulders and those heavy tits and tight nipples. Damn.

She points her finger at me. "I heard you were a world class jerk. In fact—"

"Did you come?" I abruptly interrupt her, because I could give two shits what she heard about me from whatever club skanks she rolls with.

"What—"

"I asked if I made you come last night."

She turns her lips up. "Yes, but—"

"Did I disrespect you at all?"

"No, but you—"

"So let's be clear. I made you come. Loud, hard and more than once if I recall. I'm pretty sure I even said goodnight; the polite motherfucker that I am. We slept, and now it's a new day, and I have to go. If you're going to fuck strangers that you take back to your apartment, then you're going to have to toughen up. Not everyone is going to want to go steady afterwards."

What's her name was finally stunned and silent.

Just the way I like 'em.

**DYING TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?  
DOWNLOAD MASTERSON NOW**







*The King Brothers Series*

## **Camden King Is My Cocky, Badass Boss And He's Coming For Me...**

I work for him, but I can't stand him.  
I slept with him once, and he never lets me forget it.

Camden King thinks he can have me again...and again...and again.

But he can't...I won't let that happen.

I just have to last thirty days to prove it to him. Will I be able to hold out?

Or have I finally met my match...

*Claimed by a King is a HAWT alpha spin-off novel of the Masterson series featuring badass alpha Camden King. It is a standalone, full length novel, with a HEA and NO cheating (but maybe a little ménage:).*



## PROLOGUE



The Harbor Hotel  
Baltimore, Maryland  
**Three Months Ago**

CAMDEN

*I*'m not a big talker.  
I keep to myself.

If someone needs to make a lot of noise, I let my brother Cutter handle that. Cutter often describes me as the silent and deadly type. That may be a somewhat accurate characterization of me, but I like to think of myself as careful instead.

A watcher.

Someone who calculates risk before taking it. Someone who observes a situation long and hard before striking. But when I finally do make the decision to act, I don't fuck around. I handle my business. Which is what brings me here standing in front of the five-star Harbor Hotel of Baltimore, Maryland.

I've run a million scenarios in my head.  
I've calculated the risk.  
And I think it's fucking worth it.  
Tonight ... I'm taking what's mine.  
I've been patient long enough.



## JADE



The Harbor Hotel  
Baltimore, Maryland  
**Three Months Ago**

I'm in the bathroom, in my birthday suit, contemplating the day I've just had. As I sip on my second large cocktail consisting of Grey Goose vodka and pineapple juice over ice, I finish wiping off the remnants of my so-called waterproof mascara, and start running the tub when I hear a knock at my hotel room door.

I'm feeling no pain, but the knock is loud enough that I hear it over my old school nineties jams streaming through an app on my phone. I don't think anything of the interruption, though, because I'm expecting an overpriced Cobb salad and an iced tea from room service. So I wrap the oversized bath sheet around my nude body, run to the door, crack it open to let the server in, and immediately turn back to attend to my tub full of water.

"You can just leave the platter on the bed," I call out. Running back to the bubbles and cocktail waiting for me.

But it isn't anyone from room service. It's a greeting from a deep, rolling, familiar voice that makes my stomach flip and flutter instead.

"Where are you running off to, itty bitty?"

I whip my head around in shock. Strands of my hair flying in my mouth. Only one person calls me that particular nickname, and he has no business being here.

"What the hell?!" The words tumble out of my mouth.

"Come again?"

The *voice* doesn't like it when I curse at him. Never mind the fact that he has a foul mouth too. Never mind the fact that he is here invading *my* space, not the other way around, so in my opinion a couple of curse words are definitely called for.

"Let me speak clearer for you then." I make sure to enunciate all my consonants and vowels. Especially the bad ones. "What the *hell* are you doing in my hotel room? No wait, what the *fuck* are you doing in Maryland, period?"

"Handling some business, and watch your fucking mouth."

My boss Camden King, deliciously dressed in all black, steps completely into my room, lets the door click shut, and carefully drops his signature black leather backpack on the floor. As soon as I hear the thump of his bag hitting the carpeted entryway, the room suddenly becomes several square feet smaller.

I can barely breathe.

His cocky dominance takes up so much oxygen, and there's a seriousness etched across his beautifully chiseled face that frightens and fascinates me at the same time.

"What business?" I ask with a faux confidence. Not even realizing that I am walking backwards towards the wall as he moves silently forward like the predator that he is quickly revealing himself to be.

I stop moving when I can't any longer, my back finally against the wall, white knuckling the corners of my towel, making sure that it stays closed. Because if it slips even just a little, I think I will end up slipping.

Slipping right on top of his enormous dick.

I hate to admit it to myself, but *doing* Camden King has been a reoccurring theme in many of my dreams lately. Dreams I hoped would cease very soon, because they are a pain in my ass and a strain on my vibrator. Not to mention that I couldn't or wouldn't ever make the decision to *actually* fuck my boss.

Only in my dreams.

Or so I keep telling myself.

The two of us stare at each other for a moment in uneasy silence. We don't really need words at the moment, because the fact that he is here speaks volumes. Camden doesn't travel much outside of the Philadelphia area. Not unless it's absolutely required for a job, and being in Baltimore was certainly not a job requirement. We don't have any clients in the area, and we both are actually supposed to be somewhere else tonight.

The beauty of my relationship with my employers: Camden, Cutter and Roman has always been that it's a simple and straight forward relationship. I work for them. They pay me. I take care of them. They protect me. But we give each other a wide berth when it comes to our private lives. They have their women. Lots of women. And I've had my dalliances too, but no one interferes in each other's lives.

At least not until today.

"What are you doing in this hotel, Jade?" he asks while closing the gap between us even more. "Why aren't you home attending the fundraiser?"

There was an important autism fundraising event hosted by Roman's stepmother that we both were supposed to

attend. I was planning all week to be there, but decided at the last minute to come here instead. I didn't tell anyone where I was going, because there would have been too many questions. Questions I wasn't ready to answer.

"Why aren't *you* there?" I counter.

"I asked first," he says while flashing that very wicked smile of his.

"What business is it of yours?"

"Last time I checked you are my business." He takes a long pause for effect then finishes his thought. "You work for me, remember?"

"Well if you want to get technical about things, Roman is the one who hired me."

"I think you're very confused." Camden practically growls in my face.

At this point, we are standing so close to each other that I feel drenched in his scent. All of the domineering men I work for have a signature aroma, but Camden always smells the best. Earthy and natural. Like he sweats sandalwood and leather. The scent is utterly intoxicating and must be permanently etched in my olfactory senses, because sometimes I wake up in the morning and swear that I can actually smell him in my apartment. Which is completely impossible, because Camden has never been inside of my place, and Lord knows that I'm trying to keep it that way.

"You answer to three men. Roman, me, and my brother. Of course tonight you have the distinct pleasure of only having to answer to me," he says while running the backs of his fingers gingerly down the side of my face. The unexpected touch of his calloused knuckles almost takes my breath away. *What is he doing?*

"Listen, Camden—"

"No, you listen."

He's so close that his lips are actually touching mine as he

continues to speak. His eyes almost dancing. "I tracked you, I followed you, and I'm not leaving until I get what I came for."

He firmly grabs me around my waist with one hand, and places his other on the hand that is holding my towel in place.

"What did you—"

He cuts off my idiotic question with his mouth, and kisses me like he was trying to teach me a lesson. A lesson on how to fuck someone's mouth properly. A lesson on how to shut a woman up in the most pleasurable way possible. A lesson on never questioning why Camden does anything he does. It would be pointless. Especially if he was going to do shit like this to stop me.

I haven't allowed myself to completely let go though. I'm still highly strung like a tightly wound clock, because I haven't been kissed like this since ... well I've never been kissed like this. I've only had one serious relationship in my life, which was a complete disaster from start to finish, and then a string of meaningless fucks afterwards.

I never kiss them.

It's one of my rules.

A rule I seem to have completely thrown to the wayside as Camden's tongue expertly and languidly explores mine. Soft, tender, exploratory strokes of his tongue that are loosening me up with each swipe. His skills are so amazing that they make me wonder just how good it would feel if he used them on other areas of my body.

Probably would be life changing.

There's no way I can let things get to that point though, because that would be damn near close to breaking my *never going to fuck my boss* rule. Unfortunately Camden's expert command of my mouth and my inability to respond appropriately because of it starts to shake my resolve.

I release the taut hold I had on my towel. Then he lifts his

hand away from mine and slides it in my hair at the nape of my neck.

Cradling the back and side of my head.

Stroking his thumb gently near the corner of my mouth.

Pulling me farther into him.

Deepening our kiss.

And ratcheting up the heat factor.

I completely let go of the towel. It feels stupid to keep holding onto it in the middle of us passionately making out, because that is indeed what we are doing, even though my hands are still in between us. Serving as the last remaining barrier between the two of us making full bodily contact.

I can't place my arms around his neck like I want to, because Camden is so much taller than me, so I slide them around his waist instead. Decision made. If this is going to happen, then it's going to happen. Maybe it was meant to be. There's no one here to interrupt us. There's no one to talk me out of it. There's just me and him. No one will have to know. It could be a one time thing. Another meaningless fuck. It would have to be.

He's my boss and someone I've known for a long time, and because of those two things, he knows entirely too much about me, and I know quite a bit about him as well. Things that would make going beyond one night complicated and awkward. So yeah, it could never be more than one night in this hotel room for both of our sakes.

Camden abruptly pulls away from the kiss and glares at me almost angrily. As if he's upset that he's just kissed me, or something. *Me too, buddy*, I think to myself. I never thought I would be kissing Camden King naked in a hotel room.

Honestly, I have no idea what he's thinking. Which is one of the things that drives me absolutely nuts about Camden. I can't read his facial expressions or lack thereof for shit. Which makes handling him that much more of a challenge.

It's always been like that, and oddly enough, one of the things that draws me to him.

"What?" I ask open-mouthed.

He slowly rakes his eyes up and down my nude body before asking the craziest question.

"Are you fucking someone here?"

"What?!"

"Did I stutter? I asked you if you're fucking someone."

"What does that matter?"

"Not the right answer, Jade."

"Don't make this more difficult."

"Don't make *what* more difficult?"

"Whatever I think is about to happen in this room."

"Nothing is going to happen in this room until you tell me if you're fucking someone or not."

"Are you actually trying to throw down an ultimatum? Let's not forget that I didn't invite you here. You barged your way in here. I could care less whether anything happens between us tonight or not."

"Your pussy begs to differ."

"You don't know shit about what's in between my legs, and you never will."

I bend down to pick up my towel, suddenly very self-conscious about my lack of clothing.

"Anyone who stepped inside of this room right now would know. You can smell it. It's wet. It's weeping. It's hungry. And I made it that way."

For just a moment his gifted kissing technique made me forget what an arrogant prick Camden King can be, and the reason why I in fact have rules in place to begin with.

"Get out," I order firmly.

"I'm not going any motherfucking where," he growls.

"I don't want you here. Get out—"

He cuts my words off again, but this time with one of his

hands wrapped around my throat and the other shoved between my legs. I inadvertently drop the towel again, and immediately feel a warm gush between my legs as he slides his fingers back and forth between my folds.

Assertively and expertly.

My knees would have buckled if it weren't for the fact that he was firmly holding me against the wall by my neck. I am so turned on by his passionate manhandling of me, I can't think straight and the yeses seem to keep flying out of my mouth.

"Do you like how this feels, Jade?"

"Yes," I moan like the weakling the vodka has made me.

"Do you want me to keep doing this until you come on my hand?"

Dammit, he's dirty too.

"Yes," I exhale in defeat.

"So are you going to be a good girl and answer my question?" His deep voice rumbles closely beside my ear as he continues to stroke me between my legs.

"Yes," I gasp in pleasure.

"Yes you *are* fucking someone here?"

His hand stops moving.

"No," I puff out in frustration. Sick of the twenty questions. "The only person I'm fucking is you in about three seconds in this hotel room."

"Good fucking answer, itty bitty."



## JADE



I'm totally mind fucked. The second after I give Camden the answer he wants to hear his hands instantly drop down and away from me. I can't believe how my body immediately misses his confident grasp, the slight pressure around my neck, and the way he was stroking me. Somehow without prior knowledge, this big pain in my ass knows exactly what my body likes and what it needs, and God help me, but I'm desperately craving more.

"Pick up the towel you dropped and spread it on the bed. I don't care how nice of a hotel this is, hotel bed spreads are gross."

I do what he asks as he starts taking off his jacket, but there is something about touching the towel again that triggers my memory. The water.

"Shit!" I scream as I take off flying towards the bathroom. "I left the tub running."

Sure enough there is the beginning of a major flood in the beautiful marbled bathroom of my five-star hotel room. Well more than just the beginnings. The floor is damn near

completely covered in water, and I know I'll have to pay a mint if I don't quickly figure out a way to sop it all up.

While I'm wading my feet in flood water, wondering what the heck I am going to do, Camden runs out into the hallway, locates a housekeeping cart, and swipes a stack of towels. Next thing I know, we both are on all fours, mopping up water with white fluffy towels, when room service knocks. I'm actually still naked as a jaybird, so Camden does the honor of answering the door.

"It better be fucking room service for one," he says in an accusatory tone. Still obviously suspicious that I am in Baltimore to meet a man.

"Oh be quiet and get the door," I fuss back.

I hear Camden answer the door, mumble a few words, then close it; but when he never comes back into the bathroom, I get a little nervous. After finishing up wiping the last of the water, I go back out into the suite's main area to see what he's up to, and find that he has made himself quite comfortable.

The lights have been dimmed, the bedspread taken off, and the sheets of the bed are pulled down. He's taken off his black motorcycle boots, his shirt, and leather jacket. And all he is wearing are his black cargo pants, a leather cuff on his wrist, and a sexy smirk across his face.

I should be annoyed. He's being so ridiculously presumptuous. I mean have I ever given him reason to think that I'd be down for this? But it's difficult to be genuinely miffed about his impromptu visit when I'm practically drooling over the jerk right now.

He looks amazing.

Downright delicious.

I've always known that Camden takes care of himself. He eats well, works out, and I've definitely seen him without a shirt on over the years, but getting a full on view of his

diamond cut six-pack in soft bedroom lighting, with that hungry look in his eyes is a whole other thing. I can't look away.

"Who was at the door?" I ask in a lame attempt to distract myself from the *real* distraction in the room.

"Room service and it looks like crap," he says as the metal lid clanks when he places it back over my salad. "We'll have to order from a better place later. I'm sure you'll have an appetite for something more than salad by then."

"What is going on with you Camden? Why are you doing this? Why are you here?"

Camden stares at me with a look of steely determination.

"Playing stupid doesn't suit you, Jade. You know exactly why I'm here. You've known for weeks. Maybe even months. There's something between us, and we're going to figure out what tonight. No more glares from across the room. No more ignoring me. No more smart-ass comments about who I'm fucking. No more silent treatment at meetings, because you don't know how to communicate when you're pissed."

My head is whirling. "I don't ... I don't want this," I say.

Actually I've wanted this for months, but I've been fighting it. I think it would be a huge mistake that not just the two of us, but all four of us would never recover from.

"Get in the bed," he orders gruffly. "You lie entirely too much."

"Oh my freaking God, you've definitely lost touch with reality—"

"I think you're confused again." He shushes me. "When I tell you to get in the bed, I also mean for you to shut the fuck up."

"Like that will ever happen," I say. Not totally understanding that while my mouth chooses to oppose any and all orders he may give, my body delights in submitting to each and every one of his directives. In other words, I'm fucked.

"No?"

"No," I answer a lot less confidently.

"I've got the perfect way to shut you up. Get on the bed and scoot down. Head away from the headboard."

I follow directions but am shaking while I do.

My heart rapidly pounding.

My breath shortening.

Camden slowly unbuckles the thick leather belt he's wearing with his eyes completely on me. As he pulls the leather through his belt loops, I take a quick inhalation. Frightened that he plans on using the belt on me.

His eyebrow raises in curiosity. "You want the belt, Jade?"

I nod my head no as he chuckles in response. "Next time then."

I stay completely silent as he continues to unzip his pants, and lets them drop to the floor with a thud. My pupils are mono-focused on the growing bulge inside of his black fitted boxers. I think I may have just even licked my lips.

He waits for a moment.

Watching me.

Reading me.

I consider myself pretty tough, and it takes a lot to intimidate a girl like me, but he was doing a pretty good job of it.

When he finally slides his boxers down, I watch in delicious horror as his dick springs completely free. I say horror because I am four eleven, he's got to be at least six two, and his dick is big as shit. I mean I've always suspected it was huge, I've caught glimpses of it in its flaccid state over the years, but seeing it live, erect, and in person makes what is about to go down between us seem *extra* real.

And fucking scary.

I'm worried.

*If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit*, is the only nonsensical line I keep repeating to myself. What if it doesn't fit?

“Wait,” is my one-word feeble attempt to stop him, and he does ... after kicking his boxers across the room.

“I don’t respond to the word *wait*. The only words you need to say are *stop* if you want this to end or *don’t stop* if it feels good. You got me?”

I’m literally speechless as he continues on and climbs carefully onto the bed. Sitting above my head and against the headboard. His dick jutting out and bobbing angrily up and down over the top of my face.

“Hold onto my thighs and open your mouth,” he directs.

*Fuck*, I swear to myself.

I’m so conflicted.

It never dawned on me that Camden would be so commanding in bed. This isn’t exactly the way I pictured it in my fantasies. I may have to do whatever he says at work, but in my dreams, I am the one in charge. Taking orders in bed is not something that I’m used to. Not with my one-night stands. With them I always take the lead and I always feel safe. But maybe letting go with someone I am very much attracted to, and someone I trust (to the degree that I can trust anyone) wouldn’t be such a big deal. I’ve done worse things.

So I do what I’m told and grip the outsides of Camden’s muscular thighs, while he adjusts himself and then slides his penis into my mouth. Almost immediately I feel another rush of wet heat between my legs. I actually like arrogant Camden King force-feeding his dick into my mouth. *Who knew?* So, surprise surprise, that is yet another one of my rules I’m breaking.

1. *No kissing.*
2. *No fucking the boss.*
3. *No controlling shit.*
4. *No fellatio.*

Camden begins to gently pump himself in and out of my

mouth. Making sure not to move too deeply at first, probably so he doesn't choke me to death. Allowing me to get adjusted to the girth of his cock and the rhythm of his thrusts.

I'm starting to really like this. In fact I want to participate more by at least holding him at the base of his dick or fondling his balls a little, but Camden won't allow it.

"Hands," he reprimands me with a guttural growl when I try to move them. "Back on my legs. Yes, Jade, that feels so fucking good."

It's amazing to me how even with my hands basically tethered to his body, holding onto his thighs, that I still feel totally powerful. That I am completely controlling Camden's pleasure with my mouth and henceforth increasing mine as well.

"Spread your legs."

I hesitate at first. I don't want him to see how wet I am. Even though I am enjoying myself, I still can't get completely out of my head. I never do when I have sex. It's a blessing and a curse.

"Wider," he insists.

I take a hard pull on Camden's dick with my mouth as punishment for reprimanding me, but it has the opposite effect. He loves it. He folds his enormous body completely over on all fours and starts licking and lapping me between my legs while pumping himself harder in and out of my mouth.

We are in a perfect sixty-nine position, and for a split second I'm frightened. Probably because I know that I can't control his thrusts in this position. What if he gets excited? What if he starts ramming himself down my throat and I can't stop him? But as these random concerns for my safety swirl around in my head, I can't deny that with each passing moment I feel good. Better than good. My eyes are practically rolling in the back of my head, as we begin to

become lost in each other. A sensual and mutual game of tit for tat.

Every time he flicks my clit with his tongue.

I suck him harder.

Every time I take a stronger pull of his cock.

He takes a powerful one of my clit.

It's almost a battle of wills. Who is going to come first? Who is going to scream for mercy first? He's trying to break me, like I'm some sort of wild stallion, not because I believe that he wants me so badly, but probably because there's never been a woman who's told Camden no in his life.

Maybe I serve as some interesting sort of challenge for him, but he's going to realize quickly that there is no way I am ever going to allow him to break me. I will always be free. I will never surrender and become someone's property, someone's plaything, or someone's ATM machine ever again. But if there was anyone ever able to get me to bend my will, God knows that Camden would be the one.

He lightens up on the suction of my clit. Then he bites it.

Then he kisses gently around my core. Almost reverently.

Then rapidly licks back and forth across my clit with his powerful tongue like a human vibrator.

All while holding my legs spread wide and immobile.

It was all beginning to be too much. I was positive stronger women had fallen for less. My legs were beginning to shake, and I swore I could feel my heart pounding through my chest.

"Come for me, Jade," he demands with urgency.

And I come swift and hard like a wild banshee. Screaming expletives and some other unintelligible words, because it feels just that good. Then he comes inside of my mouth with a hushed curse of his own.

"Fuck."

Hot, salty, lava floods my mouth and drips down my

throat, but I swallow every drop and am proud that I do. Now I'm hot and sweaty and still very horny. I want more of Camden. So much more. Like him inside of me all over this hotel room, but I refuse to beg for it. Which is what I'm pretty sure he's looking for me to do. He seems the type to get off on begging.

Camden finally lifts his large body from over me and sits against the headboard of the bed staring at me while stroking my hair. It's an odd gesture, because it seems to be part of the post afterglow that lovers share, not two people just fucking around.

The unforgettable orgasm which has totally rocked my body, has me lying here panting for breath, as if I'm unfit and don't run a couple of miles everyday. It must have been the erotic mixture of exertion, adrenaline and bliss making me unusually winded. I can honestly say that no man has ever made me come that hard. I'm already bemoaning the fact that this one-night stand is going to be difficult to put behind me.

"I want to fuck you, Jade, but I'm not going to have my dick inside of you on a Saturday and another man's in there on a Monday."

When he put it that way, he made me sound like a whore, and maybe I was a little, but I liked it that way. Dictating whom I had sex with. Calling the shots about where. Always in charge of the when. Not feeling stifled by relationship restrictions or expectations. And never being disappointed by disappointing men. Yeah, if I had to choose between being a whore and being a pushover then I pick whore all day.

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say."

"It's not a difficult concept. If I'm fucking you, then you're only fucking me."

"Well you're not fucking only me, you're fucking me *tonight*, there's a difference."



He glares at me with icy eyes.

"What are you doing in Baltimore, Jade?"

"Why do you keep asking me that? What do you think I'm doing here?"

"I don't fucking know!" he roars. "That's why I'm asking."

"Huh, you seem upset. I guess all of your little computer programs could track me here, but couldn't tell you *why* I was here. Is that the problem?"

He rubs his face harshly with the palm of his hand in frustration.

"Run the Jacuzzi water again."

"Why?"

"You're going to need it," he says with a maniacal hunger in his eyes I've never seen before.

"I thought you needed assurances that I wouldn't be fucking anyone tomorrow, or the next day, or the next—"

He quiets me with his mouth again.

This time with much more urgency.

And I welcome it.

The warmth of his tongue caressing mine.

A girl could get used to it even though she shouldn't.

"I've decided that I don't want you to make me any empty promises or pledges right now."

He pulls back from the kiss to look directly at me when he speaks.

"Because after tonight you won't want anyone inside of you but me. That I can *assure* you."

## JADE



Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

### **Present Day**

I'm doing something that I haven't done in a really long time, and I know I'm probably going to regret it tomorrow, but I'm meeting my younger sister Jana for lunch. I may be three years older than her, but she has always been smarter, more mature, and more successful than I ever have, and she never lets me forget it.

"Has a waiter come over yet?" she asks, while plopping her overpriced handbag on the table.

"Hello to you too, Jana."

"Oh yeah, hi. Happy New Year and all of that. Sorry that I'm a little snappy, but I'm hungry as hell. I had a really long class this morning and skipped breakfast. The professor I work for is so demanding. You're so lucky you didn't pursue this type of career path, Jade."

I have the strongest urge to pluck my sister in the middle of her forehead like I did when we were kids. Jana enjoys throwing in my face any chance she can how she's a teaching

assistant for a prominent professor at Temple University, while passively aggressively reminding me of how I barely made it out of high school algebra.

"The server said he'd be right back," I say dryly.

"Is the service here okay?"

She looks around with her nose turned up as if my selection of restaurant is beneath her. As if she has no recollection of how our parents idea of dinner out was a Friday night at McDonald's.

"It's fine," I say with an attitude. "I've eaten here twice before with Roman. You know him right? My *rich* boss."

"Yes, yes, Jade. I'm well aware."

After I flag down our server, a very sluggish boy with freckles and a sandy brown Mohawk (my sister probably isn't too far off about the service here) takes our order.

"Still eating salads every meal I see."

"That's right," I reply smirking. "I need to keep my girlish figure."

This is one of the other things between us. Jana is about twenty-five pounds overweight, and I've always been small and pretty fit, which I attribute to a mixture of good genes, plenty of exercise and a decent diet.

"You could stand to eat a burger or two. You look thin. Too thin. Is that boss of yours working you too hard?"

Jana always tells me stuff like this. I'm used to it by now. That's Jana speak for *you look better than me, bitch*.

"I helped him plan a very romantic proposal to his girlfriend last week, but other than that, work is pretty easy going nowadays."

Our waiter brings us both glasses of ice water with lemon wedges and also a Sprite for Jana. I play around with the lemon inside of my glass as I wait for Jana to get to the real point of this lunch. There's always a point.

"So ... I saw Dad the other day."

I should have seen this coming, but if she was trying to spring a *Daddy* conversation on me, she should have taken me out for drinks not lunch. I need to be totally trashed to talk about that bastard.

“So.”

“I think he may be sick. Seriously sick.”

I twirl the ice around in my water with the straw, watching as bits of lemon pulp swirl around inside, turning my water cloudy. Like my mood.

“So.”

“So ... I think you should go see him.”

“And why would I do that?”

“So he can apologize to you before he leaves this earth, which by the looks of him is going to be relatively soon.”

I take a long sip of my water. Staring at my sister like the unbelievable turncoat that she is.

“Maybe you were too young to really remember him at his worst, Jana. So I’m going to chalk this conversation up to your youth and ignorance, but let me tell you something ...”

I pull my straw out and point it defiantly at her. She watches as drops of lemon water drip down on the table, driving her absolutely nuts.

“Our father is a motherfucker, and I don’t care if he’s gasping his last breaths right this very minute. I have no interest in visiting him, talking to him, and certainly no interest in forgiving him.”

Her eyes bulge.

“Gosh, Jade, you’re so nasty when you’re hungry. Where is Mohawk dude with our food? This place is so slow.”

“It’s worth the wait.”

I have a bad habit of sitting on my phone, and cracking the screen at least twice a year. I really need to carry a bag, but I’m a bit of a tomboy and never really got used to them. They just get in my way.

I feel my phone buzzing in the back pocket of my jeans. It's just a feeling, but I think I already know who it is. I thought he had backed off for a while, but now I'm realizing that was just the calm before the storm. He's relentless now.

**KING KONG: You still avoiding me?**

**Me: No**

**King Kong: You're not?**

**Me: I was never avoiding you. I haven't even been thinking about you.**

**King Kong: Now we both know that's a lie.**

**Me: I'm busy right now. Leave me alone.**

**King Kong: Busy doing what?**

**Me: Lunch**

**King Kong: With who?**

**Me: My lover. A famous Brazilian soccer player. You don't know him.**

**King Kong: That's a very specific fantasy lover :)**

**Me: Do you know a real one then? I'd love to meet him.**

**King Kong: I'm going to ignore that.**

"ARE you going to text your fuck buddy during our entire lunch?" Jana interrupts our text exchange like a splash of cold water.

"What are you talking about? Fuck buddy," I mutter.

"I can tell by your facial expressions that you're texting a man. A man whom you have either fucked or want to fuck. You're smiling quite devilishly."

"Lower your voice," I demand.

"Am I wrong?"

"It's just one of the other guys I work for."

"One of those hot twins? Oh my God, are you sleeping with one of them now?"

"They aren't twins," I say flatly. "They're nothing alike."

"Oh, I just assumed. Well which one are you messing around with?"

"We're not messing around."

"Which one were you just angry texting then?"

I sigh.

"The older one."

**KING KONG: You still there?**

**Me: What. Do. You. Want.**

**King Kong: You know what I want.**

**Me: Is this about Baltimore?**

**King Kong: It's about me inside of you in Baltimore.**

UGH, he really won't let this shit go, and I'm just about sick of it. I went to the harbor on a fool's errand, but still, it was completely my own business. Then here he comes running after me. Inserting himself in my damn business. Okay so maybe I did slip and fall on his dick in a Baltimore hotel, but while I may not have Jana's book smarts, I have plenty of common sense, and I know better than to do that silly shit twice.

Not going to happen.

No matter how much he pushes the issue.

**ME: Stop texting me about this. We have to work together.**

**King Kong: Or I can work that tight pussy of yours again.**

. . .

I'M ERASING these messages as soon as I get up from this table.

He is so vulgar.

**ME: You didn't work it well before, so I pass.**

**King Kong: Such the little liar. You better bring your sweet little ass to the club by nine, or you and I are going to have a much bigger problem than my dick in your mouth.**

OH MY GOD, I can't stand him. The worst mistake I ever made was spreading my legs for that arrogant, computer hacking, asshole. I mean seriously. He's touched in the head. Completely nuts.

"Where is our damn food?" I slam my phone down on the table livid by the exchange I've just had with Camden and irritated that it takes thirty minutes to get a chicken Caesar salad in this place.

"Excuse me!" Jana turns around and calls out to a group of servers who are by the register. "Somebody better bring us our food real soon or somebody's going to catch a murder charge."

I can't help but laugh. Jana can be pretentious, and a pain in my ass, but sometimes I forget that she and I were raised in the same dysfunctional home. Sometimes some of *that* fire bred into us kicks in. Her approach works too, because lo and behold our food, which evidently had been ready and waiting for Mohawk to pick up arrives.

"Sorry 'bout that," Mohawk apologizes. "We're short staffed today."

"Uh, huh," my sister says unconvinced. "Can you please

just bring us some ketchup and some extra napkins? Like right now?" she snaps.

"Of course." He raises one of his eyebrows at that finger snap. "I'll be right back with that."

"He's going to spit in your ketchup." I chuckle. "This is a nice restaurant. It will be easy for him to do it because they bring it in a little dish, not a bottle, and he's pissed with all that finger snapping of yours."

"Nice restaurant my ass."

I take a bite of my salad. It's delicious like I remembered. They make a great Caesar dressing here. No one can pick an out of the way restaurant with great food like Roman.

"So how's school?" I ask, sincerely wanting to know.

"Professor Owens is working my ass off of course. So I've been staying up all night grading tons of papers, and he keeps taking all the credit."

"Well isn't that what teaching assistants do?"

"Yeah, but now that I am one, I see the gross inequality of it all. Seems like everyone in academia works their asses off when they're young, so that one day they can sit back and not have to work at all when they're forty. It's called tenure."

"Isn't that what you want?"

"I guess so. Tenure is part of my fifteen-year plan. Guess I shouldn't deviate from it now."

"Guess not."

"So tell me everything."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me everything about the twin."

"Not a twin," I say annoyed. I've told her that a million times before.

"Right. What's his name?"

"Camden."

"Right. So tell me about him."

"There's nothing to tell, Jana. You're looking for some



interesting love story, but you know that I don't do relationships."

"I know you haven't had any relationships since Tyson, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't. For God's sake, Jade, you two were only kids then."

"I understand that, but it doesn't really matter. I have zero interest in ties or relationships. I work at a place where I meet sexy, amazing men every night. Who wants to be tied down to one man when I'm always in the middle of the best smorgasbord ever?"

Jana puts her fork down for a moment.

"Not every man is horrible, Jade."

I don't look at her and continue eating.

"I never said they were."

"Mom wouldn't want you sleeping with every Tom, Dick and Harry."

This would be the second time I've been called a whore in three months.

"Is that what you think of me, Jana? You think I'm a whore?" I ask defensively.

"Of course not."

"And why bring our mother into this?"

Our mother died when we were just kids from ovarian cancer. She was a warrior. A saint. Bringing her up is just fighting dirty.

"I'm not. I'm sorry I said anything. Just tell me about your boss. I want to know why after he texts you, something lights up inside of you. Like sparklers."

"You watch way too much television. I'm just annoyed. There is nothing *lighting up* inside of me."

"Then why does he *annoy* you so much?"

Jana uses her fingers to form air quote signs while saying the word annoy. Did I mention that my sister is a psychology graduate student? On track to having a rewarding research

and teaching career.

"Because he won't leave me alone."

"In a creepy way?"

"No, not like that."

I've called him a creep before, but I'm not going to let my sister think he's one.

"Did you sleep with him?"

Might as well confess. She already thinks I'm a slut.

"Yes."

"Does he want seconds?"

"I don't know what he wants."

"Ah, so that's it. He doesn't just want your body, he wants more."

"He doesn't want more. He's just playing around. He's never been in a serious relationship in his life."

"Ohhh, so he's damaged just like you."

"I don't think he's damaged, and neither am I by the way."

"What's wrong with him then?"

I might as well tell her. She won't stop asking questions.

"I've known him for a long time, Jana. He knows all about Tyson. He was there when it all went down, and Rome got me out of there."

Jana looks down at her plate. This is exactly why I didn't want to talk about this. Anytime I mention Tyson, this guilty look spreads across her face. She and I had a falling out back then. She told me, begged me, many times over to leave my ex, but I wouldn't. At the time I felt trapped. At the time I thought that if I left him, that no one would love me again. My warped thinking and inability to get out of my toxic relationship created a wedge between me and my sister, and we stopped communicating for a long time.

That's why she thinks she failed me, because she wasn't around to help me when the shit really hit the fan. But I don't feel that way at all. She's three years younger than me, our

mother was dead, and she was really a kid. It was my job to take care of her and look out for her. Not the other way around.

Unfortunately her guilt, our sibling rivalry, and my inability to put up with a lot of her passive aggressive bullshit is why I have to keep a certain amount of distance from her. I love her, but it's best that we talk occasionally and see each other rarely. Especially since she started speaking to our father again. I want nothing to do with that.

"So are you embarrassed that he knows about that part of your past or something?"

"I'm not embarrassed about anything, Jana. I've accepted that I've made some bad choices. Everyone has. I'm just saying that we know so much about each other. Too much."

"You must be really attracted to him then."

"What? Why do you say that?"

"After everything you just said about what he's seen, and how much he knows, you *still* slept with him. That tells me a lot."

"We all have slip ups now and then."

"I don't believe in accidents, Jade, only fate."

## JADE



I stroll into Lotus at 9:23 p.m. on purpose. I know exactly where all the cameras are located in the club, and I know that my creeper is probably watching them from his perch up in the club's office. I stop to talk to Marco, the bar manager. I flirt with him from time to time, because it's just fun. Nothing serious. Nothing that's ever going to lead anywhere.

I can feel *his* eyes on me everywhere though.

Watching me.

Clocking my every move.

He's probably sitting in his chair practically seething, because I'm late. That and the fact that I'm being so cavalier about it. Uh-oh and here comes the other one.

"I think my brother is looking for you, little hobbit," Cutter King says with a mischievous smile.

He calls me hobbit and a million other names as if I don't already know when I wake up everyday that I'm vertically challenged. It just baffles me why all three of these jerks I work for have to remind me of it every single day of my life.

"Why?" As if I didn't know.

"The hell if I know, but it probably has something to do with the fact that he fired Ray today."

Ray is the manager who we never really needed. He kind of did the work that the old manager Larry used to do. Day to day stuff. But with all three of us working out of the club now, and the boys having only a few clients, I don't think there really is a need for Ray. Yet I have an inkling that his firing is about something else entirely.

I make my way upstairs to the club office and knock, something I usually don't do, but I have a feeling that I better keep it purely professional right now.

"Come in," his voice rumbles.

When I enter the office, Camden is sitting at the desk with his laptop open, but the screensaver running. He's not actually doing any work. He's in here stewing about something. When his head pops up and it registers that it's me who's entered the office, some sort of fleeting emotion passes over his face, and then his demeanor returns to normal. Hard. Unreadable.

"You're late."

"You fired Ray?"

"My business."

"Can I ask why you fired him? We didn't need him before, but now that you guys have these new Miami clients, you're going to be stuck doing all the shit work around here and still have to deal with Miami."

"Correction, you're going to have to do the shit work."

"What!?"

"You are now the acting manager of Lotus."

"Oh, hell no, that's not in my job description."

"You don't have a job description. You do whatever the hell we tell you to do."

I suck my teeth.

"That means I'd have to be here almost every day and night of the week, Camden."

"I know what the job entails."

"Roman will never go for that."

"Roman is working the Miami clients, planning a wedding, and having a baby. He doesn't have time to deal with the shit here. Someone needs to handle it."

"So you do it!"

"I have a lot to do for the Miami clients too, and Cutter is handling Mendez on his own. Neither of us has the time to order olives and lemons for the bar or cash out the register."

"Why did you fire Ray then?" I challenge.

"We didn't need him."

I stare him square in the mouth. I locate a spot on his strong, angular jaw that I'd like to punch the hell out of, but I digress. The days of physical altercations with men are over for me.

"Why did you fire Ray, creeper?"

"Why are you calling me names, midget?"

"That's politically incorrect, asshole, and not even accurate. I'm short, but not that short, and you are most definitely a creeper. That's just factual."

"I should make you get on your knees right now."

"Shut up."

"You've done it before," he grins.

"I thought we had an agreement. Baltimore never happened. It's been months now, and you need to let it go. Stop texting me about it, stop making references to it, and please stop talking to me like that."

"I never agreed to forgetting shit, and talk to you like what?"

"Like I'm your personal whore!"

Camden stops talking for a moment and quietly studies me in the careful and confident way that he always does. The look that sends shivers down my spine when no one is looking.

"If you must know, I fired him because he was in my way."

"How? In what way?"

He glares at me angrily.

"You *fucked* him, Jade."

"So?"

"So I didn't want to look at his fucking face anymore."

I look down at the floor, but I'm smiling inside. Something about the way he spews his accusation makes me feel warm and jittery. I don't want to feel this way, but I do. He's jealous, and I think that I actually like it. A man lost his livelihood, because Camden was jealous, and I should be outraged. But I'm not.

Regardless of the things said in the heat of passion, I foolishly believed that after he left my hotel room all those months ago, that we had forged some sort of unspoken agreement. That we'd keep our one-night stand between us and not let it affect our working relationship or friendship. But I read Camden completely wrong. He won't let what happened go. And if I don't watch it, I'm going to turn into one of *those* girls who I hate. Girls who ruin themselves over elaborate pipe dreams fueled by meaningless fucks. We can never be more than that one night. That's just common sense.

"I want thirty days," he says to me.

I pop my head up. "What do you mean?"

"Work the manager job for thirty days. If you want to quit after that, you can."

"And what about my work for Roman?"

"Is Roman the only boss you care about?" he asks with an unfamiliar edge to his voice.

"That's not what I meant. You know he's used to a certain level of attention."

"I'll talk to him."

"So all I'll be doing is handling the club?"

"That's right."

"You know this shit is more than just ordering lemons and olives. I don't know if I'll like it."

"That's the point. I don't think you have any idea what you truly want or like." His words are loaded with double meaning.

"I know what you're doing," I say. "But you forget that I know you very well, Camden King. I've watched it happen a million times. I know how this will end."

He closes his laptop and stares at me with a very determined look.

"You have no inkling how this is going to end, itty bitty, because it hasn't really begun yet."

"You know I was drunk that night right? If I had been totally sober I would never have slept with you in Baltimore."

"So that's how you're going to play this?"

"I'm not playing at anything. It's the truth."

"You think I don't know when I'm drunk fucking someone?"

"Oh that's right, I forgot who I was talking to," I say in a snarky voice.

Camden takes me by surprise by practically tossing me on top of the desk and stands in between my spread legs.

"Now that's the first correct thing you've said since you walked in here. You definitely have forgotten who the fuck you are talking to. Maybe I should remind you."

He grabs the back of my neck and pulls me against his warm, hard body. *God, I've missed it.* His strength. His smell.



"You should stop," I say half-heartedly.

"Why, are you *drunk* again?" He smirks.

"This is not going to happen again, Cam."

"Why not?"

His hand slides around my neck and slowly down my chest. He stops at one of my breasts. Rubbing the backs of his knuckles against my nipple. Quickly making it pebble through my shirt.

"You think if you pin me down for a bit of time, that it'll be easy for you to get inside of my head—"

He squeezes my nipple tightly in between two of his thick knuckles. I take a large exhalation in an effort to ignore how good it feels and continue talking.

"Easy for us to fuck like bunnies during this so-called *thirty day* arrangement of yours."

"You said it. I didn't," he says in a deep, raspy voice.

He switches his hand to my other breast, but I keep going.

"You had me once, and now you think you can have me over and over."

"Now you're starting to get it," he replies.

This time he wraps his entire hand around my breast. Massaging it. Gently rubbing the tip of my nipple with his thumb.

"Claim me like a possession," I pant.

"Exactly."

We both hear a door slam across the hall which doesn't particularly startle him, but it does stop him from what he was doing, which then effectively snaps me out of the trance I was falling under. He's convincing, but not that convincing. We made a mistake and had one night of good sex. All right, great sex. But I won't be swayed.

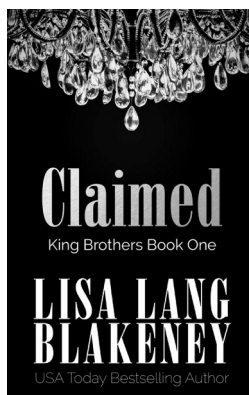
He thinks he knows me. He thinks he can have me anytime he wants. But hasn't he learned his lesson yet? I

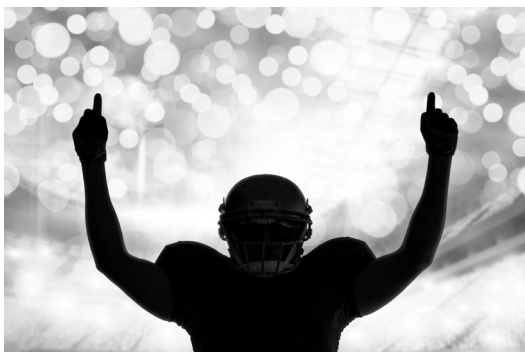
LISA LANG BLAKENEY

guess not, but I tell you what, he's about to learn a very long but simple thirty-day lesson.

Jade Barlow is anything but easy.

**WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?  
DOWNLOAD CLAIMED NOW**





*The Nighthawk Series*

**A one-click, damn he's funny, enemies-to-lovers romance and sexy love story with the hottest quarterback in the NFL.**

I hate sports, and he is football royalty. I like quiet and predictable, but he's sex and swagger personified. I didn't particularly care for Saint Stevenson the first moment I laid eyes on him, but his warped brain seemed to process our initial meeting as foreplay.

I have a meticulous five year plan in place for myself and my career, but now this huge, cocky, self-absorbed quarterback who I've been assigned to at work is seriously fucking it up.

He's the ultimate player on and off the field, and it doesn't make any sense that I'm falling hard and fast for the arrogant baller; but there doesn't seem to be anything about our love story that makes any sense at all.



## GUNSLINGER DEFINED

**Gunslinger** |'gən,sliNGər|

noun *informal*

Term for a quarterback who plays in an aggressive and decisive manner by throwing deep, risky passes. These quarterbacks usually possess the strong arm needed to throw deep effectively.

## SABRINA



*A foolish person doesn't always recognize when she's crossed paths with someone she is destined to meet...*

I SLIDE myself back into my seat at the dinner table and begin nervously playing around with my order of shrimp scampi, which was left for me while I was in the restroom. I'm fidgeting around, because I'm a little uncomfortable in such a romantic setting like this with my coworker Jason. The man who I've been pining over pathetically for years, yet there's nothing even remotely romantic going on between us.

He looks up briefly to acknowledge my return, but then mouths the word "sorry" and continues a very spirited conversation on his cell phone. One that he's been having, for I swear, the last fifteen minutes, and frankly I'm bored out of my mind.

While everything about this restaurant screams date night: the lighting is low, the tables are meticulously decorated with fine, modern details, and there are affectionate couples all

around me. This has ended up being more of a working dinner (for him) rather than anything resembling a date. When am I ever going to learn to stop fantasizing that one day the two of us will fall in love and become the company's power couple? We work, and he definitely flirts, but nothing romantic happens past that. Like him asking me out on an actual date.

To pass the time I return a few emails on my phone, and soon become distracted when I notice a sudden shift in the energy of the restaurant. An energy which rises high above the low frequency buzz of casual dining in the room.

The faces of the waitstaff become more animated.

Their eyes enlarged.

Their whispers growing to the level of dense chatter.

I look around and notice what or rather who the cause is. A man has entered the restaurant, and he walks into the place with distinct purpose.

To be seen.

I try to look away and mind my own business, but like others around me, I can't help myself as I continue to track the man's movements.

I'm inexplicably drawn to him.

With confident strides he follows the hostess with complete bravado towards the bar in a pair of well-fitting jeans, a black tee, and a pair of aviator shades on. His outfit perfectly complimenting his muscular frame.

There are two other behemoths flanking both sides of him as if he's someone important. Someone in need of security. Although I'm not totally sure why he'd need them, because the man looks like he could probably knock them both out or anyone else who got in his path for that matter.

Being in the business that I am, and living in New York City, my first inclination is to assume that he's some sort of celebrity, but then I second-guess that theory. With my expe-

rience, I think I would recognize him if he was one, even though he's hiding himself behind his sunglasses.

The colossal stranger stops just short of a couple of feet from our table and speaks with the two men who are with him. All three of them start laughing, but the rumble of his laugh specifically echoes through my chest.

I quickly turn and stare back into my scampi. His proximity makes me feel uneasy. So uneasy that my heart begins rapidly beating inside of my chest, like a skittish small animal that recognizes when a predator is nearby.

I continue searching my bowl of scampi for shrimp, as if I'm digging for gold, but can still see the man's legs out of my peripheral vision. Denim clad, muscular, powerful legs.

I'm not sure how I know, but I can sense him watching me. Maybe because he's stood completely still for the last few seconds. Almost as if he's watching and waiting for me to look up at him. I know I shouldn't, but I go ahead and raise my eyes anyway. Just for a moment.

I don't know exactly what's going on behind those shades of his, but a slow almost disquieting grin spreads across his face, when he catches me looking. Then he starts walking.

He walks behind me with heavy, considerable strides and as he passes by, I swear that I can feel one of his fingers briefly skimming the back of my neck, close to my hair. The brazen nature of his act startles me, and my spine is on fire. It's as if he's branded me with just one slight touch.

My fork drops from my hand with a clank on the table in surprise as my heart continues to thump powerfully. I gingerly place my hand on my chest to calm myself. For a split second, I wonder if I'm having a panic attack until I realize how ridiculous that is. How ridiculous this whole thing is. I don't even know this man.

I look across the table at Jason wondering if he notices what's going on. Thinking that maybe I've screwed up the



possibility of this whole evening by taking such obvious notice of another man. I mean the whole point of me being here is to hopefully have Jason see me as more than just the "girl at work," but as usual, he's still in the middle of a heated discussion on his phone, completely unaware of anything going on around us. So that's why I decide that it might be okay if I turn my head for a moment to catch a glimpse of the intoxicating stranger one more time, and I'm amazed at the sight of him when I do.

He's magnificent. Even from the back.

And everyone in here knows it.

Including him.

Women who are sitting with each other or are with their significant others are all gawking at him. Repositioning themselves. Poking out their chests and sucking in their stomachs. Men who evidently seem to recognize his face are giving him respectful head nods. Even the hostess seems to have an extra hitch in her step knowing that this majestic beast is watching her walk from behind.

*Who the heck is this guy?*

"How's your scampi?"

Yikes. I didn't even notice that Jason's call was finally over.

"Oh," I fumble over my words. "Umm, it's okay."

"Just okay? You don't like it?"

"Well they were a little skimpy on the shrimp."

"I can order you something else," he offers apologetically.

"No, I better get going. I have some work to finish at home."

"Crap, I'm sorry, Sabrina. I wasn't much company tonight was I? I've been a little distracted for the past few days with a new account, which is already a pain in my ass. That's what that call was about."

Jason is always distracted with work. It's really nothing

new, but it's also why he's such a great business manager. The best one at the company in my opinion. He's always going above and beyond for his clients.

"Anyone I know?"

"Some new alternative band out of Cali."

"Oh yeah, I heard a little about them from Marisol and none of it was good."

"Exactly. They're already giving me a headache and the ink is barely dry on their paperwork. I'm thinking about passing them over to Abby."

"Would you like me to handle them?"

I volunteer to take on Jason's group, not because I really want another client on my roster, but because I'm a little concerned that the first person he thought to throw extra work to was Abby and not me.

"I have no interest in you giving me the evil eye in the office everyday," Jason smiles. "And I know that would happen if I gave you this headache."

"But you'd give them to Abby?"

Jason tilts his head thoughtfully. "Only because I know one of her clients are about to jump ship to go with the Frazier Group. That's the only reason, Sabrina. I know you would do a good job with them if they were yours."

"Oh, okay." I say a little embarrassed that I even questioned him about it. Like I'm fishing for approval.

"You know you can email me anytime with whatever questions you may have about your accounts. You don't have to wait for these random dinner meetings of ours. I know it seems like I'm hectic right now, but my door is always open to you."

"I know, Jason, or what I mean to say is thank you. I will definitely reach out to you if I need to." I fumble awkwardly over my words as Jason looks at me as if I'm some sort of adorable little puppy or cute little sister.

Not an ounce of heat in his eyes.

In two seconds, I think he was about to pat my head.

"It's a shame your food wasn't good and mine is cold. This place was so highly Zagat rated." He frowns. "We'll have to pick a different location next time."

Jason's polite words don't impact me like they normally would. Not when he's just given me the big brother/little sister look just now, not to mention that I've been set a tad bit off kilter by the hot mystery man who I'm pretty sure just touched me on purpose.

"Okay," I reply, knowing very well that I don't need a repeat performance of tonight. Not only did we not get any work done, but we aren't even remotely close to a love connection. What the hell is the point of another dinner like this one?

At some point, I'm going to have to throw up the white flag, but unfortunately I'm a creature of habit. Day after day I eat the same things, listen to the same music, talk to the same friends, watch the same television shows, and yearn for the same man. That's just the way I'm built.

Especially when I have friends like Marisol. She's my superior at work and it was she who came up with the bright idea of having Jason mentor me as a way to ramp things up a notch. Since executing her plan he and I have been on three "working" dinners. Unfortunately none of them have produced many results, romantically or professionally for that matter.

"I'm going to go talk to the manager about your dinner, pay the check, and then go get the car. You wait here okay? No need for us both to walk that far."

"Sounds good," I nod with a smile.

It's not easy finding parking in the middle of Manhattan on theatre night, or any night in the city for that matter, but Jason refuses to pay parking lot prices after seven. He's

thrifty like that. So we drove around for fifteen minutes to find a parking space on a street that is at least six city blocks away from the restaurant. That's why it's going to take him a good while getting the car.

It's such a gorgeous night though, it would have been kind of romantic if we had walked together to get it, but that's me trying to *wish* this into a date when it's anything but. For the few minutes that Jason and I did speak with each other, prior to him receiving his phone call, all the two of us managed to discuss tonight was work. Nothing personal. And I'm not sure, regardless of how much I wish it were different, we ever will talk about anything more than what we do for a living. It just may be all that we have in common.

While I wait for Jason to return from his long trek, from the shadows of the private rooms in the back of the restaurant, I see the tallest man on the planet moving towards my location with great purpose.

His shades are now off.

And his mesmerizing titanium colored eyes are locked on mine.

Eyes that look somewhat familiar, but I just can't quite place where I've seen them before.

"He left?" Are the only two words he gruffly asks. His tone suggesting that we've known each other all of our lives, or that he has the right to ask me anything he wants.

"Umm, no."

"So then where's your date?"

Coworker not date, but there's no need to expound on that touchy subject with a total stranger.

"He's getting the car."

Wait—why I am answering this guy's questions?

"Short dinner," he observes with that same pompous grin across his face I saw when he first entered the restaurant.

"I didn't like my meal."

"He's all wrong for you, you know."

"What are you talking about?" I ask incredulously.

This guy has some nerve. Jason was barely out of the door before he came barreling over here crashing my dinner. No manners. No class. The only thing he has going for him are his looks. Too bad he totally knows it.

"I *said* he's completely wrong for you. Too short. Too inattentive. Too full of himself. And he took his eyes off of you. Big mistake."

"Too full of himself, huh? Unlike you?"

"Yeah, but I've got the goods to back it up," he says with a completely straight face.

"Ha. Ha." I roll my eyes.

"Do I amuse you, Miss ..."

"White."

"First name?"

This guy is a pure player.

"There's no need for first names is there? I mean I *am* on a date with another man."

"A very bad date. One that you clearly need rescuing from. Probably why you took it upon yourself to bail yourself out of it. There's nothing wrong with your dinner. You just want to go home."

"Are you calling me a liar, Mr.?"

"Stevenson," he replies with an amused look. "And yes, I'm calling you a liar. If short dude believes that you didn't like your food versus his less than entertaining company, then let's add one more thing to my list of reasons of why he's not the man for you. Too stupid."

I can see through the restaurant's front windowpane when Jason finally pulls up in his sleek, silver, S-class Mercedes Benz. A classically beautiful car for a very sophisticated man. A man that I shouldn't keep waiting. A guy who's always been a gentleman. A man whom perhaps if I bide my

time, will end up seeing me for more than just a sweet girl at work who needs mentoring.

"Well it was nice chatting with you, Mr. Stevenson, but my *boyfriend* just pulled up," I say proudly.

"He's not going to even come back inside and escort you to the car? A car he apparently is using to overcompensate for something," he chuckles.

Boy he's gorgeous when he laughs.

*Walk away, Sabrina.*

"Believe it or not, this isn't the turn of the century. I'm a grown woman, and I don't need a guardian to escort me five feet to a car."

"You've got me there, Miss White. You are very much a grown woman in all the places that matter." His eyes rake over my body with slow deliberation.

"Let me give you a piece of advice, *sir*, and believe me when I say that I'm using that term rather loosely. You walked in here tonight with your oversized bodyguards and your darkly tinted sunglasses at eight o'clock at night as if you're someone important, but trust me when I say, that I know what important men look like, and you aren't it. You're trying *way* too hard. Not to mention that it whiffs of desperation that you're approaching a woman who is currently involved with another man. So have a nice life, all right?"

After my fantastically delivered admonishment, I stand up forgetting that I had placed my clutch handbag on my lap, and it drops to the floor with a thud. The entire contents inside splattering across the floor and underneath the table. Totally embarrassing.

"Would it be too turn of the century of me to help you pick up the mess you've made before my *desperate ass* goes on to have a nice life?" the stranger asks in a manner that's dripping with sarcasm.

I don't particularly want to, but I nod reluctantly in

acceptance of his offer, because my very tapered pencil skirt fits way too snugly for me to comfortably bend and maneuver myself underneath the table in any sort of graceful way.

"Thanks," I try saying with as much sincerity as I can muster.

As he squats down to retrieve my things (super tampon included), I can't help but take a closer look at him in a most obvious way that almost makes me redden in embarrassment.

This close up there's no denying that he's a giant wall of muscle and masculinity. Larger than any other man I've ever known. But it's his swagger, his personality, his energy—which fills the restaurant in a much larger way than even the circumference of his body. It's no wonder why all eyes are on him.

I wasn't ever the type to attract the big, beautiful, confident types like him. I tend to attract the intellectual ones who are vertically impaired and riddled with insecurities. Neither type being a reliable pick for a girl like me. I like predictable. A safe bet.

I think that may be why I've liked Jason for so long. Jason is safe. Not a giant, but definitely taller than me. Intellectual but not nerdy. Confident but not cocky. And most importantly, certifiably single. There's no ex-wife or a baby momma. Which means no mess and very little risk. All statistics that a math geek like me can buy into.

I don't even have to talk to this Stevenson guy for more than three minutes to already know that he is the complete opposite of safe. He is probably everything my parents were always afraid would come knocking on their door looking to ravage their only daughter.

First of all, look at him.

I'm looking for someone to snuggle at night, not smother

me. In fact he's so huge that there's no real way he's even going to be able to fit under the table to pick up my things. Although now I see that he doesn't even have to. His arms are so long that he can maneuver them easily under the table and reach for whatever's under there without too much awkward bending. It's actually kind of impressive.

And speaking of his arms.

*Holy hell.*

His arms are huge. The wingspan of his hands alone makes them look like they could easily smack someone into next week. His biceps are thick and muscular. Chiseled and strong. And my favorite part of a man's upper body, especially this man's body, are his forearms. Both are roped and strong and adorned with what looks like many sessions worth of intricate tribal ink. I've always liked tattoos from afar. They're not something I'd ever have the nerve to do, but I think they are beautiful. Especially when they adorn a man who's built like a tank.

"Here you go, Miss White."

He scoops up all of my things with one of his hands, while toying with me carefully using those two titanium saucers of his. Eyes that are confusing the hell out of my poor ovaries.

I've never been good at keeping a poker face, but there's no way this man needs to know how hot I think he is. I'm sure he already knows. So I bend my head slightly down in an attempt to avoid direct eye contact, as I accept the contents of my handbag and place everything back inside. He holds onto one thing though. One of my business cards.

"Sabrina White." He reads the card aloud while casually playing with it between two fingers. "That's a beautiful name for an equally beautiful woman."

I hate that the first thing that I do is start smiling after that lame line. Not a big smile, but a smile nonetheless.

His words are cliché.



His glare is obvious.

And I'm still grinning like a simpleton when I notice Jason sitting in his car, watching the two of us with a blank look across his face.

"Umm, my date is here. I have to go."

"Until next time, Sabrina White."

I watch as he slips my business card in his back pocket.

"I doubt it," I grin, although I'm somewhat flattered that he's choosing to hold onto my information, even though he and I both know that there will be no next time. I mean he looks like he eats women for breakfast (literally) then sends them on their merry way with a pat on the ass and maybe a couple of bucks for an Uber car.

But I'm not going to lie. I purposefully walk towards the exit of the restaurant with a little sway in my step, just like the hostess did earlier, because I know that he's watching. Something tells me that he likes to watch. What the hell, right? I never do stuff like this, and I'll never see him again.

As I smooth my skirt down the sides of my hips and thighs, and carefully place one stiletto heel in front of the other, I can't help but look in the glass doors ahead of me. Just to make sure that stranger danger is still checking me out, and when I do, I catch his reflection.

His platinum pupils dancing.

Looking straight at me.

And his mouth grinning shamelessly at the view of my behind.

So I sway my hips a little harder. Then turn around and give him a small wave good-bye. One that I make sure Jason can't see. And it's at that moment that I see and feel what I've been waiting for all night, except it's from the stranger's eyes instead of Jason's.

Pure. Unadulterated. Heat.

## SAINT



*Three Years Ago  
Georgetown, Washington, D.C.*

"*Y*ou need to kill some time, Mike. She's not ready."  
"She's not here yet?!"

"Naw, man. I think she's still at the hotel with the bridesmaids or something. No one's picking up their cell phones over there, but knowing her she's probably just running around driving everybody completely nuts."

"I knew I should've sent my mom over there. I swear to fucking God if she—"

"Calm down, best man. There's no way that girl is going to mess up her wedding day to Saint."

"You mean mess up her meal ticket."

"No shit talking today, Mike. You have to reel it in. This is your brother's future wife we're talking about. Just like you want respect for yours, you need to respect his choice."

"The hell you mean? There's no question about anyone respecting my wife. She's not some sleazy lounge singer looking for a benefactor, so that she won't have to get a real job."

"You know what I mean, Mike."

"All right. I guess the easiest solution is to get everybody drunk. Then no one will know just how fucking late the blushing bride really is. Including my brother."

"Good idea. I'll get the waiters to grab us some champagne."

*Ten minutes later.*

"Open the Dom! Does everybody have a glass? All right, all right. Listen up everyone. I just want to say a few words in a toast before our boy here walks down the aisle. Saint, you know you're one cocky son of a bitch. You always were. Even as a snot-nosed kid, you thought the sun rose and set specifically for your ass. Never thought I'd see the day that you'd get hitched. Especially this early in your career. But I guess there's no rhyme or reason to when we find our happily ever after. Sometimes we find her when we least expect it. So let's all raise our glasses to my little brother and his forever after – Adrianna."

"To Saint and Adrianna!!"

*FIFTEEN MORE MINUTES LATER.*

"Excuse me, Mr. Stevenson?"

"Yeah, that's me. How can I help you?"

"I think I need to speak to your brother."

"He's a little busy getting married right now. What do you want Saint for?"

"Well, umm ... I guess it's okay if I tell you. I need to show you something."

"Who are you again?"

"A guest on the bride's side. Can I just show you something? It's important."

"You better not be showing me any videos of your kid playing ball or something. This is my brother's wedding not a recruitment—"

"It's nothing like that. Just take a look at the headline on this website."

**Jilted! Saint Stevenson's Fiancée Seen With Reality  
Star & Singer Benjamin Luck On Wedding Day!**

"YOU ACTUALLY BELIEVE THIS? This is just some bullshit gossip blog looking to get more web traffic with lies. Adrianna is at the hotel getting ready as we speak. There's no way she's in, where does it say?"

"Miami, but look, there's a photo. Scroll down."

"Fuck me. It is her."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure it is."

"How am I going to tell Saint? This is going to kill him."

*A FEW MOMENTS LATER.*

"Can we get the room for a minute, fellas?"

"Why are you clearing the room? What's up?"

"Have a seat. I need to talk to you."

"Right now? I'm about to get married."

"Calm down for just a second and listen. Adrianna is gone."

"What the fuck do you mean she's gone?"

"She left, bro. She's in Miami."

"What. Are. You. Talking. About?! What did you do Mikey?"

"Nothing, Saint. I swear. I'd never ruin your wedding day no matter how I feel about your girl. She must have gotten cold feet. She ran away with some rocker reality show kid. Some douche named Benjamin Luck. I'm assuming you haven't spoken to her today."

"We saw each other last night. She wanted to wait to talk until we saw each other at the alter."

"Well it looks like she jumped on a flight to Florida this morning."

"I'm calling her ass right now!"

"Wait. Don't chase her Saint. You're better than this. And isn't it better that you know what she's really like now rather than later when you're three kids deep? I mean if you really think about it—OUCH! You asshole. You just winged my head with that chair!"

"Dammit, Saint, don't go trashing the entire reception hall. Our parents and their closest friends are here. Reverend Paul is in there. Don't embarrass yourself because she wasn't woman enough to end this the right way."

CRASH!

"You told me not to call her, so this is what I'm doing instead!"

*\*Sigh\**

"Are you actually going to force me to kick your ass on your wedding day to get you to stop?"

"It's not my wedding day anymore!"

"Saint if you don't put that table down, I swear to God I'm going to have to put *you* down."

"I don't fucking care—"

WHAP!

## SABRINA



*Three years ago  
Georgetown, Washington, D.C.*

"*W*hat can I get you?"

A female bartender who is probably in her twenties, but looks like she's pushing forty because of the bags under her eyes and her leathery skin, asks me for my drink order. Problem is that I don't really drink.

It's one of the many things I have given up to stay at my goal weight which is actually pretty high for my height, so I have to be careful; but tonight I want to feel like someone other than myself. Even if it's only temporary. Even if it's just smoke and mirrors. And I know that alcohol can help me get there.

"What do you recommend?" I ask. Her face may look hard, but so is her body. So I'm guessing that she knows a thing or two about staying fit. "I want to order a drink or two tonight, but I don't want to consume a lot of extra calories."

"Do you like red wine?"

"I don't usually drink alcohol at all, so I don't particularly *like* any one thing."

"Then may I ask what's your reason for wanting to drink tonight?"

She asks her highly unusual question (for a bartender anyway) while drying the inside of a wine glass with a soft white cloth.

"A guy. Well basically *all* men."

"Understood." She smiles briefly. "Then shots are the way to go."

"Shots?"

"Yeah, it's the mixers that are highly caloric like fruit juice or soda. If you drink straight liquor I promise that you will arrive to your destination much quicker with little to show for it around your hips."

"That sounds like exactly what I'm looking for."

"Are you on a budget?"

"Not really." I'm using my company credit card tonight.

"Then Patron shots are the way to go. It's a premium tequila."

"Eww, with the worm inside?"

"Absolutely not," she snickers. "This is an upscale, smooth tasting tequila. Great for margaritas and also for shots and no worms."

Sounds like what I'm looking for.

"Okay, give me two."

"Coming right up."

I've never done shots before, although I've seen college kids do a million of them, but I was never that girl in school. I was a scholarship kid carrying a 3.9 GPA. I never had the time or inclination to spend my nights getting drunk and possibly date raped at frat parties. I was always in the library, and parties were never my scene anyway.

The bartender never introduces herself to me by name or much less cracks a smile. She's not warm and fuzzy like the ones I've seen on television shows and in movies; but at least she's helpful. Her goal is to get me drunk or at least feeling better, and I'm thinking she understands because she has some pretty interesting war stories about men of her own.

She demonstrates how I should drink my shots for the full experience. Shaking the bar salt on my hand, then licking the salt, drinking the shot (with haste), and then chasing it by sucking on a wedge of lemon or lime. I like that there is a ritual behind this shot taking thing, so I catch on fast. The first shot makes my eyes squint, but by the third (or is it fourth) I am feeling *way* better.

I hear a group of voices coming towards the direction of the bar and my stomach drops. This is it. It has to be new guy's voice I hear among the sea of voices. I wonder if I've ingested enough liquid courage to finally talk to him about something other than mundane topics such as how the microwave works on the third floor lounge or the weather forecast.

I never quite mastered the art of flirting and because of that character flaw, I've ended up only dating a few guys, and they were all guys who I was set up with by friends. Unfortunately that has meant that I've usually ended up with guys that I'm not attracted to at all or who are complete weirdos.

I'm hoping that this is the one time that the nice, normal nerd (that's me) gets the successful, safe guy (that's new guy) and that we live happily ever after. For once I would like to be in a sweet, normal, reciprocal relationship.

Of course none of that will ever happen if I don't learn to say anything interesting when I open up my mouth. I tried about thirty minutes ago towards the end of our company dinner and it was a complete disaster. I made a fool of myself.



This must be what it feels like to be drunk, because my ears are playing tricks on me. I couldn't have heard the new guy, because none of the people that enter the bar are actually my coworkers. They are a group of very rowdy and gigantic men who all kind of look alike. I giggle to myself, because they look like they are going to completely annihilate the place by just moving around and bumping into things. They're that big.

It's pretty obvious that they're celebrating something, and the decibel level of their spirited banter grows only louder with each passing moment. This is my cue to leave. Even if my new coworker walked in right now, this noise would make it way too distracting for me to say anything to fix my earlier blunder.

"Are you with the Carson group?" The bartender asks me.

"Yes, how did you know?" The hotel is a big place.

"There are three groups that have pretty much locked down all of the rooms in the hotel this weekend, and I don't think that you belong to the other two."

I'm offended by her assumption that I couldn't be with any other group in this hotel. What is she trying to say? Although I guess that's what people do. Make assumptions about others based on limited information. I suppose I did the same thing to her.

"I'm pretty sure your group went to the Galaxy Bar after dinner. That's the lounge on the seventh floor."

Dammit, I'm in the wrong place.

"Thanks," I say curtly.

When I motion to stand up from my stool, I feel loopy. Objects in the room are starting to wave and ripple, and suddenly I wish I was sitting on a chair that was a little lower to the ground and had a back to it.

I'm going down.

"Whoa there. Are you all right?"

Two very tall and wide masses of grinning flesh steady me by the waist, and gratefully I don't fall and split my head open.

"Thanks guys," I offer.

Both guys start cracking up.

"It was an easy save, Freshman. No problem."

"Why are you calling me that? I'm not in college anymore."

"Could have fooled me by the way that you drink."

"I just had a couple of drinks, Mr. Need To Mind Your Own Business. That goes for both of you."

"You're cute."

"You're blurry."

"Aww, you're really twisted aren't you?"

"Twisted?"

"Drunk."

"I don't think so. Wouldn't I be slurring?"

"You are slurring," one of them laughs.

Another blurry mass yells from across the room, "Hey, man. Next round is on you!"

"You and your friends are like gigantic. Look how they barely fit in the seats. I think they're going to break the couches over there," I giggle.

I can't stop laughing.

"You want another drink, Freshman?"

I may be tipsy, but I'm not stupid.

"So you can have some sort of ménage with me? Uh, I think not." I frown.

That gets me a huge laugh.

"First of all there's only one of me standing in front of you right now, and secondly I like my women sober, so they can at least remember my name when they call it out. I just wanted to buy you a drink, because I'm celebrating and evidently I'm also paying for everyone's third round in here."

"Celebrating what?"

"I just got dumped."

I don't know why anyone would celebrate that. Hell, at this point I'm still trying to figure out why I still see two of him.

"So you're sure you're not a twin?"

"Damn, you're cute in your little corporate suit, but this is bad timing. I've officially sworn off women."

For a moment I feel woozy and when I dip a little to the left on my stool, he quickly places his enormous hands back around my waist and saves me from another near death experience.

"Did you eat today, Freshman?" he asks with concern.

I usually eat six little meals a day, but at this point I'm sure I've missed at least two of them. I didn't eat anything at the dinner tonight, so my stomach is probably empty. Maybe I didn't think this drinking alcohol thing completely through.

"I may have skipped a meal."

The big guy doesn't sit down but continues to stand behind me, still holding me by the waist, and speaks closely by my ear. If I wasn't so tipsy, it would be very sexy.

No wait, it is sexy.

"These are the basic rules to getting shit-faced, Freshman. You listening?"

I nod my head silently.

"Good girl. All right, so you need to eat before you drink. That's very important. You should drink the same alcohol all night. No mixing vodka with tequila. No red cups ever. Even at an office party. Pace yourself with glasses of water in between drinks. And never drink alone. That only leads to trouble."

"I like rules," I say not even fully processing everything he's said. "Rules are good."

"I see that." Is what I think he murmurs in response.

The bartender interrupts us by asking my new bar mate for his order. I find it amusing that when she talks to blurry guy that she seems to crack a smile. At least I think that's what she's doing. She's baring teeth at least.

"Can I get you something?"

Oh my God, is she being flirty with them? I mean him.

"I'll have another of whatever is on tap and drunko over here will have a nice tall glass of ice water."

"Hey!" I protest being called a drunk as well as his choice of drink for me. "I don't like water."

"Drink it anyway. I want to stop holding you on this stool. I'm sick of standing."

Humph. "Fine."

He sits on the stool next to me, spreads his massive legs apart, and pulls my stool forward in between them while holding my hips to keep me steady.

"So tell me. What's got you so upset that you've taken to the bottle? It's obvious to the average idiot that you don't do this often if ever."

Something about the warm tequila flowing through my veins and the vibes that blurry guy gives off, gives me the courage to discuss my dismal love life. I'll never see this guy again, and there's a sliver of a chance that he could actually help, so I talk. It's hard though, because I have to make sure to focus on only one of them.

"There's a guy."

"Go on."

"He's here."

"Where?"

"In the hotel. We're on our annual retreat."

"Oh so you work with him?"

"Yes. He's new."

"Okay, and?"

I take a chug of my ice water. It's actually refreshing, because the alcohol has me practically sweating like a pig.

"And he doesn't know I exist."

"I find that hard to believe."

"It's true."

"That's why you're upset?"

"We were just in a dinner meeting before I came here. We were all doing team-building exercises. He didn't want to team up with me. I could tell. I might've said a few things to embarrass myself after that. Then I ran out."

"Paranoid much?"

"He either didn't want to team up with me, or I'm invisible to him."

"Are there a lot of other women on the team?"

"A few."

"Young like you?"

"Yeah."

"Well there you go. There are too many distractions for the poor guy. I know the feeling well. You're going to have to figure out how to get some one-on-one time with Mr. Clueless."

I squint my eyes. "Are you positive you don't have a twin brother?"

"No," he chuckles. "Do you still see two of me?"

He waves his hand directly in front of my face.

"Yes," I say emphatically. "And you both have identical black eyes."

"Drink more water. When the good Lord made me, he broke the mold. So I guarantee that you should only be seeing one of me as well as one black eye courtesy of my brother over there."

I take another big gulp of my water.

"Why should I take your dating advice anyway? You just got dumped."

"The reason why you should take advice from me is because it works. It's how my bitch of an ex snagged me. She made sure to get my attention first, and then went in for the kill."

"Why did she dump you?"

"I have no idea."

"You should go after her."

"I started to, but then I changed my mind."

"If you loved her, you would have gone after her."

"Love shouldn't take that much work, Freshman."

"Maybe you weren't romantic enough. Women love romance."

"Who needs romance when she has *this* to wake up to every morning."

"The two of you think very highly of yourselves."

"Still seeing double huh," he snickers. "I think you better call it a night, Freshman."

"I was on my way to the seventh floor. I don't want to just go to bed without saying something to him. I ran out of the room like a complete moron today."

"Can I be honest with you?"

"You mean you weren't honest before?"

"Men are dumb, but we ain't stupid. Trust me when I say that he knows exactly who you are already, and if he were the least bit interested he'd have his eyes on you right now. He'd be in this bar right now. The fact that he isn't here tells me that he's not the guy for you."

"He should be chasing me but you shouldn't be chasing your fiancée?"

"Exactly."

"I think you're wrong. He's the perfect guy for me."

"There's no such thing, Freshman. My parents come damn near close to the perfect couple, and they still have their issues. There is no perfect guy. Only the right guy."

His words are starting to fade, as I try to keep my eyes open. I am ten seconds away from sprawling out on this floor and catching a nap.

"I'm *soooo* sleepy."

"What room are you in?"

"I dunno. 342 or maybe 324."

He laughs at my confusion and the next thing I know I'm seven feet in the air.

"Wait—"

"Quiet. I'm making sure you get to your room safely. My cousin Ben is starting to give you the hungry eye over there."

"The hungry eye?"

"Yeah, like he wants to eat you for dessert. Literally."

Uh-oh.

"Where's your key card?"

"My suit pocket. Just make sure he doesn't see me like this."

"Who, my cousin?"

"No, Jason, the new guy." I say drowsily.

I do my best to keep my eyelids open in case I need to cry for help. I'm breaking all of my personal safety protocols by allowing a complete stranger to carry me in an elevator and up to my room; but I'm no match for the deep sleep that the alcohol is placing me under, although I stay alert just long enough to hear a garbled promise that I hope is kept.

"Don't worry, Freshman. I've got you."

## SAINT



Sweat and salt dripping down my blazing hot back.  
Chunks of the earth underneath my fingernails.  
The gritty taste and texture of fresh turf in-between my teeth.

Football is what I eat, shit, and breathe.

I've been playing the game my entire life, and I've played with sprained ankles, broken ribs, jammed fingers, sore Achilles tendons, and black eyes; but the one thing that I've never gotten used to is tossing the ball around in ninety degree heat with a helmet and pads on. I hate that shit. I'd rather play in the snow any day.

I come from a lineage of professional football players. Football royalty is what they call us. The Stevenson Family. My father played the game. My uncle. My cousin. My older brother currently plays in the league, and so do I. I'm sure if I have any sons, they'll be expected to play as well. It's what we love. It's what we do. It's who we are.

Every fall as a kid I played football for my high school, but every summer it was a requirement that my brother Michael and I play in our family's football camp a.k.a. our



summer league for kids with high football IQs and professional potential. It's called the Stevenson Summer Combine and it's a big deal. Any kid who doesn't play football for a highly visible high school program wants to come to our camp to hopefully be noticed by scouts. Our family is well connected, but it's no picnic. We played all day, everyday, and every summer at that camp whether we wanted to or not. Whether we'd rather be riding bikes or eating water ice because it was so hot. It was our duty as Stevensons to be there.

Football is our legacy.

In those days we played on some of the hottest, humid Philadelphia summer mornings straight through to the late afternoons. I remember feeling many times like I was going to keel over and pass out. Luckily my older brother Michael knew when I was about to eat rocks, and made sure to pour a pint of Gatorade down my throat, before I met my maker.

That's exactly the same way I feel now. Blazing hot, and a bit nauseous, but I can't totally blame the heat for it. If I'm going to be totally honest, I haven't been sticking to my usual clean diet of protein and veggies. I ate crap and drank more beer than I should've last night, because I felt like wallowing. Hell, I deserve to wallow. I'm in a miserable situation.

Last year my team, The New York Nighthawks, finished second to last place in the league. The year before that we were dead last. The year before that? Hell, I don't even like to think about my rookie year. We sucked balls. And right this very minute, we don't look any fucking better than we did last season. Which is nuts because ...

I'm the franchise player.

The star.

I put butts in the seats and pay the bills around here. So why is my team complete trash? I'll tell you why. I don't have any support. I'm getting my ass kicked out here week after

week, and nobody in the head office is doing anything about it. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to diagnose what the problem is. I see it. My father sees it. The fans see it too.

Management needs to concentrate on working the kinks out of my offensive line. Unfortunately to stay well under the team's salary cap, our penny pinching owner has secured all these wet behind the ear rookies or broken down veterans that the coaching staff seems to be struggling to put in place to protect me out there on the field. It's even more critical now because we've finished the pre-game season, and now we're about to enter into the regular season, and they *still* don't have it figured out.

Unfortunately that's always been the biggest problem here in New York. Finding the right players at the right price point to protect me every Sunday, because I get sacked more than any other quarterback in the league, and that shit is no fun. When commentators throw out my stats in a broadcast it sounds as if I'm the worst quarterback to have ever played the game, and that I don't know my ass from my elbow. But that's far from the truth.

I'm the shit.

I was the number one draft pick.

I won the Heisman Trophy.

I've been raised to dominate and to win. So I definitely know how to avoid my opponents when I'm on the field, but the fact remains that I need time to throw the ball. It's that simple. Football 101. You can't blame me if management can't do their jobs, and pay five good men more money than they've ever seen in their lives to protect me and give me time to throw the damn ball.

"Stevenson!"

"Yes, coach."

"Meet the new guy. We're putting him in place of Wachowski."

That's just great. Ten minutes ago my tight end got trampled, and the backup is suspended because of a drug violation; so now after halftime, I'm going to be thrown in the middle of the goddamn game with a tight end I've never met before.

I realize that injuries and last minute replacement of players is part of the game, but I still hate that shit. I'm having a hard enough time establishing chemistry with the players that I already know.

"Pleasure, man," the new guy says eagerly.

I reluctantly shake hands with this big ass, grinning, muscle-head who appears to be my new tight end. I don't feel like meeting this kid right now, because we're losing and I'm pissed. Plus I don't feel like making pleasantries, or getting friendly with new players. He may not make the cut. Then I've gotten all attached for nothing. I learned that hard lesson my rookie year in the league. Nobody's job is safe. Everyone is expendable.

"What's up," is all I manage to say in response.

I'm not trying to have a full blown conversation with the new kid, when we only have a few minutes to figure out how the hell we're going to get the ball into the end zone next quarter.

"Followed you when you played for Capitol City, man. I'm a real fan."

"Thanks."

I don't really like talking about my time at my alma mater, Capital City College. Mainly because I was a winner there. A *phenom* as the papers often described me. And people often compare my performance there to my performance now. Which can be best described as *not* winning.

"Cooper's got the goods," Coach says with confidence. That's unusual for him to speak so highly of someone who's brand spanking new to the team, but I've been sold the

same bullshit before. So I'm not going to even get my hopes up.

"Excellent," I respond with faux enthusiasm. "We need someone on this team besides myself who has *the goods*."

"Looking forward to helping out," Cooper says then he walks away towards the rest of the team who's waiting to hear our usual halftime strategy slash pep talk. I say *usual* because it seems like we're always losing after the second quarter, and therefore always getting these types of motivational speeches.

Yet that shit never seems to work.

I pause for a moment to myself, thinking that I may have come off as a bit of an arrogant asshole to the new guy, but he'll just have to understand. It's just my frustration talking. The press has been ripping me a new one over the last two seasons and it's been taking its toll.

I feel the weight of each and every season on my back and it's heavy like a motherfucker. When we lose, and we lose a lot, everyone looks at me as if this shit is not a team sport. As if it's all on me. They say I don't protect the ball. That my arm is not as powerful or accurate as it used to be. They say I don't play like I want to win. As if I don't want a championship ring when that's all I want. It's all I've ever wanted. It just seems so far out of my grasp right now. I can't seem to see a bright light at the end of this loserville tunnel.

"Stevenson!"

"Yes, Coach." I answer one of my other coaches - Coach B.

"We have plenty of time to turn this thing around. Stop trying to go for the damn touchdown every throw. Just get a first down for Christ's sake!"

"Somebody needs to catch or run the damn ball in order for me to do that, Coach B." I say loudly enough for all of my sloppy wide receivers to hear.

"*Somebody* will if you'd just throw it to the man you're

supposed to. We've run these plays all week, but you seem to have forgotten every single one," Coach B replies icily.

The team's offensive coordinator, Coach Benny, is not my biggest fan. Rumor has it that he actually wanted to go with the number two quarterback in the draft the year I entered instead of me. As a matter of fact, I was told the owner didn't particularly want me that badly either, although he'd never admit to that publicly.

From what I can tell over the last three years that I've been with the Nighthawks, only our head coach, Coach Ryan, really wants me here. That's why I try my best to work my ass off for him, as well as for myself. I don't ever want his position to be in jeopardy because of me, but clearly I'm not doing such a good job of that, because after halftime, we lose by seven points.

A-fucking-gain.

## SAINT



*I* don't even bother showering right after the end of the game, because I refuse to get cleaned up to go face the firing squad of reporters. So I just wipe the sweat off of my body with a towel, toss on one of my signature gold Nighthawk hoodies, lift the hood up to make sure it covers my entire head, and walk into the press room.

I really wish I could wear my shades, so they can't start making shit up about what my facial expressions say about my state of mind, but the team will probably try to fine me if I do that. So I compromise by only wearing the hoodie.

The questions start flying from all over the room, and like usual I answer only the ones I want. The way I want.

"Saint, what did you say to your teammates during half-time to try and get their heads back into the game?"

"Whatever I said didn't work, now did it?"

*Next.*

"Saint, how do you feel about Wachowski's injury?"

Fucking Annoyed. That jerk can't stay healthy to save his life.

"Disappointed."

*Next.*

"Saint, what do think about some of the official's questionable calls today?"

"They were bullshit."

*Next.*

"Saint, over here! Do you think you'll make the playoffs this year?"

A random reporter asks this stupid question. I've never seen him in the pit before. He's probably some sort of lame ass sports blogger. He looks all of eighteen years old. I guess the league gives anyone a press pass nowadays.

So Stupid.

"We gotta win at least one game first," I reply in a smart aleck voice.

*Next.*

"Saint, what do you think you need to do to turn things around this season?"

Now this guy I know. Jim Mathers. He's practically a relic. An old, balding guy from The Football Network, and he always asks the same irritating questions. Every single game.

"Score," I deadpan.

*Next.*

"Saint, unlike you, your brother seems to be having a fantastic start to his season in Seattle. How do you feel about that?"

And that question comes from a reporter named Myra Kitch. Rhymes with bitch. She's the worst out of the bunch. She's had it in for me since the day the Nighthawks signed me. She probably would play football herself if they allowed women to play in the pros. She's bigger and rougher than half of my offensive line, but because she's a woman, I have to be *extra careful* with how I handle her.

The team's PR people have repeatedly warned me that I

need to be careful and make sure to keep my statements politically appropriate. That shit infuriates me though. Where's the equality in that? I should be able to rip her a new one like I do any male reporter when they ask me something asinine.

"That's a stupid question, Myra," I respond. Because it is.

"Is it? The way I heard it you Stevensons are highly competitive, and that you might not be so happy about your brother's success."

What the fuck is she talking about?

"You heard wrong." Myra Kitch the She-bitch.

No one has ever dared pit the two Stevenson brothers against each other like she's doing. We're America's football family. Hell, they had my mother on Good Morning America teaching Robin Roberts how to bake the perfect apple turnover and dancing to a live performance by Brad Paisley.

No one but this woman, this very evil woman, with a wider neck than my great-grandmother Stevenson (and that was one big woman), would make it seem as if me and Mikey are jealous of each other's success when that could be the furthest thing from the truth.

My dad's probably cringing right now as he watches me lose some of my composure on national television. He always taught me to be humble and smile when on camera, but I'm not in the mood for either of those things. I can't stand this part of the game. Whoever the hell came up with the idea to interview players ten minutes after they've put their asses on the line for four quarters and come up short was either an idiot or a sadistic genius. No player or coach wants to talk to the press after a loss. No one wants salt poured into their wounds when they've just been sliced and diced for the nation to see.

I can't wait for the day when I get to silence these jerks. The day that I finally get my championship ring. They'll all



be kissing my ass when that day comes, because that's all you really have to do to shut reporters up. To shut everyone up.

Is win.

\* \* \*

AFTER WASTING thirty minutes of my life in a press conference, I try scrubbing the layer of "loser" off of me in the shower, and when I'm finished I'm not surprised to see that I have a visitor waiting for me at the entrance of the locker room.

I always do.

This one is dressed in very little clothing, has the best tits her money can buy, legs for days, and is staring at me like I'm the answer to all of her problems. I'm not even going to bother asking security how she got all the way through to the player's locker room. A supposedly secure area.

All I have to do is take a look at how her huge *National Geographic* looking nipples are practically poking through her clingy Red Bull tank top to know. She's one of *those* girls. The kind that would step over just about anybody to get what she wants, and today what she wants seems to be me.

Typically a visit from a woman like this would be just the kind of escape I'm looking for after an abysmal game like today and a press conference like the one I just had.

They basically line up for us after the games. Cleat chasers. Ball groupies. Normally one will give me a blow job in the car, and if she knocks that out of the park, then maybe I give her a quick fifteen minutes of banging her from behind back at her place. That's all I usually want from girls like her, but I'm guessing by her body language that is what she wants too.

It's what they all want

Quick and dirty. Something to brag to their girlfriends

about. Sex with the Gunslinger. Sex that their delusional asses are hoping will spoil it for all the other women after them, so that I'll come back specifically to them for more. But what this woman doesn't understand, just like all the women before her, is that there is no pussy in the world that will make me give up all the others. Forget all the others? That's never going to happen. I'm not built like that. Not anymore.

I've been getting pussy thrown at me since I was damn near fourteen years old. I guess because playing football is like catnip for certain women, case in point, this one standing in front of me licking her lips is a prime example.

Yet for some reason I can't explain my dick isn't jumping at her blatant offer. All I can seem to think about is the straight-laced, uppity woman, wearing the tight pencil skirt and bad attitude, with curves for miles from the restaurant the other night.

The girl who has no idea who I am.

Who doesn't remember me at all.

Twenty-four hours before I met her that first time, I had just been dumped by my fiancée Adrianna. Even though I trashed one of the rooms of the hotel, management was understanding. First of all the wedding was paid for, all my childhood friends and family were in town, and I'm kind of a celebrity. So we decided to stay and we spent the rest of my wedding weekend getting fucked up.

I noticed her the minute I walked into the bar that night. She was throwing back tequila shots and wobbling around on her stool with little grace but boundless beauty.

I listened to her sob story about liking some loser at her job, and then I gallantly tucked her into her hotel room bed without even as much as a peck on the cheek.

It's been a few days since our second meeting, but I still have her business card lying in the center console of my car,

and I have no explanation for why I haven't tossed it or used it. In fact, all I've been doing is reading it over and over, and adjusting the hard-on between my legs every time I do.

**SABRINA WHITE.**

***Junior Account Manager, Carson Financial.***

***Midtown Manhattan.***

***212-555-5484***

"YOU NEED A *RIDE* SOMEWHERE, GUNSLINGER?"

The groupie's provocative questioning snaps me out of my train of thought like a splash of cold water.

"Nah, I've got a ride."

"Then how about I take your mind off of things and onto better things while you take that ride."

Quick and dirty girl makes her move in a tone full of sexual promise, but one I'm not really in the mood for. Usually, I rely on noncommittal girls like her to make me come hard and snap me out of the funk a bad game puts me in.

But not tonight.

The groupie and her Red Bull tank top remind me of something. I'm Saint fucking Stevenson and bad season or not, I should at least have endorsements flying out of my ass, and I know just the girl that can get them for me.

## SABRINA



*I* notice it immediately. The office feels transformed the moment I walk off the elevator and into the main foyer. While Mondays are my favorite day of the week, they typically aren't anyone else's at my workplace. Yet today there seems to be a vibrancy floating through the air and bouncing around from person to person.

Contained excitement.

Reserved glee.

I'm not sure that I can explain it. Everything *seems* normal. My coworkers are at their cubicles with fresh lattes and small Pyrex bowls of warm oatmeal, typing away, writing on sticky notes, or texting on their cell phones about one thing or another. But something is definitely different, and I can't quite put my finger on what it is. Whatever's going on, I'm clearly the last person to know. I just hope it's a sign that I'm going to have a good mid-year evaluation.

"Morning, Sabrina"

"Morning, Peter."

It's common at the company for employees at my level of junior management to have mid and final year reviews with

a supervisor and a senior level account manager both present in the room. In my case today that's my team supervisor Peter and my friend who's a senior account manager, Marisol.

"So before we get into the thick of your review, Sabrina, we wanted to talk to you about some changes that are happening within the company. Exciting changes."

My eyes widen. Oh my God, is Peter going to give me Spin? Marisol silently nods her head back and forth behind Peter's back as if she can read my mind.

Spin is one of Carson Financial's top clients. They are an award-winning, platinum-selling band, that sells out stadiums every time they tour. Their account manager Priscilla Carson just left the company after finding out her husband, and Carson Financial founder, has been having a long-standing affair with his executive assistant. So now Spin is abruptly without a full-time money manager, and the company needs to fill the spot quickly, before the group walks away from us completely and takes their money with them.

It's no secret at my office that there is only room for one new senior account manager to join the fold, and that both my coworker (and frenemy) Abby and I want the position. If one of us is assigned the Spin account, that will speak volumes about who's going to get the promotion. It means that we're trusted with a Tier-One, A-level client. Opportunities typically offered to only senior level or rising senior managers. For me it's a serious long shot, because I'm so young. Abby has seniority, but I truly believe I work twice as hard as she does.

"So it's just come down from the powers that be that Carson is expanding our brand. No longer will we be limited to musical entertainers, but we've now opened our doors to professional athletes. In fact, there is an entire new division

of the company under development. The Carson Athletic division."

My supervisor Peter sounds almost excited as a kid on Christmas morning as he talks about this big expansion the company's making. And I get it. Athletes make tremendous amounts of money and have huge international profiles. What's not to like ... if you're management. If you're Peter. But this isn't the direction I'd hoped this conversation was going to go.

Now I'm starting to understand the silent head nod from Marisol. She knew I wasn't getting Spin or getting the promotion I was hoping for at all. She also knows how much I hate sports and despise professional athletes. They're just overgrown kids who get paid way more money than anyone should be allowed to earn for kicking or hitting a ball. I've never been able to understand that concept ever since I was a kid.

"We're starting off small. The Downtown office is getting three players. I think two of them are baseball and one is tennis, and our office is getting three new clients as well. One of them I feel very confident about giving to you, Sabrina. Best of all he's a football player."

Best of all?

"They call your new client The Gunslinger. Ring any bells?" Peter asks excitedly.

I think I'm supposed to have heard of this guy but I haven't.

"Umm, not really."

Peter chuckles, "That's all right. Marisol mentioned that you don't really follow sports. So maybe I'll have Jason help get you up to speed. He worked with ball players at his previous company. Is that okay with you?"

I'm a little shell shocked, but I go ahead and nod yes. Marisol grins like she always does whenever Jason's name is

mentioned. I swear she's going to get me to the altar and popping out Jason's babies even if it kills her. She's worse than my mother, albeit a little more optimistic about getting me married.

"The only important things to know for now are that he's the franchise quarterback for the New York Nighthawks, he's being paid the rookie wage cap of twenty-two and a half million for four years, and he's never signed with a money manager before. His father has been taking care of his investments."

It's quiet for a moment in the room until Marisol breaks the silence with a loud clap. "That's a fantastic client, Sabrina! Congratulations, girl," she says with a little extra added enthusiasm in her voice.

I guess she can tell by the look on my face that I'm completely overwhelmed by Peter's news and maybe a little freaked out. I know zilch about football.

"That's right, Sabrina," Peter chimes in. "The company is giving you this account and with it is expressing pretty much everything that I planned on verbalizing in today's mid-year review. You are an excellent account manager. You have the type of work ethic and attention to detail that Carson Financial values. You've met all of your goals last quarter, and more importantly we value you as a person.

"Good work and congratulations," Peter commends as he hands me a plain manila folder with a stapled packet inside.

"The Gunslinger's one sheet is in here along with a portfolio of his current assets. His game and practice schedule is grueling, so unfortunately the only time he has over the next two weeks to meet with you and sign his paperwork is later today at four o'clock.

"When you meet with him, make sure to have him sign the contract and discuss how things work with us. I've come up with a few goals that you can discuss, which I'll email you,

since I know you weren't prepared for all of this today, but feel free to run with any ideas you may come up with.

"I'm giving you full rein with this client, but obviously we'll be watching you closely. He's pretty important to us. So make sure you document things well. Add all significant meetings to the calendar. And just do what you do. Making sure to leave a paper trail that management can check if need be."

I accept the folder reservedly, while my brain is moving a mile a minute. Change is difficult for me. It builds a level of anxiety within me that I am working very hard to keep at bay this very minute. A trait passed down to me from my wonderful nervous Nellie of a mother.

Signs that my nerves are frayed? Well right now I am dying for a bag of potato chips and a Pepsi, and it's only nine in the morning. Grease and sugar cravings are a sure giveaway that I'm spiraling.

I'm dying to ask Peter why the hell he gave *me*, of all people, this particular client. *Is this some sort of test?* I want to yell at Marisol and tell her to stop laughing at me with her eyes, because trust me, she's cracking up at the fact that I'm silently unraveling. And most of all, I want to smack myself for being so ungrateful. While any sane person would look at this meeting as a sign that their career trajectory is on the right track, and be jumping up and down with excitement, all I can seem to dwell on are all the things that could go wrong, very wrong.

Number one. Carson Financial is known for its management of music entertainers. That is what we specialize in. That is where most of the managers' passions lie (such as myself), and it is where most of our connections are, with companies that want to do business with music entertainers. We (I) don't know the first thing about athletes.

Number two. I don't like sports. I don't watch football,



baseball, soccer, hockey, or tennis. I don't even watch the Olympics. Winter or summer. And when the sports segment comes on the evening news, I turn the sound down and read a book. Some of my attitude might have to do with the fact that I suck at sports, some of it might have to do with a little crush I had on a very evil baseball player in high school, but mostly it has to do with the fact that I have a big problem with grown men being overpaid to do what they've been doing since they were three years old ... play. Imagine someone paying me millions of dollars to play Words With Friends on my cell phone? Now that would be freakin' awesome.

Number three. I don't want any new accounts distracting me from my real mission. Becoming a senior account manager. There's no doubt that this ball player is probably young, dumb and has more money than he knows what to do with; how on earth am I going to impress management when I'm going to be stuck with such an unpredictable client. If they would just give me Spin, this would be so easy.

I just love their story. Three high school friends, determined not to sell out, writing socially conscious music in their garage, determined to share their art with the world. Doing a lot of pop-up shows for free, so that all their fans have the opportunity to see them live. And the lead singer Marley. On top of the fact that he's gorgeous, the texture and tone of his voice is haunting and makes you feel like he's singing directly to you. About you. For you.

I'm a numbers girl, and I don't have an artistic bone in my body, so I really respect people who have the gift to create art like that and are brave enough to share it with the world. Not to mention that they make a ton of money at it, and from what Marisol has told me about them, they not only make great money but they spend it wisely. They often give a lot of it away to meaningful charities. Never seeking any press or

recognition for their good deeds. Who on earth wouldn't want to have them as a client? Who wouldn't look good with them on their roster?

Ugh. I can feel my nerves churning inside of my stomach like a mixture of bad barbecue and warm beer. This is so off my plan. A huge detour. I have to become a senior manager in the next twelve to eighteen months if I want to stay on track. If I don't, then I'm going to have to re-evaluate my plan, which I really don't want to do. Because like I said, I hate change.

But if this is some sort of test from management, then perhaps I need to look at this whole thing differently. Maybe try altering my way of thinking. This could be a massive opportunity for me if I handle things correctly. Make the most out of it. Bide my time. And then I'm sure I'll get what I deserve eventually. I've got good people in my corner like Marisol and Jason. Yeah, I'm just going to have to bide my time.

"Thank you so much, Peter. I know that this is an amazing opportunity, and I'm honored that you've offered it to me."

"You've earned it, kid. Remember four p.m. in the small conference room. I'll have Dawn order a platter or something and put it in there. You like Pepsi right?"

"Yes, but make it diet," I say brightly. Surprised that he remembers such an irrelevant piece of trivia about me. But I guess that's why he's the boss. He is excellent with small details, and he knows how to make everyone feel special.

"And that, my friend, brings your mid-year evaluation to a close." Marisol throws her arm around my shoulders.

"Any questions about the account can be directed to me or your mentor Jason." She winks.

"Great." I smile. "Thank you, both."

Peter gets up to leave first, and as soon as the door closes

behind him, I snap my head around to Marisol in an almost panic. She throws her hand up to stop me before I can even blurt anything out first.

"Stop it. I know what you're going to say. You still want Spin. You hate sports. You don't think that you can do this. But trust me when I say that they wouldn't give you a twenty-two million dollar client if they didn't have plans on making you a senior level manager very soon. Also, look at it this way, it's the perfect excuse for you to work with Jason even more. He is the only senior level here with experience working with athletes."

"Then why on earth didn't they give him the account?"

"He's getting one of the other ones."

"This makes absolutely zero sense."

"Just think about all the legitimate reasons you'll have to ask for a consultation with him." Marisol grins.

"You do realize that you are not a professional match-maker don't you? This is my career we're talking about. Plus, I don't want to marry the guy. I just have a little crush."

"Little?! I think you need to remember who you're talking to. You've had eyes for him ever since he started working here three years ago. That's a long ass crush."

"It's not like I'm waiting around for him. I've dated other people."

"I realize you have needs and that you've seen a few guys here and there, but let's not forget that I know that he's the one you really want. And I'm all for it. You just have to let go of the whole retreat thing and open up. Allow him to see the real you. Not just the persona you display here at work."

"There's a bigger problem than my love life right now, Marisol. I have a meeting with the star player of a professional football team, and I don't even know that I've ever seen an entire football game in my life."

"That's okay. You're his financial manager not his coach."

"I know music, not sports."

"You know money, and you'll learn whatever you need to about sports. Do I need to reiterate how much money he makes? Don't dismiss this opportunity, Sabrina."

"There are just a few things I need to warn you about though. This guy's family is football royalty, and they're very close knit. They don't do outside people well at all. So expect some push back from his camp."

"All right and what else?"

"The other thing is that this Stevenson guy is like a rock star on steroids. Drop dead hot. Obviously loaded. He parties hard and runs through women like crazy. And he's probably an ass. He was seen at Wimbledon last summer saying something in his date's ear to make her cry. Cameras caught it."

"Wimbledon?"

"Tennis, Sabrina. It's the name of the tennis championship held in England every year. You must know about that?"

"Of course I've heard of that." Barely. "Celebrities go to that?"

"Big ones," she answers, as if she's exhausted by my sports ignorance.

"Okay, but what's your point?"

"He's charming to say the least, and let's call a spade a spade, you're vulnerable. So just stay professional. Don't let him get under your skin or inside your panties."

"You're kidding right?"

"I know who I'm talking to. I realize you have zero interest in pro athletes. Especially womanizers like him, but as a fellow woman, I felt like I should at least warn you. Stronger women have fallen under the spell of men just like him."

"Your warning has been duly noted, but trust me when I say that you have nothing to worry about. I have a very

friendly electronic boyfriend at home that takes care of the cobwebs in between fellas."

"Don't we all."

We both cackle.

"So does the office know about this guy already? I mean everyone's been acting weird this morning."

"Well, the team did get an email about the new sports division, but not about Stevenson specifically. Peter may have conveniently taken your name off of the email distribution list. He wanted you to be surprised. He was actually very excited to give this client to you. He really thinks you have senior level potential. He's pushing for you, Sabrina. So this Gunslinger guy is your Spin. Make it work."

I seriously doubt that, but I guess stranger things have happened.

As I make my way back to my cubical, I start getting a few "happy eyes" from coworkers.

They know.

Not just about the new sports division, but it's obvious that they know that I have one of the clients in that new department.

I try to graciously smile in acknowledgement of everyone's stares, and then I sit down at my cubicle and take a look at my computer screen.

I shake the mouse to stop the screen saver and check my inbox. Sure enough Peter sent another email about five minutes ago announcing the managers who will handle the three clients of the newly created Carson Financial sports division: Jason Humphrey, Samuel Parson, and myself. Out of us three, I am the only junior level manager, which means that this is definitely a big deal for me.

Perhaps Marisol is right. Maybe this is my gateway to becoming a senior manager. All right then, Mr. Gunslinger, let's learn more about you...

I pull my packet out which has the one sheet on top and can't believe my eyes when I see his photograph.

**CLIENT: Saint Stevenson a.k.a. The Gunslinger**

**Height: 6' 5"**

**Weight: 245 lbs**

**Position: Quarterback**

**Team: New York Nighthawks**

**Current Season: Fourth**

**Contract Terms: Four years; 22.5 million.**

**Endorsements: Lucky Sports**

IT'S HIM.

Those titanium eyes.

That strong jaw.

The man who touched me and damn near set me on fire.

The man I made kind of a fool of myself in front of, because I didn't think I'd ever see him again.

The man I'm going to see and sign to a contract in less than seven hours.

Oh. My. hell.

**WANT TO KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?**

**DOWNLOAD SAINT NOW**







## ALSO FROM LISA LANG BLAKENEY

### **The Masterson Series**

Devour this addictive series about the possessive bad boy, Roman Masterson, who falls hard and fast for the girl he's promised his family to protect.

Masterson  
Masterson Unleashed  
Masterson In Love  
Masterson Made  
Joseph Loves Juliette  
Masterson Box Set

### **Masterson Next Generation Series**

The crazy hot fruit doesn't fall far from the tree. Dive into this second generation of Masterson men!

Knox - Knox & Gigi  
Bronx - Bronx & Karma  
Seven - Seven & Sasha

### **The King Brothers Series**

Dive into this series of interconnected standalones featuring

3 alpha hot brothers and the women they lay claim to  
without apology.

Claimed - Camden & Jade

Indebted - Cutter & Sloan

Broken - Stone & Tiny

Promised - All King Brothers

King Brothers Box Set

### **The Nighthawk Series**

Sexy & sweet sports romances set in the professional world  
of football. All standalones.

Saint - Saint & Sabrina

Wolf - Cooper & Ursula

Diesel - Mason & Olivia

Jett - Jett & Adrienne

Rush - Rush & Mia

You can always find the most recent list of releases at Lisa's  
ebook store.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lisa Lang Blakeney is the USA Today Bestselling Author of contemporary romance sold in more than 28 countries. Worried that her fellow PTO moms might disapprove, she wrote and published her steamy debut novel Masterson under a different title and pen name in August of 2015.

Thanks to strong reader support of her alpha male character, Roman Masterson, she was encouraged to continue with the series and published the entire Masterson Trilogy the following year. She hasn't looked back since and continues to write novels featuring strong alpha men and the smart women they seek to claim.

A romance junkie for sure, you can find Lisa watching a romantic comedy, reading a romance novel, or writing one of her own most days of the week. If she's not doing that, she's outside in the garden tending to her roses.

Lisa is the wife of one alpha (whom she met in college), mother to four girls, and two labradoodles. Get news on releases, sales and giveaways when you become one of Lisa's VIP readers at : <http://LisaLangBlakeney.com/VIP>


 [facebook.com/authorlisalangblakeney](https://facebook.com/authorlisalangblakeney)

 [twitter.com/LisaLangWrites](https://twitter.com/LisaLangWrites)

 [instagram.com/LisaLangBlakeney](https://instagram.com/LisaLangBlakeney)

 [amazon.com/author/lisalangblakeney](https://amazon.com/author/lisalangblakeney)

 [bookbub.com/authors/lisa-lang-blakeney](https://bookbub.com/authors/lisa-lang-blakeney)

 [goodreads.com/Lisa\\_Lang\\_Blakeney](https://goodreads.com/Lisa_Lang_Blakeney)

 [pinterest.com/lisalangwrites](https://pinterest.com/lisalangwrites)