

Knight

Chapter One

Pointless but It's Somethin'

I was standing in the corner.

I didn't want to be there, I hadn't wanted to be there for a while and I was considering making a move not to be there anymore when he walked in.

But these thoughts flew from my head, in fact, every thought flew from my head as I caught sight of him and blinked.

Then I stared.

He was tall. I had no idea how to describe how tall he was but the only word I could think of was "very". Very tall. He was wearing a nice, tailored, black wool overcoat. With the lighting, all I could see was that he had on trousers, not their color or style, just that they weren't jeans or cords. I could also see he had on nice shoes. Those could also be described as the "very" variety of nice. They were shiny and clearly expensive. Other than that, with his side to me, I couldn't take anything else in.

And I really didn't try.

I was fascinated by it all but my attention was taken by his face. His features, even mostly in profile, were striking. Not perfection but so intensely masculine I'd never seen anything like it. It was almost unreal.

But his hair surprised me. He had on an expensive overcoat, expensive shoes and he was here, at this party, in this lavish apartment in a way that I knew, unlike me, he belonged here. But his very dark, thick, slightly wavy hair needed a cut. It wasn't long and unkempt, it was simply longish and unruly. Like he had better things to do than to get regular haircuts and those things weren't clubbing, hanging with his crew and taking fastidious care of his body, clothing and all other parts of his physical being so that he could play and then nail every female who threw herself at him.

Then again, if he did that, he'd never come up for air.

His height, his clothes, his looks, his hair were not all that fascinated me.

He was angry. It was not only etched in the hard line of his strong jaw, his lips pressed together in unconcealed annoyance or his gaze sharp on the scene that lay before him.

It was physical. A swell of vibrating heat that filled the room.

I wasn't the only one who noticed. With some effort, tearing my eyes away from him, I saw those closest to him had turned to look at him, some were even taking a few steps away to retreat.

I didn't blame them. I was all the way across the room in the corner and I still felt it. But if I was close, I, too, would shift away.

It was terrifying. Utterly.

I wondered if Nick had a roommate and my guess was, he did. My other guess was, he had no idea Nick was having a party.

My eyes swept the space. The sunken living room and the elevated areas surrounding it were cluttered with bodies. There was a bottle of champagne that had overturned on the coffee table and it clearly had been at least half full considering the wet stain on the carpet and the puddle on the table. I knew two people had broken glasses, I heard them. One, some girl cleaned up. The other, the pieces had been kicked around and likely smushed into the kickass furry carpet or ground into the dark wood floors luckily not causing any injuries (yet). There were beer bottles, liquor bottles and glasses everywhere, even sitting on the floor or having rolled under tables. There were overfull ashtrays, ashes on the floor, even butts. The music wasn't ear-splitting loud but considering it was after one in the morning, it was still too loud. The neighbors in this swank building definitely could hear it not to mention the noisy buzz of conversation and they probably wouldn't like it.

I knew I wouldn't and I didn't.

And neither did Nick's roommate.

My eyes went back to where he was standing and they did this hesitantly. Part of me wanted to see him again. I was a woman and he was the kind of man a woman would look at. Any woman. No matter what their tastes ran to. He just attracted female attention and any woman would want a second look. Part of me was scared to look mostly because he was pretty scary. This was because a man who could walk into a room wearing an overcoat, be there a moment and fill the room with a searing, angry vibe *was* pretty scary.

But when I looked back, he was gone.

And I took this as my cue to be gone.

I didn't want to come anyway but Sandrine had her sights set on Nick for a while now. Viv and I had told her time and again he was a player and we knew this because we knew a number of girls he'd played. But Sandrine saw him as the golden goose. She spent a goodly amount of time on the hunt for the golden goose and the minute she laid eyes on the handsome Nick Sebring, she decided he was The One.

The minute I laid eyes on him, my stomach turned. He was good-looking, this was fact. He was also a jerk. This was impossible to miss. And he was something else, something I couldn't put my finger on, something I didn't like. Not at all.

But to Sandrine, he had it all. Flash, dash, beauty...

And money.

Yes, my friend was a gold digger.

Still, call me crazy, and I called myself that more than once over my years of knowing her, I loved her. She was a pain in the behind a lot of the time and I had to say her single-minded pursuit of The One, just as long as The One was gorgeous, built and loaded, kind of freaked me out sometimes, alarmed me others and flat out scared me on occasion. But at least she knew who she was and what she wanted.

And this, I thought, surveying the scene, was what she wanted. She wanted to reign as queen at exactly this kind of scene. Free-flowing booze and champagne. Well-dressed lackeys. Sumptuous apartments with sunken living rooms, state-of-the-art kitchens and wraparound balconies. And we'd put our coats in Nick's bedroom so I'd had a quick look. Seriously, one look at Nick's bedroom and even I nearly reconsidered his jerk status, it was that gorgeous.

Then, approximately a half a second later, I remembered nothing was worth putting up with a jerk. Not even a beyond gorgeous bedroom. Especially not a jerk like Nick.

I put my mostly unconsumed drink on the black marble countertop that adorned the long bar that separated the kitchen from the living room and started to make my way to the balcony.

I didn't want to do this and this was the reason why I was hiding in a dark corner. I'd tried mingling but this wasn't my scene and the people there knew it just as well as me. Sandrine told me I should buy a dress and keep the tags on, just tuck them in to hide them. She also told me to buy a pair of shoes and she'd go with me to make a scene if they wouldn't accept the return because they were scuffed. But I thought this was uncool so I refused like I did all the other times Sandrine suggested this.

She didn't mind doing this and did it all the time. Sweat stains, martini stains, it didn't matter. Once she'd even returned a pair of shoes whose strap broke while she was dancing. And it was the fourth time she'd worn them.

Not me.

So I was wearing a pair of high-heeled sandals I bought two years ago. They were cute, even, I thought, sexy but they were cheap, not even real leather. I'd taken care of them but still, they looked what they were. Same with my dress. TJ Maxx and not even a way out of season designer, just a no name. I thought it was pretty, it showed just enough skin, not too much, it fit like a glove and it was the perfect color for me but it wasn't silk, satin or labeled. It was polyester and even at TJ Maxx I bought it on sale.

And the eyes came to me, moving up and down, lips curling, noses scrunching, eyes rolling.

This was the girls.

The guys, eyes right to my breasts, hips or legs. At this point of the evening, they didn't care if they banged class or someone who thought they could buy it. They just wanted to bang anything and would take what they could get.

Sandrine had headed out to the balcony about half an hour ago with Nick. She'd not returned so this was my destination. Therefore, my journey was a long one, weaving through bodies, avoiding crossed legs or stepping over straightened ones of those sitting on couches, feeling gazes following me the entire way.

It seemed to last an hour but probably lasted around two minutes.

Then I was through the glass door and outside.

It felt good out there, cold but good. No smoke, the stuffiness of too many bodies in a space gone, I allowed myself a moment to drink it in.

Then I looked around.

A couple to the right in a clinch. Not Sandrine.

I turned my head left and nearly at the corner of the balcony I saw Nick had Sandrine against the floor to ceiling window. They were also in a clinch.

Ugh.

I clicked over in my inexpensive (but cute) sandals and when I got somewhat close called, "Uh... sorry to disturb."

Nick's head came up and both of their eyes came to me. Otherwise, they didn't move a muscle.

Nick's eyes dropped to my breasts.

Sandrine's eyes widened in a clear but nonverbal, "What the fuck are you *doing* here?" She finally had him where she'd wanted him for a long while and she wasn't happy to be disturbed.

"Again, sorry," I said quietly when I got close and looked to Sandrine. "Honey, I need to go home."

"Okay," she replied immediately. "Text you tomorrow."

I blinked.

We had a pact, never leave a man behind. Not to mention, we'd shared a taxi and since we were sharing one back and she'd driven to my house that meant such a treat was affordable.

"Um... but—" I started.

"I'm good," she cut me off. "Nick can take me home when I go home." Her head turned to Nick. "Right, Nick?"

He didn't move his eyes from my breasts for a moment before they drifted lazily to my face.

"Why are you leaving?" he asked and I stared at him.

What did he care?

"Well, it's getting late and—" I began to explain.

He interrupted with, "Stay."

"Pardon?" I asked.

"Stay," he repeated then a grin spread on his face that I did not like, not that I liked much about Nick, as in nothing. His head turned to Sandrine who he still had pinned to the windows then back to me and in a low voice with unmistakable meaning, he said softly, "The three of us, we'll have a party."

I blinked again even as I stiffened and saw Sandrine doing the same.

Then I stated firmly, "No, actually, I need to go home which is where I'm going." I looked to my friend. "Sandrine?"

She looked miffed, not a little, a lot.

At me.

God, Sandrine.

Then she looked at Nick and announced, "I don't do three-ways. It's just me or nothing."

He looked at me. "You uptight like that?" he asked.

See? Jerk!

"Absolutely," I answered.

"Shame," he muttered then, still looking at me, "Though, figure, just you'd be enough."

Seriously?

“Seriously?” This came sharp and from Sandrine.

Told you Nick was a jerk and something else and whatever that something else was, was not good.

“Right, if that’s the gig then whoever’s stayin’ stays and whoever’s leavin’ leaves,” Nick went on and he did this eyes on Sandrine, who he had pinned to the windows but somehow, and it wasn’t lost on Sandrine or me, he was insinuating it was her he wanted to leave.

God, I hoped this opened her eyes to this dirtbag.

I should have known better. Those eyes came to me and she said, “I’ll text you tomorrow.”

God, somehow, some way I needed to get her to snap out of it. I wished Viv was here with me. She’d lay it out. Then again, she had, more often and with less gentleness than me and Sandrine never listened to her either.

“Sandrine —”

“Anya, honey, *I’ll text you tomorrow.*”

She was getting impatient. She was also living firm in the mistaken knowledge that her beauty (and she *was* beautiful), her style (ditto with the style, she had it in spades) and her abilities between the sheets (I had no idea about that one, though, according to her, she was fabulous) would twine Nick Sebring close and he wouldn’t want to break free.

“Sandrine, I’m not comfor —” I started yet again.

“Anya,” she cut me off again. “I’ll... text... you... *tomorrow.*” Then she gave big eyes to Nick who was looking at me and didn’t notice. These eyes indicated that I was missing the fact she had her golden goose in her snare and I needed to vamoose, and pronto, so she could work her magic.

I didn’t like this. You didn’t leave a man behind but you *really* didn’t leave a man behind with Nick Sebring.

But other than drag her kicking and screaming out of the apartment, down fifteen floors and into a taxi, I didn’t know what to do.

So I muttered, “Tomorrow.”

She grinned at me.

I frowned at her and tried to communicate seven thousand words about Nick being a jerk with my eyes. But she just turned back to him, lifted her hand to his cheek and turned his face to her.

Really, Vivica was right. Sandrine was living in a fantasy world. She’d had a Daddy who treated her like she was precious, told her she was beyond beautiful and spoiled her rotten. Then she’d had a high school boyfriend who did the same. Then in college, another boyfriend, the same. From birth to twenty-two, she’d had the golden life gliding on her beauty and feminine wiles. She hadn’t cottoned onto the fact that, after leaving college five years ago, she’d entered the jungle. And further, the particular jungle she chose to hunt in had bigger, more ferocious predators even after a number of them had already chewed her up and spit her out.

With no choice, I called a soft, “Goodnight,” and turned away.

I received no farewells.

I didn’t look back.

I headed to my coat and luckily I had something to do while I did it so I didn’t have to feel the eyes on me or see the looks. As I wended my way through bodies and muttered vague, “excuse me’s”, I was pulling my little (cheap but cute) purse open to pull out my cell.

By the time I got to the mouth of the hall, I had it out.

The apartment was strange. I thought this because it was huge. I’d never been in an apartment that large before. I didn’t even know they came that large. But it also had a bizarre layout.

Bizarre or not, it was cool and even if it wasn’t my thing and it didn’t look all that great now stuffed full of bodies and the detritus of a party, I couldn’t say it wasn’t stunning. It was.

You walked into a wide hall at the side of which one wall had two doors (closed) the other was just a wall that delineated the hall from the kitchen. This hall led to the living room which was mostly sunken,

three steps down to the seating area. But around its perimeter was an elevated, wide, dark wood-floored area and two sides of the living room were surrounded by floor to ceiling windows.

Another hall led off this just as you hit the living room area. It was L-shaped. This had two doors down one side, one at the end and then you turned down the L and another door at the end of that hall.

Nick's gorgeous bedroom. Where my coat was.

I wandered down the hall toward my coat, head bent, activating my phone. I got to the bend in the L when my phone went blank in my hand and my feet stopped as I stared at it.

"Crap," I whispered, hitting the on button to no avail. I tried again. No go again. "Crap," I repeated my whisper.

I needed a new phone. I knew this. I was saving for it and was only two paychecks away from buying it. My phone lost its charge in an hour and had been doing so for the last month and a half. My next phone was going to be a good one, not a cheapie. This was not because I wanted to keep up with the gadgets. This was because I'd been through three cheap phones in as many years and I felt this investment was sound. If I had a phone that cost three times as much as the ones I'd been buying but lasted for three years with zero headaches, I'd be ahead of the game.

I looked to the end of the hall where Nick's bedroom was and was about to start walking again but my body froze solid.

This was because on the floor in the hall was a huge pile of coats.

I stared, shocked. I, myself, had put my coat on a pile on Nick's bed. Now they were on the floor in the hall.

I looked from the coats to the end of the hall.

The bedroom door was open, the lights on and blazing, unlike before when I put my coat there and the lights were dim, romantic. An indication of a promise of what was to come for the girl who would be lucky enough (gag) to join Nick there later.

Jeez, some drunk idiot tossed all the coats in the hall. I hadn't seen anyone acting like an idiot but there were people who were careening beyond inebriated to sloshed. This happened at an open bar where the booze was plentiful and flowed freely seeing as it was free.

I pulled in breath and walked to the coats. Doing a knees closed squat, I held my cell and purse in one hand and pawed through the coats with my other one. Finding mine, I yanked it out and straightened. I did this with my eyes aimed down the hall but unfocused. Then they focused when I spied the shiny silver, thin, curving, unbelievably cool cordless phone in a black dome base sitting on the nightstand in the bedroom.

That phone was the means to a taxi. One without having to ask someone in the living room if I could use their phone, interrupting Sandrine and Nick again or hoofing it on the sidewalk in hopes I'd find a payphone then standing outside in the cold to wait.

Excellent.

I carefully skirted the coats, having to step on some as it was impossible to move around them without doing this, and walked into the bedroom to the phone. I didn't look around even though I wanted to take a closer look. I wanted more to get the heck out of there.

I picked up the phone from its base thinking the same thing I thought the first time I walked into that room. The room smelled odd. An attractive blend of some heady masculine aftershave or cologne and cigarette smoke. Yes, cigarette smoke. But it blended strangely well together making the room seem wicked but in a good way. Now, the cigarette smoke was the stronger of the two when before it was the aftershave/cologne smell and this was less attractive but more wicked.

I thanked the powers that be that taxis, something I rarely took because I could rarely afford them, had their numbers emblazoned on all their cars and had dialed in the four and one of the four, one, two, four, one, two, four number when I heard a low, smooth, very deep, definitely annoyed man's voice asking, "What the fuck?"

My head swiveled and I froze in mid-dial.

The tall man with dark, disheveled, longish hair and freakishly masculine, markedly attractive features was standing in one of the two sets the arched French doors that led to the balcony across the room. He was smoking, he'd lost his overcoat and I saw he was wearing a deep lilac, slim-fit tailored shirt that showed he not only was tall but broad, lean and had a torso unmistakably packed with power, Oh, and he was pissed.

Oh my.

And.

Oh crap.

"Uh..." I mumbled then mumbled no more as he swiftly knifed sideways, clearly to stub out his cigarette then his angry, dark gaze sliced back to me as his long legs started bringing him to me.

Crap!

"You got a cell in your hand," he informed me. "You need to hit my room and my phone?" he asked.

Yes.

Pissed.

"Uh..."

He was moving across the room so I again shut up.

This room, too, had a sunken level. The large bed was on the normal level and it was covered with a black satin comforter (yes, *satin*) with black satin cases on the pillows (satin!) which meant satin sheets. The black lacquered headboard was very tall, as tall as me. The footboard was at least half a person high. The head of the bed was flanked with two black lacquered nightstands that were elegantly shaped and topped with lamps with slim, glossy black bottoms and wide but squat ivory shades. The bed was sitting on an ivory rug that had a slender black border edged in a thicker ivory.

The same rug was in the sunken area that also held an ivory, sweep-lined couch tumbled with black toss pillows and an equally sweep-lined black armchair with ivory toss pillows that had a matching ottoman. There was also an oval, black lacquered coffee table down there and tall, now illuminated floor lamps flanking the couch that coordinated with the lamps on the nightstands.

Up three steps was another area with a matching but narrow rug that looked made to fit the space. On either end were identical, tall, black lacquered chests of drawers topped with bigger lamps with wider bases but like the floor lamps they somewhat matched the ones on the nightstands.

All the lights were turned on including the three overhead ones which had stunning arrays of pinned but dangling crystals covering them.

And last, there were three doors along the wall. Two closed. One opened though not lit but I could still see it was a bathroom.

I took all this in distractedly because he was making his way to me and I was paralyzed.

He was moving up the steps closest to me as he called, his eyes slightly narrowing, "Hello? Are you breathing?"

"I thought this was Nick's room," I blurted and he stopped suddenly by the footboard of the bed.

"It's not," he ground out.

Yep. Totally. *Pissed*.

And yep.

Totally.

Scary.

Terrifying.

Utterly.

"I need to go home," I whispered. "I came in a taxi and I need to call one to take me home. My cell, it's acting up. It doesn't hold a charge for more than an hour. It's dead. I should have known. I didn't think. But I came here with my girlfriend so I guess I thought she could call. She's staying though. And I put my coat in here and I thought it was Nick's room seeing as he told us to put our coats in here. I just thought I'd use your phone real quick and get a taxi. I'm so sorry. I had no idea this wasn't Nick's room and I was intruding. Truly. I'm very sorry."

I stopped talking and he stared at me.
It was then I saw his eyes were blue. A strange, startling, dark, vibrant, *Prussian* blue.
And they were beautiful, the color, the shape, the long, curving lashes.
My breath stuck in my throat.
Then his eyes dropped but not to my breasts, my hips or my legs.
To my arm which was attached to my hand that was clutching my purse, my cell and had my coat draped over it.
Then they cut back to my face.
Then in his smooth, deep voice, he declared, "I'll take you home."
I blinked.
He moved.
I braced but before I could do a thing about it or say a word, he slid his phone from my fingers, leaned deep into me and I smelled that the aftershave or cologne was his.
I was right. It was attractive. So attractive all I could do was stand still and take in that glorious scent.
He put the phone in its charger then leaned back and took my coat from my arm.
At that, I came out of my freeze.
"Um... I don't—" I started but clamped my mouth shut when his fingers curled around my upper arm and suddenly I found my body turned so my back was to him.
"Arm," he ordered and I twisted my neck to look at him at the same time I tried to force myself to breathe.
"What?" I whispered.
He was standing behind me with my coat held up for me to slide into.
"Arm," he repeated, sounding a lot less patient and considering he didn't sound patient at all before, this was even *more* terrifying.
"I think—" I started but said no more when his hand shot out, grabbed my wrist and pulled it back. It wasn't rough, it didn't hurt but I was shocked all the same.
Then he dipped my coat and slid it up my arm.
"Other arm," he commanded and, without delay, I awkwardly switched my purse and cell to my other hand and reached behind me to find the sleeve of my coat.
In no time I felt his hands settling it on my shoulders then one moved, wrapped around my bicep and suddenly I was facing him. Then I was moving with him to the door, his hand still on my arm.
I struggled but I found my voice.
"I'm really okay with a taxi," I told him as he pulled me out of the room, slightly tugged my arm and brought me to a stop.
Totally ignoring me, he curved his torso around the door, did something around the knob, then came out, his hand going the other way and then the lights were extinguished making the room go black. Then he closed the door, locked it, pocketed the key and turned us to the hall.
He did all of this with his hand still holding my arm.
It was at this point I realized my heart was racing and I was finding it difficult to breathe.
Then I stopped breathing altogether when he shifted quickly, bending into me. I had time enough to sway an inch away from him before I was up in his arms.
My legs flying through the air, reflexively, I slid one arm around his hard-muscled shoulders, the other one swinging out in front of him to grab my hand at his neck and hold on as he strode *over* the coats, walking right on the pile.
Holy crap!
Once free of the coats, he bent and dropped me to my feet. It again wasn't rough but it wasn't gentle and my body jolted when my feet hit floor. I had no time to recover, not from being on my feet again, not even from being *off* them, not from the easy way he swung me into his arms like I weighed as much as a body pillow.

Not from *any* of it.

Not before his fingers curled around my upper arm again and he propelled me down the hall and around the bend in it.

Okay, I had to get control of this situation and do it *now*.

I opened my mouth to do just that at the same time I was about to tug my arm from his hold when he stopped abruptly, stopping me with him. Then his head slightly cocked. His angry, blue eyes cut to me and I forgot I had to get control of the situation and do it *now*. I forgot everything.

Then for some reason he adjusted me, not gently, not cruelly but definitely firmly to the side of one of the doors in the hall.

He let me go and without knocking, he opened the door but where I was situated, I couldn't see inside.

I heard a woman's horrified gasp and a man starting, "What the —?"

"I gotta take someone home," my unwelcome ride told the couple. "You got that time to turn off the fuckin' music, empty this fuckin' place of bodies and clean up as much as you can. She wants to finish that ride you're meanin' to give her, she helps you clear out this place. She doesn't help, get her ass outta here too. You don't want me to come home to see you not takin' me seriously and I hope you get me 'cause I'm not fuckin' with you, Nick, and I am not happy."

Then he stepped out, closed the door, grabbed my arm again and pulled me down the hall.

My first thought was that he'd just walked in on Sandrine and Nick.

My second thought was obviously Nick had a less spectacular room.

My third thought was that he'd positioned me to the side of the door. I found this surprising and intriguing because he'd heard them in there. They couldn't have gotten far but they definitely were moving things on. Still, he'd shielded me from whatever was behind that closed door and I didn't know what to make of it.

We'd rounded the other hall on our way to the front door when I cleared these thoughts and came back to the matter at hand.

"Um... listen, uh..." Damn! "Um, I don't know your name but —"

"Knight," he stated, cutting me off.

"Right, Mr. Knight —"

"No, Knight," he interrupted me again then stopped me by one of the doors in the hall, let me go and opened the door.

"That's what I said, Knight," I told him. "Now, Mr. Knight —"

He came out of that door with his overcoat and turned his eyes to me.

I interrupted myself then when they hit me and I clamped my mouth closed.

"No, not Mr. Knight. *Knight*. My name is Knight."

I stared up at him as he shrugged on his overcoat and then asked, "Your Christian name is Knight?"

"If that means first name, yeah," he answered, grabbed my arm and pulled me down the hall to the front door.

As he did, curious at this information even though I should be seeing to other business, I asked, "With a 'K'?"

He looked down at me as he opened the door, "Yeah, babe, with a 'K'."

Then he pulled me out the door.

"That's an unusual name," I muttered.

"Yeah," he agreed, dragging me down the luxuriant hall toward the elevators.

"I kind of like it," I blurted because I did but after I blurted that I kind of wished I didn't.

"I can die happy," he murmured.

I pulled in breath at his murmured, mild sarcasm which was kind of funny instead of being rude and this man did not strike me as a guy who could be funny, kind of or otherwise.

He pulled me to a stop at the elevator and I watched him lean in and tag the button. This was when I saw he had hands that matched his body. Attractive. Long fingers. Well-veined. They weren't

professionally manicured but his nails were well-kept even if his hands looked like the hands of a man who didn't have a lavish bedroom in an opulent apartment and wore expensive shoes, tailored shirts in a color that suited him so well a stylist had to pick them for him and pricey overcoats.

Time to stop thinking about his hands and sort this.

"Knight, I appreciate the offer, really. Thank you but truly, I can get a taxi home."

"Yeah, you can but you aren't."

"I —"

His eyes sliced to me and I braced.

"Listen, babe, I take you home I'm doin' something. Something that requires my attention. Like driving, getting a woman home safe then driving back here. This will give me time maybe to calm down. And this will take my mind off the fact I wanna rip Nick's dick off, shove it up his ass and send that motherfucker over my balcony."

Without my brain telling them to do so, I yanked my arm free of his hold, my feet took me one step away from him and my hand came up to press against the gleaming, wood-paneled wall by the elevator as I stared up at him.

I didn't know if he meant this. I didn't think he did. It would be bad form to toss your roommate over a balcony even if he did have a party you obviously weren't invited to that happened to occur in your own home. Not to mention, it was highly illegal.

I did know he was angry.

And last I knew he didn't mind sharing that and just how angry he was and doing it to a woman he did not know in any way. He'd dragged me through an apartment, didn't let me finish hardly any sentences and *picked me up* to carry me over a pile of coats that *he* obviously threw in the hallway.

I had my hand on the wall because my legs were shaking and I needed it there to help hold me up. And my legs were shaking because I remembered he terrified me. And there was reason. He was terrifying.

As I stood there wondering if I should scream at the top of my lungs or turn on my cheap (but cute) high-heeled sandal and run as fast as I could, something happened.

He started paying attention to me.

Although it was sheer lunacy that I considered it unflattering, I did and what I considered unflattering was the fact that suddenly he seemed to be looking at me and actually *seeing* me. Until I shifted away from him, I didn't exist. I was just an excuse to get him away from his apartment and Nick before he let loose his fury. Now, he was looking at me, his eyes moving over me, taking me in. My face. My hair. My hand pressed against the wood paneling. Down the length of me to my shoes and up.

And when his eyes caught mine again, his face was no different. Hard jaw, angry eyes, pissed but not at me.

But his voice was soft when he said, "I won't hurt you."

"I'd really like to take a taxi," I whispered.

Swift and almost imperceptibly but I caught it and he meant me to, his eyes dropped to my feet then came back to mine.

"Taxi won't be a hit?" he asked, still soft, and I knew that he knew from what he saw of me that paying for a taxi would be a hit for me.

I straightened my spine, dropped my hand and assured him, "I'll be fine."

The elevator doors opened and without taking his eyes from me, he lifted his hand to catch one so it wouldn't close and he spoke. "I'll take you home. Safe. You'll have no problems from me. Just a ride. And you're doin' me a favor, givin' me a chance to calm my shit. But swear to Christ, you can trust me."

"I don't —"

"Babe, swear to Christ, I'm just a ride. Take advantage. And do me a favor and give me an excuse to get outta here."

I saw his anger now. I remembered what I felt when he walked into the apartment earlier. And it was fresh in my mind all that had just happened to me at his hand. None of it hurt me but all of it was bizarre in a dangerous, scary way that demonstrated irrefutably that I should know better than to court further time and attention from this man.

And still, I found my head tipping down so I could look at my feet. Feet that were walking me toward the elevator.

Knight shifted his arm high and I ducked under it to enter and he entered after me.

The doors started closing as he tagged the button B2.

I stared at the doors.

Yes. Sheer lunacy.

“You’re called?”

My neck twisted and my eyes moved up to his to see his looking at down me.

“What?” I asked.

“Name, babe.”

“Anya.”

He stared at me.

Then he asked, “Anya?”

“Anya,” I confirmed.

“Anya,” he repeated and I nodded. “And you think my name’s unusual?”

“Yes, I’ve never met anyone named Knight,” I informed him.

“And I’ve never met anyone named Anya,” he informed me. “What is that?”

“What is what?”

“Your name.”

“It’s a family name. As in, my grandmother’s.”

“Before that,” he stated.

“It was her grandmother’s,” I shared.

“And before *that*,” he pushed then explained, “Origins.”

“Russian,” I told him.

“You’re Russian?” he asked.

“My grandmother was,” I answered.

“She grow up here?” he asked.

“No, she grew up in St. Petersburg when it was called Leningrad. But she died here.”

His head cocked slightly to the side but his face remained impassive. “Died?”

I nodded. “Seventeen years ago.”

“Babe, what are you? Twenty-three? Four?”

“Seven.”

His head righted. “Twenty-seven?” He sounded like he didn’t believe me.

“Yes, twenty-seven.”

He studied me but didn’t give anything away.

Then he stated, “Still, she had to be young.”

“Liver failure. She was Russian as in, from Russia. She drank vodka like it was water and that’s not a stereotype. That’s very real.”

And it was. And she passed it down to my aunt, unfortunately.

He looked to the doors, muttering, “That’s the fuckin’ truth.”

I kept my eyes to his profile and asked, “Are you Russian?”

The doors opened and his hand came to me, not to my upper arm this time, to my elbow and he propelled me out, answering, “Fuck no.”

His answer was emphatic and therefore insulting since I *was* half Russian but I didn’t call him on this. I also wondered at his knowledge of the Russia vodka drinking habit but I didn’t ask about it. I simply walked with him through the brightly lit, cement underground parking garage.

He took me to a sleek, shining, low-slung, gunmetal gray sports car the like I'd never seen. It was so clean, it was gleaming and it looked like it had been driven there direct the from the showroom floor. I had no idea what it was and the only clue was on the back it had the word "Vantage". I'd never heard of a make or model named "Vantage". All I knew was, like his bedroom, apartment and clothes, it was fabulous.

He moved me to the passenger side door and opened it for me.

"What kind of car is this?" I asked, aiming my behind to the seat.

"Aston Martin," he muttered, eyes to my feet that I was swinging in and that was all he said before I cleared the door and he threw it to.

Aston Martin. I wasn't sure but I thought some James Bond or another or several of them drove Aston Martins.

Wow.

I buckled up and looked around, experiencing the feel that, like everything that had anything to do with Knight, was pure opulence.

He got in, didn't buckle up but started the car and it purred all around us.

Yep, pure opulence.

Then he wrapped an arm around my seat, twisted around and looked back to reverse. Once out, he straightened, put the car in gear and away we went.

Fast.

Crap.

We were at the second level of parking under the building and I was reminded of one of my few (but I had them) irrational fears and that was I didn't like underground parking. Sure, there were huge cement pillars I knew someone with a great deal of schooling designed to hold up the weight of the big building. But all I could think was, if that dude was drunk one day at work, screwed up and the building came tumbling down, there was no hope for me. It didn't help that Knight had a high performance vehicle that he clearly liked to explore the boundaries of its functionality so now he was scaring me in a different way.

He hit a button as we were speeding up the ramp that would take us to freedom and luckily slowed for the gridded gate that kept the riffraff out to slide up then we were out of the danger zone and idling at the entrance to the street.

I took a breath.

Knight called, "Babe."

I looked at him to see he was looking at me or, more accurately, looking at my hand that had a death grip on the armrest of the door.

Then his eyes came to me and he declared, "One, been drivin' since I was twelve. I know what I'm doin' so you can quit tryin' to fuse with the car, relax and enjoy it. Two, I kinda gotta know where I'm goin'."

"You've been driving since you were twelve?" I asked.

He didn't answer. Instead he asked back, "Where am I goin'?"

"Capital Hill."

He looked away, turned left and I gave him my full address.

Conversation was non-existent as he negotiated the streets like he was attempting to set the land speed record from downtown Denver to Capital Hill. I tried to "relax and enjoy it". I failed spectacularly at this effort but didn't fail at prying my hand from the armrest though I did knot both in my lap while praying.

We hit my block and he found an unusual nighttime, daytime or anytime parking spot on the street two houses down from my building. However, it wasn't a spot, as such. More like an opening. Still, in one go with a speed that made my heart slide in my throat, parallel parking, he whipped that expensive car into a space that I was certain wouldn't fit it but somehow did.

I closed my eyes, sucked in a breath and then turned to him to thank him, grateful the night was over and relieved my time with him was too.

But my view was of his back as he was angling out of the car.

“Crap,” I whispered, uncertain I liked his peculiar demonstrations of gentlemanliness. Giving me a ride. In a not offensive way noting I needed one. Shielding me from whatever I’d see in the bedroom. Gentleman and Knight didn’t go together somehow and I found it perplexing in a way I knew I shouldn’t give any headspace seeing as this was the one and only time I’d be in his presence but I also knew I’d give headspace way beyond this night.

I unbuckled, my door was opened and then his long fingers were wrapped around my elbow and I was out. He slammed the door and guided me to the sidewalk but stopped us both.

I looked up at him, preparing to tell him I was grateful for the ride and his attention but he didn’t have to walk me to my building but the words didn’t come out. This was because his eyes were aimed down the block and my eyes went where his were.

My street had, back in the day when the economy was booming, flourished. The houses had been renovated, repainted, landscaped beautifully and two crappy apartment buildings had fallen so smart, trendy condos could be built on their lots. The cars on the street were new to new-ish, maybe not luxury but not economy and the vibe was quiet. Families or double-income couples lived in these homes and condos, they cared about them and this was reflected on the entire block.

Except my apartment building which was where Knight was looking. It was old. No attention had been put into what it would look like when it was built. No attention was put into how it was now maintained. And it was a blight on the neighborhood. The good thing was, rent was low and it came with a parking spot. The bad thing was, the neighbors hated it, hated the landlord and sometimes, by association, hated the tenants which included me.

Now, weirdly, Knight was staring at it, again his face giving nothing away but his contemplation of it was deep.

“Knight,” I called softly, his head jerked very slightly and his eyes tipped down to me. “You don’t have to walk me to my building. I’m good. Thank you for bringing me home.”

He didn’t answer and again totally ignored me as, hand still curled around my elbow, he moved us toward my building.

“Really,” I went on as we were walking, “this is a good neighborhood.”

It was like I didn’t speak. Eyes to my apartment building, he kept moving, his fingers firm around my flesh.

I sighed and gave up. It wasn’t that far and soon this would be over.

We walked up the steps to the door and Knight stopped us.

I looked up at him to thank him again but he spoke before me.

“Punch in the code, babe.”

I stared up at him and asked, “The code?”

He jerked his head to the keypad by the door.

I looked at it, knowing it didn’t work because it hadn’t for six months. Then I lifted a hand and pushed open the unlocked door. As I did this, I could swear I heard the quiet hiss of an indrawn, pissed off breath but when my head quickly turned to him at the sound he simply drew us through.

Once inside, he stopped us, looked down at me and declared, “Babe, please tell me you don’t live on the first floor.”

This was a strange thing to say and I looked into the hall at the doors of the apartments on the first floor.

Then I looked up at him and replied, “No, top floor.”

“Thank Christ,” he muttered and moved us, eyeing the first staircase that had a rope across it with a sloppily hand-printed notice tacked to it that said, “Not in use.” Then Knight was moving us to the elevators but his step faltered when he saw the sloppily hand-printed sign on it that said, “Out of Order.” I definitely heard his sigh when he moved us to the other set of stairs and up them.

I didn't know what to make of this but it kind of irritated me. I mean, he'd made it clear he knew where I was coming from and that wasn't the land of sunken living rooms and Aston Martins. My building might be crap and the rent relatively cheap but it was also in a relatively safe neighborhood so the rent wasn't *that* cheap and thus the tenants were pretty awesome. For instance, we were walking up the stairs, there were no loud parties (unlike at *his* building) and all was quiet and peaceful.

We got to the third floor and he guided me down the hall even though it was me who was leading us to my door. I chanced a glance up at him and noted his head was tipped back. Mine did too and I saw that down the corridor, three of the five overhead lights were out. The hall was thus understandably murky. I'd called about this situation four times (as I had about the elevator, security system and stairs) but nothing had been done. So I stopped calling and decided to change the light bulbs myself, eventually, when I had a free second.

My body swayed toward my door and Knight took us there and halted us. I dug in my purse, coming out with my keys and my lips parted when his fingers closed around them. He slid them out of my hand and then, like he had a sixth sense, he picked the right one, inserted it, opened the door, swung inside and hit the light switch so my overhead light went on.

Then he grabbed my upper arm and pulled me in, closed the door but positioned me at the side of it. Then, again weirdly, he looked me in the eye and ordered, "Do not move."

I blinked.

He moved.

Then I stared as he walked through my one-bedroom apartment into the kitchen that was open like his and delineated by a short breakfast bar. He switched on the light and looked around even though he could see everything (nearly) from the living room. Leaving the light on, he moved out, opened the door to the bathroom, turned the light on, swung his torso in and looked inside.

What on earth was he doing?

Again, light left on, he swung out and moved to my bedroom.

My body jolted and I called, "Um... Knight?" but he didn't hesitate, the light went on and he disappeared behind the door.

Seriously, what on *earth*?

"Knight?" I called, taking two steps into my apartment but he reappeared and prowled with his long-legged strides to me, face still impassive but eyes on me.

He stopped in front of me and held my keys out to me.

"You're good," he declared as I took them. "Nice to meet you, Anya."

Uh... what?

Then his eyes went to the door, they narrowed on it strangely like the sight of my door pissed him off in a not at all vague way, he looked back at me and his eyes unnarrowed but the pissed off look didn't go away.

Then he muttered, "Jesus."

I stared at him, confused. Or, I should say, profoundly confused.

Before I could ask, though I was uncertain I would, he went out the door, stopped in it, turned back, his eyes leveled on me and he commanded, "Lock this after me, babe. Pointless but it's somethin'."

Then he was gone.

Chapter Two

We Slid over the Edge, Together, Holding Tight, into Nothing

I was sitting on the wraparound balcony. The cushions on the wrought iron furniture were comfy. The view of the Front Range was awesome. The sun was warm. I had a piece of toast in my hand and was about to take a bite when I stopped and twisted my neck to look over my shoulder.

Knight was walking to me, dark gray, drawstring pajama bottoms on, long-ish hair sexy messy from sleep, chest with its enticing array of dark hair bared, eyes on me.

I felt my lips curve.

“Hey,” I whispered.

He didn’t reply.

He walked to me, his hand gathering my hair then twisting it around, he tugged my head back. It wasn’t gentle, it was rough, a hint of pain spiking through my scalp and shooting pleasure straight between my legs. So much, I felt my lips part as I watched his strikingly handsome face coming toward me.

I closed my eyes slowly and waited impatiently for his lips to hit mine.

* * * * *

I opened my eyes and I was in Mrs. Herndon’s room. Second grade. I was sitting at my desk but I was an adult so the desk didn’t fit me. There was a knock at the door, all the kids’ eyes went to it and I felt my heart clutch, my stomach drop.

I remembered this. I’d never forget it. Not ever. Not ever.

Not ever.

Mrs. Herndon got up from her desk at the front of the room and walked to the door.

Don’t go there! Don’t open that door! My mind screamed but I sat at that desk that was too small for me and just watched, not able to move, not able to do anything, just sit there, powerless, about to be cast adrift, lost in a way that felt like forever.

She disappeared behind the door and I kept my eyes glued to it, waiting... waiting...

She came back in and her gaze came right to me. I remembered that too. I’d never forget. Not ever. Not ever.

Not ever.

Her face was gentle and kind, tender, embattled, pained.

No! No, no, no, no!

Then he walked through. Knight. His eyes on me too, his face blank, giving nothing away. But relief washed through me.

This wasn’t how it happened. This was different. Better. Out there in the world a child had no control over, everything was torn from me but I had him. I had him.

Knight was there. Tall, broad, strong, dangerous. I could lean on him. He’d be there for me.

And he was. Without hesitation he walked to my desk, bent and grabbed my hand. His fingers closing warm and firm around mine, he pulled me away from the desk.

Right. Good. This was good. I could face this. I could face the pain. The loss. I could face this with Knight at my side.

My fingers curled deeper into his and his hand gave me a squeeze as he walked me through the room, all my classmates’ eyes on me, Mrs. Herndon’s head tipped slightly to the side, her eyes bright, tears shimmering.

We moved to pass her and I whispered to Mrs. Herndon, “I have Knight. It’s all gonna be okay.”

Her head jerked slightly, her face became confused and her eyes lifted to Knight.

He walked me through the door, taking me toward unbearable pain.

Unbearable pain that this time I knew Knight would ease.

* * * * *

We walked out the door of my second grade classroom, Knight was gone and I was swept in a flood of water that flowed though the corridor. I tried to strike out toward a door knob, anything to grab on but I was moving uncontrollably toward the wall at the end of the corridor. Then the water and me broke through the wall, the bricks exploding and I was in a swelled, rushing river. Nature all around. Me careening down the river, powerless. Huge boulders rising from the water came at me but the current swept me to the side before I could crash into one and be broken to bits.

I fought, moved my arms, my legs, trying to direct myself to the shore but nothing I did changed the direction the flow was taking me.

I looked to the shore and saw Vivica running along it, her mouth open, her eyes terrified, shouting but no sound coming out. She tripped and fell to her hands and knees and disappeared.

Then there was Sandrine, running like Vivica, eyes on me, fear etched in her face. But suddenly Nick was there. She stopped, looked up at him, smiled and threw herself in his arms. His head bent, her hands went into his hair and they started kissing.

Figured.

Then, weirdly, since I hadn't seen him in years, there was my high school boyfriend, Sean. He was running along the shore too, his arms moving in a breast stroke, calling out instructions, I knew, even though no sound came out. I did what he said but nothing helped, I kept whirling and gliding violently with the stream.

"*Anya!*" he shouted, his voice tortured then he ran into a tree and vanished.

And then there was my aunt. She didn't move. Just stood on the shore, arms crossed on her chest, mouth smirking.

That figured too.

I lost sight of her and kept moving, fighting, exhausted, terrified out of my mind. I was going to smash into one of those boulders. I knew it. I knew.

No, no. Fear pulsed through me as I saw up ahead the river falling away to nothing.

And there I was, alone, lost in a current I couldn't fight, careening headlong into nothing.

Then I felt him and my head jerked to the shore.

Knight.

He wasn't running along the side. Without hesitation, he dove in, his long body slicing through the air and into the water then he was cutting through it, his powerful arms bringing him straight to me.

Thank God, Knight.

Thank God, I wasn't going to face nothing alone.

I'd have Knight.

He made it to me, his arms wrapping around me, one hand sliding up my neck, into my wet hair, cupping the back of my head. My legs fought through the water to wrap around his hips as our bodies met, my arms wrapped tight around him and I held on.

"You're here," I whispered.

He didn't respond. He just held my eyes and held on.

And we slid over the edge, together, holding tight, into nothing.

* * * * *

My eyes blinked open as my body jolted, still in freefall from my dream.

I was breathing slightly heavily, trying to shake away the dream.

I dreamed a lot. It started in second grade. I remembered them when I woke up. They were clear, vivid, powerful. It didn't happen every night but it happened frequently. Sometimes they were good. Sometimes they were horrifying.

I steadied my breath and shook off my dream.

Then I got up to an elbow, lifting my other hand to pull my hair away from my face and looking to the window with my misty, pretty (but cheap) curtains over the slightly battered Venetian blinds that came with the apartment. I felt under me the abrasive, worn pills of the cheap sheets I'd had too long but I knew, after I bought my new cell phone, new, nicer sheets were on the schedule.

And I tried not to think about the fact that I could still feel Knight's arms tight around me.

Chapter Three

Filled with Knight

After I parked, I hurried to the trunk, opened it up, grabbed my canvas bags filled with groceries, swinging one over my shoulder with my purse and grabbing the other two. Then I put one to the cement of the parking lot, slammed the trunk, snatched it up and hurried.

It was the Wednesday after the Saturday night party at Knight-slash-Nick's. Saturday night (or, really, Sunday morning), I'd dreamed of Knight. I'd also dreamed of him Monday night. And last night. And I couldn't get him out of my head.

I knew why and there were several reasons. One, he was hot. He might be scary but scary never eradicated hot. Or, at least, not his kind of hot. Two, he'd given me nothing. Well, he'd given me his anger, a hint he had a sense of humor and a tendency toward throwaway chivalrous gestures but other than that, nothing. He didn't laugh, smile or talk very much. I knew he didn't like Russians. I knew he didn't like loud parties, people and mess in his apartment. I knew he had money and good taste or sense enough (and the finances) to hire someone who did. But other than that, I knew nothing. Not even his last name. And, not knowing much, I didn't want him to but he intrigued me. Three, he'd picked me up and I'd felt his hard-muscled shoulders and the power of his body. It was affecting. I wasn't heavy but I certainly wasn't slight. This, too, intrigued me but in a very different way.

And last, after contemplating it for some time, too much of it (like, nearly always), his reaction to my building irked me. He didn't shield me from his anger or his personality, such as it was, but his clear contempt of my living arrangements (and I was certain this was it), was offensive. It was also, though I couldn't know this but I felt it, out of character. No one who could show signs of courtesy and take care to be sensitive to the differences in our financial circumstances at the same time pointing them out should behave the way he did when he saw my humble abode. It didn't fit but it *did* annoy me.

As I rounded the building and walked up the front steps all of this was on my mind as it had been for days. Along with this I wondered *why* it was on my mind since I'd never see the guy again. And along with *this*, what was on my mind was that I couldn't deny the fact that this was upsetting. Like I knew at a glance Nick Sebring was a jerk, I knew at a glance Knight Whoever was dangerous. I should steer clear. I knew this and the fact of the matter was I had no choice. Knight Whoever and I would not cross paths. Still, I couldn't help but wish we did.

Which was crazy.

I put my hand holding the handles of one of my totes to the front door of my building, pushed in, my body moving with my push and I slammed right into it mostly because it didn't move.

Then I blinked.

Then I pushed again.

It didn't budge.

What on earth?

I noticed movement inside and saw a man wearing gray pants and a matching gray shirt with a patch over his heart declaring his name was "Terry" and he worked for "Avionics Elevators" was coming my way and smiling. Automatically, I smiled back as his hand came to the inside handle and he opened the door.

"Everyone's doin' that," he told me as he held the door open for me.

I stared at him as I walked in and he kept smiling at me.

"Got a notice in your place that has the codes," he informed me as he let go of the door and it closed behind me.

I looked back, hearing it latch in a way it hadn't latched in months then I looked back at Elevator Man Terry.

"The door is fixed?" I asked and he nodded.

"Yup, dude left when I got here. Keypad and call system, all a go."

Whoa.

Then, belatedly, I took him in and my eyes drifted to the elevators that had plastic barricades around with signs on them that said, "Elevator out of order. Men working." The doors were opened and the naked elevator shaft was in view with work lights dangling inside.

I looked back at Terry. "You're fixing the elevator?"

"Nope," he shook his head. "Fixed. Needed a doohickey. Doohickey replaced, all's good." He tipped his head down to my totes and grinned again. "You live on one of the upper floors, you just got help."

"Cool," I whispered even though I never used the elevator. This was another irrational fear I had. Buildings crushing me in underground parking lots and elevators plummeting me to my death. I avoided them if I could and since I was capable of walking up two flights of steps, at my apartment building, I did. I noticed his grin got bigger then I took in his patch and looked back at him. "Aren't avionics about airplanes?"

He shrugged, still grinning. "Boss is a good guy but he ain't too bright. Knows elevators though. Just doesn't have much of a vocabulary. I think he thinks he made up the word. He might not be bright but he's a decent dude so no one has enlightened him."

"Ah," I mumbled and he kept grinning.

I started moving toward the stairs, calling, "Well, thanks for fixing it."

"My job, darlin'," he called to my back.

I threw a smile over my shoulder and headed to the stairs.

Jeez, wonder if the jerk Landlord Steve won the lottery.

I made it to the third floor, turned into the hall and stopped dead.

Charlie, our rarely seen maintenance man, was on a stepladder switching out a light bulb.

"Yo, Anya," Charlie called when he spotted me.

"Hey, Charlie," I called back, moving toward him. "I see you've been activated too."

"Sho' 'nuff," he confirmed the obvious.

I stopped at the side of the stepladder and looked up to watch him screwing in a light bulb. "What lit a fire under Steve? Did someone call the building inspector or something?"

Charlie climbed down and grinned at me. "No idea, doubtful though. Do know the man got roughed up. Split lip so fat it's a wonder he can talk. Eye purple and swollen shut. Holdin' his body funny so whoever it was took some shots at his ribs. Totally fucked up. That one plus his one of callin' on me made two so I'm thinkin' Gearson in apartment 2C. His woman had a baby. Does shit to a man, especially when his bitch or him has gotta drag that stroller down a flight of stairs anytime they wanna take that kid somewhere."

I could see this. I knew Wash Gearson. He was quick to smile, if he saw you carrying stuff into the building, he'd help you with it, he always opened the door and let you go through first and he loved his partner and new, adorable baby. They had a two bedroom on the second floor and I knew Wash got in Steve the landlord's face regularly. And seeing as Wash was a big, somewhat soft but definitely not a guy you messed with black dude and Steve had messed with him, Wash had messed back.

I didn't condone violence but I wasn't going to say no to a security system, an elevator that worked (even though I never used the latter, others did) and lighting in the halls that didn't make the place look ripe to become a location for a slasher flick.

"I don't think I'd let Wash hear you call his woman a bitch," I advised quietly but still grinning.

"He calls her his bitch and we share the same lingo." This was true enough. Wash's mouth was even fouler than Charlie's which was going to make child rearing interesting in the Gearson household.

"Think he'd be cool," Charlie went on. "Especially when I fixed his fridge last week after he called me direct 'cause Steve didn't do shit for three days. This could be what tipped him. Though, call Bertha, Bertha to her face."

Bertha, Wash's woman, had an unfortunate name. Luckily, her parents gave her glamorous beauty and life gave her a good man who might not make a mint but he loved her so that counteracted her name. I knew this because her smile was as easy as her man's and she laughed a lot.

"And, get this," Charlie went on, "monthly schedule. Even if the bulbs don't need changin' out, I come in first of the month and change the whole lot."

I stared at him and whispered, "Really?"

“Really, sweetheart, no fuckin’ joke. Thought I was in an alternate universe when Steve came to see me today. Then again, I saw the results of the visit whoever gave him so I’m also not surprised. You fuck folks around, eventually they’ll fuck back and since no one likes to be fucked unless they wanna be, when they’re moved to do it, they fuck harder.”

Charlie Philosophy. In the five years I’d lived there, he’d delivered it often. It was always liberally sprinkled in curse words. And it was always usually right.

“Words to live by,” I muttered.

“Damn straight, Anya. Fuck only when they wanna be fucked. You never know what’s gonna tip someone and you also never know who you’re fuckin’ knows.”

“I’m not a fuck with people person,” I shared and he smiled.

“Well, just in case you consider a turn to the dark side,” Charlie advised.

“Right, heard, cataloged, filed. Consider your wisdom processed, Charlie,” I assured him and his smile got bigger. I moved as I said, “See you later, honey.”

“Later, sweetheart,” he replied, grabbed his ladder and moved down the hall.

I did the juggling bit at the door to open it, walked through and saw the paper on the floor that had been slid under the door. I closed the door, ignored the paper and walked to the kitchen to dump my totes. Then I walked back, bent to retrieve the paper and turned it to face me. On it was a badly photocopied message.

Dear Tenant,

The building call system has been repaired as well as the security keypad. The new code is 7849. This code will be changed monthly and you will be notified by memorandum as well as emailed with the new codes one week prior to the code changing. If we do not have your email on file, please contact us immediately.

In the next two weeks, Charlie will be installing deadbolts and chains on all the doors. We will attempt to do this at your convenience but would prefer to do this during normal working weekday hours. Please complete and detach the slip at the bottom of this memo and return it to the management office with a time within the next two weeks that would be convenient for you.

As this work takes place, we thank you in advance for your patience.

-Management

I stared at the memo, the first of its kind in my tenure there and definitely more polite than I’d ever expect in a million years coming from “Management” otherwise known as “Steve”, then my eyes drifted to my door. There was one lock, it turned on the knob. I’d never thought anything of it but as I stared at the door, a tingle slid up my spine, the back of my neck and radiated over my scalp.

Knight had stared at that door and what he saw pissed him off.

And now, out-of-the-blue, when I’d never complained about it, though I didn’t know if anyone else did, we were getting deadbolts *and* chains.

“Babe, please tell me you don’t live on the first floor.”

He’d looked at the elevator. He’d noted the lights.

“Pointless but it’s somethin’.”

That tingle rushed back down and infused my entire body.

“Oh my God,” I whispered.

“I got this.” I heard Charlie say from outside the door.

“I got it.” I heard another voice I recognized as my out-of-work, moron, slightly creepy, didn’t know how he managed to pay his rent, neighbor Dick whose name said it all.

“No, I said... I got it,” Charlie returned firmly then there was banging at my door.

I moved to it, looked out the peephole, saw Charlie and Dick standing out there and opened it because, although Dick was standing out there, so was Charlie.

“Hey,” I greeted and Charlie stuck out a large, bubble wrap lined envelope at me.

“This came for you. Dick accepted receipt,” Charlie announced. “Now Dick’s goin’ to his place, closing the doors, sittin’ his ass down and thinkin’ of baby bunnies.”

I avoided Dick's eyes, pressed my lips together, understood Charlie's meaning but considered that if Dick's thoughts turned to bunnies they would be thoughts of boiling them or torturing them and I took the envelope. The front had a label that was typed and said only, "Anya, 3D"

"Thanks, uh..." my eyes slid through Dick, "guys."

"Later, Anya," Charlie said meaningfully, I looked at him, his face told me to close my damned door because Dick was a dick and Charlie didn't want him around me.

"Right, later," I replied and did as I wasn't told but still was.

Then I locked the door that would soon have a deadbolt and chain but my mind wasn't on Dick or Charlie or deadbolts or sudden activity making my apartment building safer at what had to be a serious cost. My mind was on the bubble wrap envelope that had no address, no last name and I hadn't ordered anything.

I took it to the kitchen, ripped it open, upended it and a shiny, black box slid out as did a small, business card sized card.

I stared at the box. Then I pulled out the cardboard tag that held it secure, opened the side and slid out the innards.

Then I froze and stared.

In my hand wrapped up shiny and new, nestled in protective foam packaging was a cell phone the likes I'd never seen. Glossy black on its curved shield-shaped outside, the entire front was a screen. I looked at the box and saw the brand. I'd never heard of it. I looked back at the phone and its accoutrement. Then I realized my heart was beating and doing it hard.

I put the box and phone down and tagged the card. It had fallen face down on the counter so I flipped it and stared at the black slashes that formed words.

Anya,

No woman should be without a functioning cell.

K

The tingle came back and it didn't start at my spine. It just straight out covered my entire body. I knew no "K's". No friend. Definitely no family. No workmates. No one.

Except Knight Whoever.

"Oh my God," I whispered, my home phone rang and I jumped.

Then I dropped the card and dashed to the one in the kitchen.

"Hello," I greeted when I put it to my ear.

"Get this, day four almost done, no... fucking... call."

Sandrine.

I pulled in a breath, tried to shake off what was happening all around me, who I figured was responsible for it and what that might mean and started, "Honey –"

"I helped him clean up for... like, *three hours*, in, like, the *wee morning* hours," she reminded me of something she'd already shared several times. Then she told me something that made my breath catch. Something she hadn't yet shared in her two days of bitching about Nick Sebring. "His brother came back, was a total, freaking asshole *to both of us*, and I took that, I cleaned and after that I gave him all my good moves which means he got off *twice plus twice more* on Sunday. He promised he'd call and he hasn't. Player zone I get, it could take two days. Even three. *But four?*"

I powered through the knowledge that Knight was Nick's brother and reminded her, "Sandrine, this guy has jerk written all over him."

"*I gave him my best moves and four orgasms!*" she shouted and I winced.

Then I settled in and I did it silently. She had to work this out and I had to let her even though I didn't have time. I had groceries to put away. I had a freak out about the possibility that Knight had roughed up my landlord and sent me an extortionately expensive cell phone to recommence and figure out my next move. I had to make a sandwich and get on the road so I didn't miss class. I had things to do.

“Now, I know, *I know*, no one gave him that,” Sandrine informed me. “No way. And no way he was faking it. I know that too.”

Men, for obvious reasons, couldn’t fake it so I didn’t know why she felt the need to point this out and I didn’t ask. I kept silent.

Sandrine didn’t.

“And he doesn’t come back for seconds? He doesn’t ask me out? He doesn’t do *anything*?” she asked and kept ranting. “I’ve called him four times and, as you know, this breaks my golden rule of one call only. *Four times! Four voicemails!* And, I will add, two texts. And *nothing*.”

She shut up. I gave her a beat.

Then I told her, “Honey, I’m sorry. He’s a jerk. They’re all jerks. And we’ll gab about this but you know I have to get to class.”

“Anya, this guy is The One,” she told me.

“No, Sandrine, he’s an asshole and I’ll point out one of his obvious asshole traits and that was he suggested a *three-way* with you and your *best friend*.”

“Guys are into that shit,” she dismissed.

“Yeah, definitely, but guys who could be The One most certainly aren’t.”

She had no reply and never did when I was right.

So I said yet again, “I have to get to class.”

“Fuck me,” she muttered and I recognized she was sliding into self-absorbed, poor me zone. I had to take evasive maneuvers and fast or I’d miss class or be seriously late.

“Sandrine, this weekend, your appointment, we’ll talk,” I promised.

“Right, and maybe we should hit it Saturday night, see if he’s out.”

God, seriously?

“We’ll talk about it while I do your nails on Saturday. Now I gotta go.”

“Four days, Anya,” she whispered, sliding straight into the zone and holding on tight to take me with her.

I pulled in a steadying breath.

Then I said firmly, “Saturday, Sandrine.”

Pause then, “Right, I’ll call Viv. Later.”

Then she was gone.

God, Sandrine.

As I beeped off my phone, I reminded myself that there *were* things to love about her.

For instance, when Viv had that bad breakup that she didn’t want to talk about, I was too busy with class and work to give her my attention like I’d want to. But Sandrine called her every day and went over to her house nearly every night to check in, keep her company and she didn’t pry. And when I sprained my ankle badly, it was Sandrine who dropped everything and came to get me at the doctor then made everything easy for me to negotiate at my apartment. And Sandrine not only was a client of mine, she also talked me up to all her friends and co-workers in an attempt to help me build my clientele. And when Viv’s Mom got that terrible, weird pneumonia that didn’t seem to want to let her go, both Sandrine and I were at Viv’s side when it looked like it was going to go south. And we both celebrated with her when it didn’t.

Right, so Sandrine was a pain in the ass. But there were times that pain eased.

I put the phone in its charger and immediately began multitasking. Freaking out about Knight’s possible activities at the same time putting away groceries. Then I freaked out at the same time I made a sandwich. Then I freaked out at the same time I ate my sandwich and changed clothes. Then I freaked out as I walked out to my car and continued to freak out as I drove to class.

And luckily I’d freaked out enough that by the time I hit class I could set it aside and concentrate.

Unfortunately, by the time I got home from class, I was back to freaking out. Which meant I found it hard to sleep.

And it further meant when I finally slept, my dreams were filled with Knight.

* * * * *

The next evening, I had little time. I had a client, she was showing at my house at her six thirty slot and I had to be home and set up in time. But I also had to do what I had to do.

And I was going to do it.

It was after work. I had a full-time job as a file clerk in a medical office that had six doctors and four nurse practitioners. I made shit money but the job wasn't taxing, the office ladies were funny and they had excellent benefits. These included kick-butt insurance and, if you worked there for two years, partial payment on any further education you wanted to take even if it was beauty school.

And beauty school was where I decided to go so, three years ago, I went. I'd already completed my nail technician certification and was building a clientele whose appointments I had to take in the evenings and on weekends. The goal was to have enough to go full-time therefore be able to rent a station in a decent salon. This was difficult, what with a job and school, but I was doing it.

Since, I'd finished classes in applying makeup and now I was close to completing a course to be a certified skin technician. I liked nails and I liked chattering to my clients. It was cool, seriously low stress and it actually paid pretty well. But I knew that I'd lose my mind sitting around doing nails forty hours a week so I had to diversify.

That was why I took classes to be a makeup artist and was close to completing my course as a skin technician. I liked doing facials the best. It was the quiet. It wasn't only relaxing to the client but also me. And I liked the bright but tranquil look my test subjects gave me when I was done. Not only was I making their skin look great, I was making them feel good. And that was cool.

But this wasn't my life's dream. In fact, I didn't have a life's dream. I'd learned that living a dream, finding a dream or having a dream find me was not in my future and I'd learned this early.

That said, I was ambitious.

I didn't want to rule the world.

I wanted to own my own spa.

A good one that was all about relaxation, pampering and beautification in a peaceful, safe, gorgeous setting. Maybe up in the mountains somewhere. It would look good. It would smell good. And it would be a treat for anyone who opened the doors and walked in.

Including me.

So I had a plan. Nails, makeup and facials down (nearly), building up a clientele as I went along and finding a salon or spa that would rent me space or take me on as an employee in the meantime. Then move onto the whopper deluxe, massage therapy. I was doing all this while saving to open my own place. Living frugal. Being smart. Getting educated. Building a clientele and providing excellent service to keep them so whenever I moved and when I settled, they'd follow me.

Then be my own boss and that boss was the boss of indulgence.

How freaking awesome would that be?

Perfect. With my life, facing the rest of it filled with offering tranquility and indulgence was perfect for me.

This was on my mind instead of what I didn't want to be on my mind as I found a spot somewhat close to the front doors to the high-rise complex. It took me three attempts before I did a terrible job at parallel parking my car. It didn't matter, I wouldn't be there long. I got out, fed a nickel into the meter which gave me a nanosecond (not really) but enough time to do what I needed to do.

Then I dashed into the building and went to the doorman's desk.

When we were there on Saturday, there was no doorman on duty which meant day and evening hours. But the door had been locked (as it now wasn't) and we'd had to buzz up. However, I'd seen the desk so I'd hoped it had someone behind it sometime and luckily I was right.

I smiled at him and he smiled at me as I walked up to him.

Then I stopped at the desk, put the taped down, bubble wrap envelope on it and asked, "Can I leave that and you'll give it to Knight, I think his last name is Sebring, in apartment 15A?"

His brows went up. "Mr. Sebring? Unit 15A? Sure," he replied. "But you want, I can call up. See if he's here."

His hand was drifting to the phone so I lifted mine swiftly and shook my head. "No, thanks. I'm in a rush and he needs that but I have to dash. Can you just make sure he gets it?"

He nodded again. "Sure."

I smiled. "Thanks."

He smiled back.

I skeddaddled.

Right, that down, point made, note written, *Thanks, Knight. That's very kind and generous but I can't accept. Be well, Anya.*

And that was it. The end.

The end.

I drove home thinking of the end of Knight Sebring at the same time wishing, with what I knew was sheer lunacy and I didn't get it at all, was that it was the beginning.

* * * * *

The next night, it was late and I was coming home from class thinking about my weekend. Four clients on Saturday including Sandrine who I knew would stay through the client after her and bitch about Nick (who *still* hadn't called, not surprisingly to anyone but Sandrine) and stay even after that trying to convince me to go out with her to the clubs that evening in search of him.

Because this wasn't an eventuality but a certainty, Viv and I had already formed a plan of attack. Viv was making her world famous (not really but it should be) chicken, lemon and asparagus risotto. I was bringing a bottle of wine, my facial gear and my copy of *Thor*. We were going to eat, I was going to give Vivica and Sandrine, if she was smart enough to bag on the Nick hunt, a facial then we were going to perv on Chris Hemsworth.

The perfect evening.

Don't get me wrong, there was a time when I liked to go out mostly because I liked music but I *loved* dancing. And even though I didn't have the greatest clothes, I chose selectively, liked what I chose and they suited me. I liked to get all dressed up, made up, hair out to there, heels even higher, go out, have a few drinks, loosen up, flirt a little, maybe get asked out on a date but especially, dance.

But now I was twenty-seven, not twenty-two (or three or four) and this happening every weekend with a wild party thrown in here and there was wearing. I was never out to be part of the scene. And I wasn't on the hunt for a man. I dated. A couple of times I dated a guy for a while before I broke it off. So I was open to meeting men and exploring things. But I hadn't found anyone who struck me. I wasn't desperate. If it happened, it happened. If it didn't, I could take care of myself. But if it happened, it had to be right.

"Anya?"

I knew that smooth, deep voice like I'd heard it every day hundreds of times a day since birth. So I stopped mid-punching in of new security code and woodenly twisted to see Knight Sebring striding up the steps of my apartment building toward me.

Okay, um...

Crap!

I pulled it together and greeted, "Hey," then added, "What are you doing here?"

I didn't need to ask. I was taking in his face, his well-cut, dark suit, his shirt that was the color of moss and it suited him, even with blue eyes, to perfection and the fact that he seemed mildly annoyed. But I didn't miss the glossy black box he held in one long-fingered hand.

He made it to me and held up the box. "Take it," he ordered, no greeting, no smile, nothing but those two words.

I looked down at the box then up to his eyes.

"Knight, I can't," I said softly.

His head tipped slightly to the side and his brows drew together as he asked, "Why the fuck not?"

“Because I looked it up at work and I know it costs nine hundred and eighty-nine dollars.”

“So?” he returned instantly.

I stared at him.

Then I repeated his, “So?”

“Yeah, babe. So?”

I turned fully to him. “So, I don’t know you.”

“So?”

“So?” I again repeated his repeat.

“Jesus, fuck, babe,” he jerked the box to me sounding impatient, “got shit to do. Take it.”

“Knight, *I can’t*,” I reiterated.

“Anya, babe,” he leaned in and reiterated back with some scary emphasis, “*why the fuck not?*”

I stared into his eyes. He was impatient. He was annoyed. I did not know this man and he was trying to give me a nearly one thousand dollar phone like it was nothing.

“Why are you pressing this phone on me?” I asked quietly and he leaned back.

“Told you in the note, you read?” he asked, this sarcasm not amusing but I didn’t call him on that. I nodded. “Then you know, woman needs a functioning phone.”

“I’m saving,” I shared. “I’ll have one in a couple of weeks.”

His eyes held mine.

Then he whispered, “Saving?”

Crap. *Crap!*

I ignored that and all it exposed and assured him, “Anyway, I’m fine. Good. Or I will be on the phone front in a couple of weeks.”

He didn’t say anything for a few beats then, softly, he ordered, “Anya, take the phone.”

“Knight –”

“Take the phone.”

“I don’t –”

“Babe, take the fucking phone.”

“Did you beat up Steve?”

I blurted that and I didn’t know why. If he didn’t, it was a rude thing to assume. If he did, I didn’t want to know.

But he didn’t hesitate to reply, “No.”

I felt relief sweep through me.

“But I sent the boys who did,” he finished.

My entire body got tight but I forced through stiff lips my, “What?”

“Though,” he amended, “it wasn’t me taking shots at that motherfucker only because I had other shit to do.”

I said nothing and stared.

Knight got more impatient. “Anya, got shit to do now too. Take the fuckin’ phone.”

“Why’d you have boys beat up Steve?” I asked and again didn’t know why. I didn’t want to know. But I asked anyway and he answered.

“Babe, your building, a fire hazard. One flight of steps for a building that size? Fuck no,” he bit out, now not sounding impatient but pissed. “A fire could cut off from your escape route, you only got one. And the door open for any motherfucker to walk through? They see you, trail you, you’re fucked. Totally. Not only because you only got one set of stairs, and it’s the one furthest away from the front door, but also, once you get up to your hall, it’s dark and your door’s got a lock, one boot to it, it’ll pop right open. That’s bullshit. Your rent isn’t steep but it isn’t shit either. You pay for a workin’ fuckin’ elevator and a secured door. I sent my boys to have a word. The words your landlord returned they didn’t like much. They gave me a call, I gave them the go-ahead, you got a secured door, lighting and a fucking lock that might give you enough time to at least dial 911 before some motherfucker is on you.”

Okay, that explained that.

At the same time it absolutely did *not*.

“Why?” I whispered.

“What?” Knight didn’t whisper.

“Why? Why did you take that trouble or, I mean, send boys to do it? You barely know me.”

And that was when Knight Sebring laid it out and when he did, I didn’t feel tingles. I felt shivers. I just didn’t know what the shivers meant.

“Babe, your clothes. Shit. But you work ‘em and you do because you’ve got one serious fantastic body, your hair is even better and your face is a face that launches a thousand hard-ons. Trust me, any man you’ve looked at probably since you were thirteen has jacked off thinkin’ of you. All this is a recipe for disaster if you live alone in an unsecured building with a lock like the one you got. Someone had to step up. Seein’ as you aren’t the only one who lives here and my guess, at least one person in that building bitched and nothin’ got done, so I stepped up. It took my boys an hour. Your landlord was a dick so it was an hour they enjoyed. Not a big deal. Now take the fuckin’ phone.”

“Trust me, any man you’ve looked at probably since you were thirteen has jacked off thinkin’ of you.”

Did this mean him too?

Oh my *God!*

“Any,” he growled, it was a scary growl so I lifted my hand immediately and took the box.

“Jesus,” he muttered.

“I don’t know what to do to thank you,” I muttered back.

“I ask for gratitude?” he asked and I shook my head so he went on, “Then, I will now. Use that phone. Don’t sell it. Don’t set it aside. Take it upstairs. Charge it. Use the piece a’ shit you got, if it works long enough, to tell your people your new number which is written in the shit in the box. Then use the phone. That’s how you can thank me.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Fuck,” he whispered back then he turned to leave.

To leave!

Was that it?

All this effort, money and a vulgar compliment that still managed to be a whopper and he just leaves?

I turned to watch him go and found my voice calling, “Knight?”

One step from the sidewalk, he halted, twisting his torso to look up at me.

I didn’t know what to say. He laid the terms out for his “gratitude” but I got more out of them than he did so I felt some other gesture was in order. I doubted he’d want a manicure or facial so I was at a loss.

“Any, told you, got shit to do,” he prompted and I shook myself to get it together.

Then I said softly, “Thank you,” not believing I was thanking a man I barely knew for having my landlord beat up and giving me a new phone the money it cost could buy a used car (a crappy one, but still) but doing it anyway.

His eyes held mine. Then he shook his head while turning away.

Then he was gone.

I walked up to my apartment. Then I plugged in my new phone to charge. Then I found the new number and used my old phone to text it to everyone in my phonebook. In the middle of this, my old phone died.

Not long after, I went to bed.

I tossed. I turned.

And when I finally slept, I dreamt of Knight.

Chapter Four

Only for Me

Mission accomplished last Saturday, we got our night with risotto, facials and Chris Hemsworth and Sandrine participated in the festivities. She did it bitching about Nick though not through the movie, not even Sandrine could bitch about a hot guy jerk while Chris Hemsworth was on screen.

Now it was a week later and Viv, Sandrine and I were dolled up and on the town because Sandrine was on a tear. Nick still hadn't called and Sandrine, being Sandrine, still hadn't given up.

Viv was out because she was in the mood to be out. The reason she wasn't at Nick's party was because she knew, like I knew, he was a jerk and she had no desire to spend time with him or his crew. So she didn't.

I was either a pushover or too exhausted from my busy life to bear up against a Sandrine Onslaught so I went.

Tonight, though, I was in Viv's mood.

It had been just over a week and nothing from Knight. No more chivalrous gestures, no matter how scary, scarily generous or criminal. Nothing.

I wanted to let it go and be relieved. I had a phone. It was awesome and did *way* more than taking calls, it did email, internet, apps, the whole shebang, all of this looking cool as hell and like something NASA designed but fifty years from now... it was *the bomb*. I had a safer apartment building and so did all my neighbors. He told me in no uncertain terms he found me attractive but he didn't stop by and before he left didn't say he would contact me nor did he ask for a date. So the only thing I could assume was that although he was scary, he still was a man who saw that something needed to be done and he did it. It was a lot more than him hearing I needed a ride and him giving it to me but, bottom line, it seemed simply that was who he was and the kind of thing he did.

So he did his thing and onward.

For a guy like him, I was probably a memory.

I didn't like this and yet I did. I was relieved and upset. It was odd. And these feelings weren't fading. Not even a little.

Which sucked. Not just because they weren't fading but because they were confusing as all get out.

I still wondered if he thought about me when he was doing a certain deed. After a few days of trying to convince myself I didn't as well as trying not to think about it at all, and failing at both, I admitted to myself that I liked this idea even as it freaked me out just how much I did (which was a lot). However, it was highly unlikely a man like him ever needed his fist, as in ever, so it was also highly doubtful.

So I decided to go out, have a few drinks, dance and celebrate new sheets, a new comforter and new pillows. Without having to buy the phone, bed linens had been stepped up on my schedule of things I could buy. I got the good kind of those too, going way beyond what I would normally allow myself and doing it because I not only had the money but because Viv brought me a new client. An extra fifteen dollars every two weeks for a steady, Sunday manicure appointment. And for me, thirty dollars a month was *awesome*.

So celebration it was.

"You know, asking around, that Knight Sebring guy owns this club."

This was Viv shouting in my ear as we walked into Slade, the trendiest nightclub in downtown Denver and that was trendy in a bizarre way where it wasn't trendy just for a year or two but had been since I started clubbing when I was twenty-one. The cover charge was high but it was *the* place to see and be seen. It was uncanny since clubs went in and out but Slade stayed popular. So popular, when celebrities hit town, they hit Slade. This was because Slade had small, medium and large VIP seating that was cordoned off from the commoners. Movie stars went there. Rap stars. R&B stars. Broncos. Nuggets. They took their posses to their VIP sections, had their own cocktail waitresses and bouncers and didn't see but were up on daises so they could be seen.

This was so rare, I had actually given headspace to this phenomenon and came up with the fact that Slade stayed the hotspot because every year it was closed down for a month and the entire inside was

guttled and renovated. It was like getting a whole new club and yet it wasn't. And it was always the best, the coolest, the hippest. A costly but clever ploy, I thought, and it worked.

Not to mention the cocktail waitresses were always gorgeous with amazing bodies, the bartenders were hot and the bouncers and security were huge, scary but all attractive so if you hit Slade there were other treats for both sexes. Not just hot music in a hip atmosphere with well-poured drinks in fantastic glasses but eye candy.

Further, there was a line to get in, every night, even weekdays, and whether you agreed or not it was the right thing to do, the bouncers picked and chose who got in. It wasn't just about clothes and money. If you were gorgeous, you went to the front of the line. Then, if you looked like you had serious cake, you got in. All others could stand out there for hours and never get in so they'd learned over the years not even to bother.

We got in because Sandrine had her sheet of strawberry blonde hair, fake breasts an ex-boyfriend bought her and her ability to say no to desserts *all the time* and therefore her body was slim and perfectly toned. Not to mention, there was Vivica, with her tall, slender frame, dark, flawless midnight skin, unusual tawny eyes, graceful giraffe neckline and perfect skull with her short cropped afro. And, lastly, apparently the new intel was me, who had a face that could launch a thousand hard-ons. Not a flowery compliment but still, it said it all even if it pulled no punches.

Once I noticed this (not, obviously, the bit about me since I didn't know that until a week and a day ago), this had made me, for a six month stretch, swear off Slade. Sandrine, of course, wore me down and I lifted my ban.

So now I was back and had been back for a couple of years though with decreasing regularity.

Further, last Saturday I'd told both Viv and Sandrine all about Knight.

Sandrine's comment was, "Hope he leaves you alone. He's totally hot but he's also a total asshole."

Vivica just stared at me and said nothing. This was her way. She tended to cast judgment only when she had all the facts even if, I found, one of those facts included the knowledge that some guy had sent "his boys" out to beat someone up for me. Still, it was one of the three million, twenty-two thousand, six hundred and eleven things I loved about her. That said, once she cast judgment, whether it was right or wrong (or whether I thought it was right or wrong), it would take torture to make her change her mind. This could get a tad bit irritating. But it was, as far as I could see, Viv's only flaw. And since we put up with enough of them from Sandrine, it all balanced out.

Until I mentioned him, neither of them knew Knight Sebring.

But obviously, Viv had asked around. I wasn't surprised. This was also Viv's way. She tended to be curious and that curiosity would go into overdrive once a man gave me a thousand dollar phone and had my landlord beaten up to make me safe(ish).

"Really?" I shouted back.

She nodded. "Yep. Since it opened eight years go."

Wow. Interesting.

Suddenly, I was happy that I'd pulled out my best going out dress. It was designer but I bought it at a secondhand shop. Black, skintight, two inches above the knee, one shoulder bare, other arm sleeveless, across the side it gathered to a big, opened hole that exposed the skin of my other side under the sleeveless arm from ribs to the top of my hip. It wasn't hot. It was *scorching* hot. And part of that scorching was the obvious fact that, to wear it, there was no way I could wear underwear. I loved it. I'd paired it with spike-heeled, strappy sandals that were black but looked like they were coated with silver glitter. They didn't cost the bomb, I got them on sale at a mid-scale shoe store but they were sexy as all heck.

"Did you, uh..." I was still shouting in her ear as we pressed through the bodies on our way to the bar, "learn anything else about him?"

Her eyes caught mine and she shook her head. "Nope. No one knows much about him except he's Nick's older brother. I think he's thirty-four, thirty-five, got different ages on him but only those two.

He's not Nick's biggest fan which means I'm leaning toward liking him. He's also got a serious, kickass name. And he owns this club."

Not a lot of information, some of it I already knew, but still interesting.

"*Ohmigod!*" We both heard Sandrine shriek and our eyes went forward to where she was powering through the club, cutting a swath for Viv and my passage, to see she'd turned back to us. "That asshole is *here!*"

Before my eyes could move to where her finger was pointing, a VIP dais that was medium-sized, across the club from us but had a spectacular elevated view of the room since it had at least five steps up, Sandrine was again powering through. But this time she was practically throwing people out of the way to do it.

This was because Nick Sebring was clearly visible up there. This was not a surprise, we met Nick here and Nick was almost exclusively and always here in his own VIP section.

My first thought, and I acted on it, was to scan the dais for Knight.

He was not there.

My second thought was that this was a bummer.

My third thought was to remind myself it wasn't. He had someone beat up and lamented the fact he couldn't do it himself. Sure, he did it for me and Landlord Steve was a jerk but he did it and that was scary.

My last thought was that I better get my booty in gear because Sandrine was riled and when Sandrine was riled this usually caused a scene.

Vivica had my last thought first and she was hurrying behind Sandrine in the futile hope of heading her off.

And it was futile.

Before I was even close and Vivica was twenty feet behind, Sandrine was up the steps to the dais and pushing past a bouncer who was looking behind him toward Nick to see if he had the all-clear for her entry. Sandrine, with years of experience, was adept at getting anywhere she wanted to go, past bouncers, security, to the front of lines, backstage, her ass at choice window tables in trendy eateries. You name it, she found her way to get it even if she had to use her toned muscles to do it.

Which she did now.

I watched Vivica follow and the bouncer didn't turn back to see if he had the all-clear for Viv. He caught one look at Vivica's rounded behind in her tight, turquoise dress and didn't stop looking.

Seeing as he was distracted, this made it easy for me to get by him too.

Vivica was too late and I was woefully too late. I knew this the instant I hit the scene.

And I say woefully because Nick Sebring was not just a mammoth jerk.

Nick Sebring was scarier than his brother.

And I knew this because I interrupted Knight Sebring having a calming cigarette by intruding in his very personal space and helping myself to his phone. Even though he made his irritation clear, he ended up giving me a ride.

Nick, on the other hand, was done with Sandrine, her texts, her phone calls and her storming into his VIP section intent on making a scene and he'd chosen a terrifying way to communicate this to her.

And I knew *this* when I got to their side, opposite Vivica, got close and saw Nick had Sandrine by both upper arms. He'd jerked her so her body was against his, his face in hers and I knew his hold hurt because Sandrine's beautiful face was twisted in pain.

"Nick, let me go," she whispered, "you're hurting me."

"Am I gonna hear from you again?" he asked in a way I knew he was repeating himself.

"No," she whispered.

"Had you, don't want more, don't want your shit," he growled, still in her face and still clamped onto her. "Get me?"

"I get you."

“Willin’ to make my point clearer, you even think you’ll have second thoughts,” he kept at it, pissed off in a way I didn’t think it would calm for a while and he had his hands on my friend so I got closer.

“Nick, please, let her go. She’ll be cool. I promise. Just let her go and we’ll be out of here,” I said loudly to be heard over the music but also softly in order to let him know I meant what I said.

Nick’s head turned to me and it took a lot but I didn’t quail.

Yep, definitely scarier than his brother. Knight Sebring had control. Nick Sebring absolutely did *not*.

“Nick, please, I promise, no more. Let me go. You’re *hurting me*.” That was Sandrine in a tortured plea but Nick’s eyes were on me and he didn’t let her go. He held on and held my eyes.

“You want me to let this bitch go?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I answered immediately.

“Then make sure this bitch gets the fuck outta here but you stay and have a drink with me,” Nick replied and my stomach clenched.

“No, let her go and we’re all outta here,” Vivica entered the conversation but Nick didn’t tear his eyes from me even as he gave Sandrine a shake. I heard her whimper so I knew either the shake had scared her or his hold had tightened.

“You gonna let me buy you a drink?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied. “Absolutely.”

“Anya,” Vivica said low.

“Let her go,” I said to Nick.

Nick looked back at Sandrine, pulling her up to her toes so she was nose-to-nose with him and visibly wincing.

“Bitch, I don’t see you, I don’t hear from you, I don’t even fuckin’ *smell* you,” he growled then pushed her off, hard.

She staggered back on her four and a half inch sandals that I knew she’d return in the next week because they cost six hundred dollars, something she couldn’t afford. Vivica shot to her to catch her from falling.

I did too but I came up short when a hand clamped around the inside of my elbow.

My neck twisted so I could look at Nick who now had a hold of me.

“Drink,” he clipped.

My stomach in knots, my heart beating wildly, I nodded.

“Anya!” Vivica yelled and I looked to her even as Nick started to turn me to the back of the dais where there was a long, plush, raspberry colored booth seat.

“I’m good!” I yelled back. “Go! Just a drink and I’ll text you when I’m out.”

Vivica’s eyes went from me to Nick to another bouncer who was hovering that I hadn’t noticed until then and finally her eyes came back to me.

“We’ll be at the bar!” she shouted.

“You’re with that bitch, you’ll be in the fuckin’ street!” Nick shouted back, still dragging me. “You lose her, you stay up here.”

No. I didn’t want Vivica anywhere near there.

“Go!” I yelled.

Vivica held my eyes as she held Sandrine in the curve of her arm, a Sandrine who was now crying and staring at me, fear in her face. I lost sight of them when Nick let go of my elbow, slid an arm along my waist and turned me to face the direction he was taking me.

Crap. Crap. *CRAP!*

God, *Sandrine*.

Seriously, some day that girl was going to be the death of me.

Right. A drink. I could have a drink with Nick.

Crap.

He sat us down, him too close to me and immediately his eyes went across the dais and his mouth opened up to clip a loud, “Yo!”

The cocktail waitress came scurrying. It was then I saw the bouncer who was hovering was now at the end of the dais, another black-suited bouncer was standing on the floor under him, he had his hands up to cup around his mouth and he was yelling something.

“What are you drinking?”

I tore my eyes from the bouncer, sucked in breath and looked at Nick.

“Sparkling water,” I ordered.

“Fuck, you fuckin kidding me?” he bit out.

Okay, that was the wrong answer.

He looked at the waitress. “Get her a cosmo. Me, Hennessy, Paradis.”

Her eyes bugged out a second before she pulled it together, obviously having witnessed the scene or just knowing Nick, and she scurried away.

Nick looked at me and announced, “Your friend’s a pain in my ass.”

She was a pain in mine too. Then again, at that moment, so was he.

I decided not to answer.

“Fuck, she thinks she can make me come and she owns me?” he asked.

I had no answer for that either, though, I had to admit, he was a screaming jerk but he was kind of right.

“You’re also a pain in my ass,” he declared.

What did I do?

I didn’t ask. First, I didn’t want to know. Second, I was trying not to throw up and/or have a heart attack and I thought both were priorities.

“Only way I know your honey isn’t locked up in ironclad panties is I’d see ‘em through that fuckin’ dress. Jesus, do you fuck anybody?” he asked.

“Um...” I mumbled but said no more mostly because this was none of his business, partly because I had, indeed, hit a long, dry spell and lastly because he was scaring the heck out of me.

I watched him pull a hand through his hair and it hit me that he slightly resembled his brother but not much. They both had black hair with a bit of wave in it but Nick kept his perfectly cut and styled with product. Nick also had blue eyes but they were nowhere near as vibrant as Knight’s. He was at least two inches shorter but still tall. And although Nick was built, he was slighter of frame.

Their facial features, however, were not the same. Not at all. Nick was handsome but he didn’t pack the punch of Knight’s pure, aggressive, masculine beauty. Not even close.

He dropped his hand and looked at me.

“Fucked up,” he muttered.

“What?” I whispered and he watched my mouth move which was uncomfortable but considering the fact I was whispering in a club, if he didn’t lip read, he’d have no idea what I said.

He leaned in and repeated, “I fucked up.” Then he went on, “With you. That scene. Fucked up.”

Yeah he did.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said back, this time louder so he could hear me. “Let’s just have this drink then I’ll, uh... go and, uh... check on things.”

His eyes held mine and I noticed the anger had leaked out of his. “What’s it take with you?”

I felt my eyebrows draw together. “Pardon?”

He leaned further in and I tried not to lean back because he seemed not to be angry anymore but I didn’t want to test it.

“What’s it take with you? Dinner?” he asked.

Oh God, please, do not ask me out. Please, please, please.

I was considering the option of informing him I was a lipstick lesbian, concerned about the fact this might turn him on more, when I felt it.

That swell of frightening, searing, vibrating heat.

I knew the feel of that so I knew he was coming.

Nick did too because his body jerked, his head whipped around and mine did as well, to see Knight stalking up to us, face a mask of unadulterated fury, eyes on his brother.

He stopped in front of Nick, chin tipped down, eyes scorching and I froze.

“Knight –” Nick started.

“You put your hands on a woman in my club?” Knight asked, his voice vibrating with that same heat he was radiating.

I debated the merits of inching away when Nick started again, “Knight –”

That was all he got out because suddenly, Nick wasn’t sitting next to me. Suddenly, Nick was out of his seat and flying across the dais. He slammed into the back of a couple of guys and some girls who all went down with him.

I jumped from the seat.

Knight’s head snapped around so his eyes could pin me to the spot which they absolutely did.

“Do not move,” he growled.

I stopped moving.

He looked back at Nick and so did I to see him getting up, three bouncers closing in, the people he took down with him also slowly coming to their feet and Nick’s entire VIP dais posse beating a hasty retreat.

“Lesson,” Knight clipped to one of the bouncers, the bouncer nodded and put hands on a now pale-faced Nick and instantly dragged him to the steps as another of the bouncers followed. Knight kept talking. “Find Anya’s friends. They don’t have a car, escort them home. They do, escort them to their car. And VIP vouchers. Now.”

Wow, that was nice. VIP vouchers at Slade. Everyone knew what that meant. Your own dais for you and your friends, your own cocktail waitress, your own bouncer and if you carried the voucher card, you drank for free.

I was thinking this therefore when Knight’s hand closed around mine hard, scrunching my fingers together somewhat painfully, it came as a shock.

I had no time to respond to this mostly because now *I* was being dragged to the steps. He didn’t release the pressure on my hand and I was working hard not to fall as well as keep up with him, so I didn’t make a peep as he prowled down the steps with me in tow. Then he prowled through the crowd around the dais, shoving them aside without hesitation. Then he prowled to the back of the club toward a door. A bouncer standing beside it opened it before we arrived and I saw it led to some lit stairs. Then we were through it and I was climbing the stairs, clamoring after a very swiftly moving Knight.

“Knight!” I snapped. “Slow down! I can’t keep up.”

Mistake. He jerked my hand as he turned and I started falling. He caught me, swinging me up in his arms as I cried out in shock and grabbed on like I did the night he carried me over the coats. Then we were up the stairs, he dipped down, opened a door and walked through. Then he slammed me down on my feet, hard, the movement jarring me and he closed the door. The music that was muted when we walked into the stairs disappeared completely when the door closed and I found myself facing down a seriously angry, seriously terrifying Knight Sebring in a private office to the strains of what sounded to my uncultured ears like Beethoven.

“What... the fuck... is the matter with you?” he asked slowly, his voice still vibrating, the fury still radiating and I blinked.

What?

I didn’t do anything.

And I thought he should know that and not mistake it.

So I yelled it, leaning toward him and everything.

“I didn’t do anything!”

He came at me, fast. I retreated, not as fast. I hit something, went into freefall and my bottom landed sideways in a chair, back to a cushioned armrest, legs over the other one. Knight leaned over me, one hand to the top back of the chair, one hand in the seat beside me, face an inch from mine.

God, God, God, he was scaring *the hell* out of me.
Why was he angry? At me!
“You put on that dress, didn’t you?” he whispered and it was sinister.
“What?” I whispered back.
“You... do not... leave your house... dressed like that... without being on the arm of a man like me,” he ground out on a terrifying staccato with scary pauses.
“A man like you?” I whispered.
“A man who’d shoot another man in the face he even looked at you. Yeah, Anya, a man... like... me.”
He meant that. He meant that. Every word. God, he meant *every word of that*.
“Knight, you’re scaring me.”
Yep, still whispering.
“Good,” he bit out, his eyes moved over my face for a while then he growled, “Fuck me. Fuck me. Fuck... me.”
What now?
No, no. I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want VIP vouchers either even though I could possibly sell them on the internet for half the cost of opening up a mountain retreat spa.
I just wanted to go.
Now.
“Can you move up so I can get up and get out of here?” I requested cautiously.
“Tomorrow, I’m giving you breakfast. I’ll pick you up at nine.”
I blinked.
Then, yes *still* whispering, “Pardon?”
“You heard me.”
I shook my head. “I can’t.”
“Bullshit. Nine. You say no again I’m givin’ you breakfast anyway but only because tonight, all night, until morning, you’re tied to my bed.”
There it was. The whole body shiver I wasn’t sure was good, as in very, *very* good or bad as in very, *very* bad.
“Knight,” I breathed.
“Nine.”
“I have a client at eleven,” I blurted and his head jerked as his brows shot together.
“A client?”
“Acrylics. Um... fake nails. Standing appointment every two weeks. Her name is Shirley,” I explained though went overboard on the information because I was *freaking out*.
He stared at me and I felt my entire body heat from the infuriated blaze coming from his eyes.
Then he said, “Lunch, one.”
Oh God.
“Knight –” I repeated.
“Lunch, Anya, one. You come to me. My place. I don’t get a call up at one, the boys find you and bring you to me.”
He meant that too. God, he meant every word.
“You’re scaring me,” I told him quietly and honestly.
“Good, then you’ll do what the fuck I say,” he bit back. “Now, I’m gonna go, send up a drink and you’re gonna drink it while you wait for me to find a man I trust to take you out back so no man’s eyes are on you as you walk through my club. He’s gonna put your ass in a car and take you home. He’s walkin’ you to your door. He’s also doin’ a walkthrough of your place. You give him shit, he’ll tell me and I’ll punish *you*. Are you with me?”
“Not really,” I whispered.
“You will be,” he whispered back, pushed off and stalked to the door.

By the time he got there, I'd pushed myself up in the chair but had not been able to scramble out of it before he pinned me to the spot with his eyes.

"That dress, babe, you wear it again, it's only for me."

Then he disappeared through the door, I heard it lock from the other side and he was gone.

WARNING

This book is an ADULT EROTIC romance featuring an anti-hero. This novel contains explicit scenes of pain play, domination (control) and bondage. The hero in this novel lives a life by his own code with no apologies. In an effort not to spoil it for you, I will not explain further about the hero but he is most definitely not your (or my, in my other books) "normal" hero. If you do not enjoy the above, I would suggest that this novel is not for you.

If it is... I hope you enjoy!