

# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

## THE LAYOVER

Megan Erickson

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE LAYOVER

By Megan Erickson

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# THE LAYOVER

By Megan Erickson

## Photo Description

Two sleeping men lie on a mattress on the floor. One man has his arm around the waist of the other, spooning him. The man in front has a colorful tattoo on his shoulder.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I can't think of anything worse after a night of drinking than waking up next to someone and not being able to remember his name, or how you met... or why he's dead.*

I'm dying to see where you take it from here. I would love to see something humorous. I would love it even more if you manage to keep the cops out of it.

*Sincerely,*

*Gwynn*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** humor, some mystery, wicked hangovers, dancing in gold lamé shorts, a talking parrot, and what happens in Vegas doesn't stay in Vegas, HFN, adventure, amnesia

**Word Count:** 17,440

*Author's Note*

I had a blast writing this. I saw the photo, read the Dear Author letter, and immediately thought of the movie *The Hangover*. So this story is a little inspired by that but with... you know... guys who like guys.

**THE LAYOVER**  
**By Megan Erickson**

## Chapter One

My roiling stomach woke me first, then my pounding head joined in the greeting. Their friends, dry mouth and liquor sweats, let me know last night had been a real winner.

Those were my only clues, because I sure as fuck didn't remember a thing.

I opened my sandpaper-lined eyelids and blinked until enough moisture coated my eyeballs so I no longer wanted to gouge them out of my skull.

My assessment:

I was lying on a bare mattress with a single sheet draped over me.

I was naked. With morning wood.

I wasn't alone.

I lay on my side, my arm around a slim brunette with a riot of colored ink on his shoulder. I squinted. The tattoo was kinda shitty, with some weird-looking blue monster with horns and fangs. It looked like something out of one of my niece's movies. I think her favorite one, a blue furred one named Sully.

I lifted my arm off of his waist, and peeked under the sheet. He was naked too. Nice ass.

I frowned and wiggled my hips a little because...

"Dude, quit moving," said a voice from behind me.

*Behind me?*

I turned and shot up to a sitting position, scrambling backward like a crab until I fell off the end of the mattress onto the hardwood floor on my naked ass.

As I grabbed for the sheet, a pair of green-gold eyes peered over the edge of the mattress. Those cat eyes squinted at me. "Who are you?"

I looked at the top of Sully-Tattoo's head. He didn't move. Must be a deep sleeper. I looked back at Cat Eyes. "Who are you?"

His gaze was on Sully. "Who the fuck is that?"

"I don't know."

Cat Eyes looked back at me and then his gaze lowered to peruse my body, slowly, unashamedly, before working back up to my face. He cocked his head

and smirked with a dimple that could stop Chicago traffic on I90 at rush hour. "You're cute, Blondie."

I narrowed my eyes. Yes, he was fucking gorgeous with his ruffled black hair, broad shoulders and model-quality chiseled jaw, but I was in no mood to chit-chat.

I had no idea where I was, who these dudes were, or what time it was. I had a plane that I had to catch tomorrow out of Vegas. Because my sister's wedding in California would wait for no man. Even her favorite brother. Who stretched his layover in Vegas to two nights.

Because *Vegas*.

Oh fuck, I hoped today was the day I thought it was. I glanced at my watch. It was nine a.m. On March fifteenth. Okay. Good.

So, another assessment: Clothes. Verify location. Make sure I still make my flight tomorrow morning.

But first... "Did I fuck you?" I asked Cat Eyes.

He jerked his head back, raised an eyebrow. "Uh, I don't think so. I fuck you?"

"I don't think so either."

We both looked at Sully, who still hadn't moved a muscle.

Cat Eyes reached over and prodded the guy's inked shoulder. "Yo, buddy."

"Yo, buddy?" I asked. "Is that the line you used to get in my pants?"

He glared at me. "You're critiquing my pick-up skills right now?"

I was grouchy and cold and hungry and hung-over. "I'm just sayin'."

He opened his mouth, then confusion passed over his face. He licked his lips. "You know, I don't remember." He frowned. "Anything."

I rubbed my eyes with the heels of my palms. "I don't remember anything either."

I replayed my last steps in my head. I'd taken an early vacation from my graphic designing business, and hopped a flight to Vegas, looking to party before dealing with my perfect nuclear family for a whole weekend.

Where the fuck had I gone...

"Yo, buddy," Cat Eyes said again to Sully. "Wake up."

I wracked my brain. I'd been at those fountains, hadn't I? With the water and lights?

"Dude," he said again, sitting up and leaning over Sully. A black swirly tattoo curled over his left hip, and I couldn't look away. Fuck, he was cut with muscle, with lightly-furred pecs and abs and holy shit—

"Mother. Fucker," he said, and I snapped my eyes up to his. They were wide, and his previously tanned face now looked drained of color. I swore I saw a rapid pulse beating in his neck and those pecs were rising and falling with fast breaths.

I leaned forward. "What's wrong?"

Those cat eyes remained wide, locked onto mine. I rolled onto my knees and crawled to the end of the mattress. "Hey, man, you okay?"

His eyes darted to Sully and back to me. "He's dead."

I froze. He didn't say what I thought he just did. No way. Or maybe he was a comedian and he was fucking with me. Did I go to a comedy show last night? "Come again?"

"The-the-thing-in the wrists and the neck..."

"The pulse?"

He nodded maniacally. "Yeah, yeah that. He doesn't have one."

We stared at each other a beat as my expression surely morphed into a look of horror matching his own.

And then we moved.

I fell back to my ass, and, in a maneuver I would maybe later revisit because of its smoothness, I hopped onto the balls of my feet and bolted. The flap of a sheet and thud of bare feet let me know Cat Eyes was on my heels.

I didn't know where I was going. I barely registered that I was in some fucking lush Vegas hotel room with over-the-top drapes on huge picture windows and gold statues of lions and shit like that.

I spotted an open door ahead of me, marble sinks and tile floors, and ran inside then dove into the dry whirlpool tub and huddled into a ball.

Cat Eyes slammed the door behind him and climbed in across from me, hugging his knees to his chest.

We huddled across from each other, and it took me a minute or two, sitting in silence with a stranger, to realize we were both still naked. My hip bones dug into the sides of the marble tub.

I grabbed a plush brown towel off the ledge beside the tub and wrapped it around my waist. Then I handed another to Cat Eyes, and he did the same.

I didn't want to talk about the... whatever that was in the other room. I figured the next important task was to figure out who the hell I sat in a tub with.

"What's your name?" My words echoed off the walls of the expansive bathroom.

He squinted at me. "You don't beat around the bush do you?"

I shrugged. Because no, I didn't, but this guy didn't need to know me. No matter how hot he was. Or how much I wanted to see those eyes glaze over with lust. Or how much I wanted to touch his cock. The glimpse I'd gotten earlier...

"Beck."

I blinked. "What?"

His jaw muscled flexed. "Beck. My name."

"Your name is Beck?"

His lip twitched in amusement. "My last name is Becket. I go by Beck."

He looked like a Beck. Kind of a rich guy with an edge. I bet he looked fucking orgasmic in a tux. "What's your first name?"

"Aaron."

"You don't look like an Aaron."

A bigger smile. Those dimples. Gah. "Agreed." Pause. "What's your name?"

"Nate."

"Nate what?" I liked hearing his voice say my name.

"Callahan."

He pressed his lips together and shot a glance at the closed door of the bathroom. "So, Nate Callahan. We have ourselves a situation."

I looked down at my towel-covered lap. "I don't even know where my clothes are. Or my phone. I guess we need to call the cops."

Limbs thumped against marble as Beck rose onto his knees in a jerky motion and held his hands toward me, palms out. His eyes were wide, and he was breathing rapidly again. "No cops."

Oh for fuck's sake. "Are you shitting me right now?"

He shook his head. "No cops, Nate. Please."

Dammit, he used my name. "Why not?"

His eyes skittered away. "I just... fuck, I can't deal with cops. I can't be associated with this..."

"So you're gonna bail on me so I have to deal with the dead guy by myself?"

"No, but—"

"Was that even your real name?"

He rolled his lips between his teeth. "Maybe. Maybe not."

I threw up my hands and slapped them down beside the tub. "This is so fucked up."

"I swear to God, I had nothing to do with what's going on here. I'm just as confused as you are. But I can't get involved with cops right now. I'm trying to... move on... and..." His voice trailed off, but he stayed on his knees, widening those cat eyes at me imploringly.

"What'd you do?" I asked

He bit his lip.

I pointed a finger at him. "Oh God, did you kill a man in Reno just to watch him die?"

Those scared eyes froze for a second before they crinkled, and he chuckled. Then, I snorted. And then, we both collapsed into a fit of laughter.

I swore I'd gone crazy, but if I called up my best friend and told him I was naked in a bathtub in Vegas with a dead guy on a mattress in the next room, he wouldn't be that surprised.

I think my danger gene was defective.

"Ok, so just to clarify," I said, wiping my eyes, "you're not a murderer, right? Because that would be awkward."

He shook his head. "I swear, it's nothing that bad, but I... I can't get the cops involved in this, okay?"

I took a deep breath. I should say fuck no, we're calling the cops. But the guy was gorgeous and polite, and, dammit, he was naked in a tub with me, those eyes fixed on mine, that tattoo tempting my tongue to trace it.

Stupid never-ending hormones.

"Okay," I said, hoping that didn't seal some sort of fate. A bad one.

He relaxed back into the tub but didn't take his eyes off of me. "So what's the first step?"

"I'd like some clothes," I said.

"Me too."

I tapped my finger on my lips. "And then... we have to figure out who Sully is."

"Sully?"

"Yeah, he's got that horrible tattoo on his shoulder. Looks like that monster from that kids' movie."

He wrinkled his nose. "It is a crappy tattoo, isn't it? He didn't do a great job vetting the artist."

I nodded, and it wasn't lost on me that our minds seemed to work alike. "Ok, so we need to find out who Sully is. Hopefully he's got some ID on him."

He looked thoughtful. "We need to find out who the hell paid for this room. I mean, if I did, then I'm broke as shit. Since I was already broke." I nodded in agreement as he kept talking. "Because we can't just leave this guy here if our names are on the room."

I sighed and tugged on my hair. "On the count of three, we get up and walk out. Okay?"

"Okay."

"One... two... three."

Neither of us moved.

"I said three!" I cried.

"You didn't move!" he cried back.

I growled. "Okay, I'm going to count again."

“Fine.”

“One... two... three.”

This time we both climbed out of the tub together, opened the bathroom door and made our way back into the living room. I peered around the corner, hoping Sully had magically come back to life and would be waving to us while he made coffee.

No such luck, because his prone form was still on the mattress. And I didn't smell coffee.

We stood side by side staring at him, towels wrapped around our waists.

“Can't we just say what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas and—”

“TRANCE!” The inhuman screech pierced my ears, and I didn't know who moved first, whether Beck grabbed me or I grabbed him, but within seconds we had turned the sofa so it faced the far wall and were clutched in an embrace on the plush cushions. Our defense was the back of the couch on one side of us and the wall on the other.

Our legs were tangled, and Beck had his thick arms wrapped around my shoulders, one hand clutching my head to his chest. I was slightly smaller than him, and his instinct to protect me from whatever the hell that thing was warmed me.

A little.

Because I was pretty freaked out.

His heart beat a mile a minute under my ear.

“What the fuck is that?” I whispered.

“No fucking—”

“TRANCE!” The screech came again, and his body shuddered under mine.

“It sounds like a woman,” he said.

“Or a robot?”

“A robot? What is this, a Will Smith movie?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Fuck.” He took a deep breath. “Okay, I'm going to look over the back of the couch. If there's someone here, then why didn't they say something this morning?”

“Is that question rhetorical?”

He sighed, and I knew there was an eye roll. Despite the clusterfuck of the situation, his exasperation made me smile.

He eased me off of his chest and motioned for me to stay put. Like I was going to move. Yeah, right.

He gripped the top of the couch and slowly raised his head, kind of like a human meerkat. I waited, able to see the corner of his eyes from the angle at which I hid.

His eyes widened and he froze, clearly focused on something.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“TRANCE!”

“It’s a fucking bird,” he said in awe.

“A bird?”

“Yeah, like a parrot or some shit.”

I did my own meerkat impression beside him. There, perched on the black mantle of the tacky as hell gold fireplace, was a green parrot with a yellow head. A couple red feathers capped the folded edges of his wings.

“What.The.Hell.HappenedLastNight!” Beck screamed at the bird, his frustration clearly evident at finding another surprise in his little hotel room o’ horrors.

“TRANCE!” The bird screeched again. “Mac!”

“Did he just—”

“I think he said ‘Mac’,” I said.

Beck sat back on his calves and looked at me. “Okay, so he has said ‘Trance’ and ‘Mac’.”

“Good detective skills.”

He shoved me gently. “Shut up.”

“I have no idea why he’s yelling Trance, but I’m going to guess his name is Mac?”

We both turned our heads to look at him. He stared at us with black beady eyes and clicked his black beak. “Mac!”

Beck winced. “Does he come with a volume button, I mean what the hell—”

“TRANCE!”

I held up my hands. “Whoa dude, ease up on the bird insults. Mac is not pleased.”

“Sorry, Mac,” Beck muttered. How adorable was this guy apologizing to a parrot?

Mac flapped his wings and then strutted back and forth along the mantle, casting glances at us every once in a while.

“Think he’s dangerous?” Beck said.

I shrugged. “He could have dive-bombed us and pecked our eyes out by now.” I folded my arms on the back of the couch. “We better make nice, though, because I think that bird’s holding a couple of answers about what the fuck happened last night.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

While Mac glared at us from his mantle perch, Beck and I searched the room for our clothes. We dressed quickly, and I mourned the loss of Beck's perfect ass now hidden beneath his well-worn jeans.

Bummer.

"Nate?"

"Yeah?" I looked up from buttoning my shirt.

He rooted in his pockets. "Do you have your wallet?"

"My wallet?"

He raised his eyebrows. "Ya know, ID, credit cards, money, *basically our whole lives in pieces of leather!*"

He ended the sentence on a shout and then fisted his hands in his hair. In the search for my clothes, I'd neglected to start thinking about my luggage and my ID. My stomach dropped into my toes. "Where's my shit?"

"Where's *my* shit?" Beck hollered.

"TRANCE!"

"Fuck you, bird!" I yelled and then ducked with my arms over my head in case Mac decided to descend on my face and claw my eyes out.

I peeked through my arms. The bird completely ignored me.

"Who's paying for this room, then?" Beck muttered. "I sure as hell wouldn't have sprung for this room, no matter what I was on."

"Okay, I don't think that's a valid assumption since we are discussing this over a dead guy and a talking bird."

Beck paused, then bobbed his head. "Fair enough."

I patted the pockets of my jeans and shirt one more time, but no money clip. No luggage.

Nothing.

How the hell was I going to get to this wedding on time?

And most importantly, what did we do about this dead guy in the room?

“We need to figure out what the hell happened last night and who *that* dude is,” Beck said, pointing toward the mattress. “All preferably with no cops involved or, you know, us getting dead ourselves.”

“Gee, you make it sound so easy,” I quipped.

Beck shot me a glare.

I bit my lip and eyed the phone on a table by the couch we’d pushed back into place. I walked over, picked up the receiver and hit the button labeled “front desk.”

“What are you doing?” Beck asked. And I put my fingers to my lips to shush him. He scowled.

“Il Albergo front desk,” came a polite female voice over the line.

“I-I’m in room... uh—”

“Five twenty-two.”

I jerked my head back. “What?”

“You’re in room five twenty-two. The room displays when you call, sir.”

Oh, right. “Yes, of course.” I cleared my throat and tried to deepen my voice. Beck rolled his eyes at me.

“I seem to have misplaced my credit card and—”

“The room has already been paid for.”

This lady really loved to interrupt. Damn. “Paid for?”

“Yes, sir.”

I cringed, bracing myself for her answer. “And who paid for this room?”

There was a pause. “Kane.”

One name. A dude with fucking one name paid for our room. This didn’t sound good at all.

Beck stepped closer and leaned forward, nestling his head beside mine so he could hear the woman on the other end.

“Kane paid for our room.”

“Yes, sir. And since it’s already past checkout, Kane has been charged for another night.”

“Wait—”

“Look Rudi,” her voice was now a whispered hiss. “I’m not sure what game you’re playing, but my manager will be back soon. Now quit it and get your ass back to work!” The phone clicked in my ear.

We both turned our heads to the still form on the mattress.

“I’m going to assume that’s Rudi,” Beck said.

I hung up the phone and made the sign of the cross on my chest, even though I wasn’t Catholic. It just seemed appropriate. “We never even knew ya.” I looked at Beck. “So, *Kane*, whoever that is, paid for this room. I mean, does he know we’re here? If he has our IDs and we just leave, they’re going to be able to find us, right?”

Beck groaned. “This is so fucked up. Who the hell is Kane?”

“TRANCE!” Mac yelled.

Beck pointed at him. “Why does that thing keep yelling that damn word?”

I tapped my fingers against my thigh. There had to be a reason the bird kept shouting that word. I picked up the phone and called the front desk again. A different person answered. “Il Albergo front desk.”

“Weird question for you, but if I say the word *Trance*, does anything come to mind?”

A pause, then the man cleared his throat. “Yes.”

I nudged Beck with my elbow, who had leaned down to listen to my call. “And what is it?”

Another pause. “A nightclub, sir.”

After the front desk attendant gave me directions to Trance, which I scribbled on a hotel notepad, I hung up.

I tore off the paper and waved it in Beck’s face. “You wanna go and check out Trance?”

Beck shrugged. “What other lead do we have? Other than walking around and asking if anyone knows some guy named Kane.”

“TRANCE!” yelled Mac and in a green blur, he swooped down and landed on the phone.

Beck backed away with his hands up. “I am not taking the bird.”

Mac eyed him and in another flap of wings, he rose from the table and perched himself on Beck's shoulder.

"Oh my God." I clapped my hand over my mouth to stop the laughter.

Beck stood frozen, his arms clamped to his sides, hands in white-knuckled fists. Mac looked perfectly content, rolling his weird, black tongue in his beak. Beck spoke out of the side of his mouth. "What the fuck is he doing?"

I reached a hand toward the bird, who eyed me and said, "Don't touch me!"

I jerked my hand back. "Holy shit!"

"Did that bird just—"

"He yelled at me!"

Beck laughed and cautiously raised his hand. He touched the tip of Mac's wing. Mac didn't react.

"I think he likes you," I said, a giggle escaping.

"This isn't funny."

"Beck and Mac sitting in a tree," I sing-songed and before I could finish, Mac did. "K-I-S-S-I-N-G!" he screeched in Beck's ear, and I couldn't hold it in anymore. I bent over and roared with laughter.

But when I looked up, Beck was hesitantly petting Mac's chest with the back of his fingers.

"I'm glad you made a friend in Vegas," I snickered.

"You're just jealous," Beck shot back, and I collapsed on the couch laughing.

We were starving but had no money. And although the thought of eating near a body wasn't appealing, the only option we had was room service so we could charge it to the room, courtesy of the unknown, Madonna-like, singular-named, *Kane*.

The hotel room had two bedrooms, so we sequestered ourselves in the bedroom not stripped of its mattress, away from Rudi (may he rest in peace). I took a shower while Beck ordered, and I accepted the delivery while he showered. I set the silver trays on the garish bedspread. They needed to ease up on the gold theme in this hotel.

I sat cross-legged on the bed, checking to make sure they delivered my burger sans onions like I asked, when Beck sauntered out of the bathroom, hair

a wet blue-black and dripping on his broad shoulders. The drops drizzled down between his pecs and abs, then disappeared onto the towel knotted at his waist.

Here's the deal. I'd seen him naked this morning, but I was in panic mode then. Now, I was in hungry mode. But not for that damn burger.

He held another towel in his hand and ran it over his hair, ruffling it, and I could smell the *clean*.

Clean male. My favorite.

He stopped and eyed me. "What?"

I threw up my hands. "Don't walk out of that bathroom all wet and half-naked and then ask me what. Are you kidding? I mean, you have looked in a mirror, right?"

He cocked his head and then grinned, bringing out the dimple in his left cheek. He nodded to me. "You do know you're sitting there in just a pair of briefs, right, Blondie?"

I did. They were my favorite. At least I'd done something right and worn my good pair of black Andrew Christians.

But I wasn't as cut as Beck. I mean, I ran a little and stuff but working out wasn't really my thing.

Apparently he didn't care because he eyed me like I had been eyeing my burger.

God, under any other circumstances, *any other* circumstances where there wasn't a dead guy in the next room, I would have slithered off the bed onto my knees and unknotted that towel while he fisted my blond hair and...

"I'm thinking you need to stop staring at my towel like you want to incinerate it with your eyes, eh, Nate?"

I snapped my eyes up to his face and didn't bother to act like I hadn't been wishing I had X-ray powers. Because Beck's face was flushed. He'd been thinking the same thing.

"I mean, any other time, with you... and me..." He struggled for words and then waved a hand at the door leading to the living room. "But we have that and..."

I held up a hand. "Beck, for real. I get it. I mean, trust me, if there was no dead guy, I would have you over the bed already but—"

“Who says *I’ll* be bent over?” He took a step toward me. That grin was back.

I narrowed my eyes. “Who says *I’ll* be?”

He pulled on his boxers under his towel. “Well, good thing we’re not going to do this, or we’d have a battle on our hands.”

I pointed at his tray. “Just sit and eat so we can get the hell out of here.”

He sat cross-legged across from me. “So Nate gets cranky when he’s hungry and horny. Good to know.”

“I’m not horny,” I grumbled.

He bit into his tuna sandwich. “Riiiiight.”

That damn dimple.

“Eat,” I snapped.

“Eating,” he said around a mouthful of sandwich.

I took a bite and swallowed my growl.

“So, what are you doing in Vegas?” he asked.

I popped a fry in my mouth. “I’m traveling from Chicago to my sister’s wedding in California. I decided to have a little fun and take a layover in Vegas.”

“So that kind of backfired?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, I’m sure whatever I did, I had a good time. Just wish I could remember it.”

He blew out a breath. “I’ve been in some weird situations in my life, but this is by far the weirdest.”

“Me too. But if I don’t get to that wedding on time, I’m the one who’s gonna be dead. I have to find my ID. I have to make my flight.”

Beck glanced at the closed door. “So the hotel room isn’t in our name, but this Kane guy could know who we are, right? I mean, just bailing and leaving him here isn’t a good idea. We’re probably on security cameras and our fingerprints are all over this place...” His voice trailed off, and he dropped his head into his hands. “We’re fucked.”

No cops, Beck had said, and even though I just met him, he seemed like a good guy. I didn’t want to get him thrown in jail. Or *back* in jail. Or whatever.

And ultimately, I was curious. I wanted to know what the hell happened. Why we had a bird and dead guy in our hotel room. And I wasn't fond of jail myself.

"Here's what we'll do," I said, wiping my hands on a napkin. "We'll go to this Trance place with that bird out there. We'll find out who Kane is and find out who Rudi is. But that nightclub is our only solid lead at this point."

Beck bit his lip. "Yeah, I guess it is."

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Three

Our clothes were wrinkled and I had an unknown stain on the bottom of my shirt, but at least our bodies were clean.

Thank God it wasn't Vegas in the summer or we'd have been roasting walking the sidewalk on The Strip.

When we left the room, we'd hung the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door hoping housekeeping honored it and didn't walk in to find our deceased friend. We'd also pumped up the air conditioning before we left to... well... counteract any stench.

We'd found some cheap aviator sunglasses in the hotel store and charged them to our room. So we kind of looked like matching government agents, with our dark jeans, boots and button-downs.

Except for the large green parrot on Beck's shoulder. That was definitely not working with the look.

"I feel like I need an ear piece," I said as we walked down the strip.

"What?" Beck asked distractedly, looking up and down the street and muttering about Mac's claws making holes in his shirt.

I pressed my middle finger against my ear and said in a robotic voice, "We have a visual on a man with a parrot. I repeat, we have a visual on a man with a parrot. Over."

Beck looked at me, and then slowly raised his mirrored sunglasses so I got a look at those gold-green eyes. "You're an odd guy."

"Thanks!" I said cheerily.

He sighed and went back to fussing with the bird. His bird. Rudi's bird? Kane's bird? I didn't know.

As we walked, I again tried to replay the previous night's events in my head. Trance didn't even sound familiar.

"What's the last thing you remember?" I asked.

Beck turned away from Mac. "I was drinking in the bar of Il Albergo. I had my duffel at my feet. I hadn't decided if I was going to stay in town or head out and..." He shrugged. "That's all I remember."

I looked back in the direction we walked from. "Wait, what bar?"

He pointed with his finger. "The one in the back. It had a Greek theme with—"

"—Grape leaves and statues of David," I finished for him.

He frowned. "Wait, you remember?"

Some of my memory was in shadows, so I only got half a picture. I turned to Beck and lifted up his sunglasses, looking into those cat eyes surrounded by thick lashes. And my mind flashed back to another time, those eyes crinkled in the corners, the sound of ice tinkling a glass, the murmurs of other bar patrons.

"Shit, I must have met you there. I kinda remember you now."

We'd stopped on the pavement now and faced each other, tourists swirling around us. He reached out slowly and raised my glasses. "I remember you too."

"Do you remember anything else?"

He bit his lip and shook his head. And just like that, the whole memory plunged back into the shadows for me.

"Dammit," I muttered.

We dropped our arms at the same time and kept walking. I swore our steps were heavier.

"Where'd you plan to go after this?" I asked.

Beck squinted at the sun. "I wasn't sure."

The directions scrawled on the hotel paper led us to a large black building nestled among some clubs.

*Trance* was scrolled across the top of the building in glowing neon green script. It was mid-afternoon, so I didn't know if the place was even open.

I looked at Beck as he peered up at the sign. "So, should we knock or—"

The front door banged open and a mountain of a man—his skin almost as black as his T-shirt—stared down at us. The sun shone off his shiny bald head, and he crossed his arms over his chest, seriously testing the elasticity of his shirt material.

He also wore sunglasses.

"Do you wear those inside?" I asked, pointing at the frames covering his eyes.

He scowled at me. Well, I thought he scowled. I couldn't really be sure because I thought that expression was permanent.

“Rudi said you two would be here at two and it's almost four and Kane is pissed! And why the fuck are you standing at the front door with your thumbs in your asses?”

I held up my hands, palms out. “I want it on the record that none of my thumbs are in my ass or his ass—”

“Where is Rudi?” Baldy said, his eyes scanning the street behind us.

“Uh,” I stammered. “He's coming later.”

Baldy squinted at us and then growled, “Just get the fuck inside!” And turned to walk back through the door.

Beck elbowed me. “Did you have to piss off the huge guy already?”

“I don't like people talking about me sticking my own body parts in my own body,” I said, as we followed Baldy through the door.

“How often is that something you need to dispute?” he said.

“I don't know—”

It wasn't until the door slammed shut behind us that it hit me we had no idea what we were doing. At least we'd found Kane.

“Wait what are we?—Oh my God.” Beck stopped dead in the entrance. I stopped with him directly under a black light. That's when I caught the reason for Beck's expletive. Because if I looked anything like him, I had a huge, green, glowing parrot head stamped on my neck.

“What the fuck?” He pointed at my neck.

“Is there a parrot head on my neck?”

His eyes widened as he clamped his hand on his own neck. “Me too?”

I nodded and looked around. “I'm going to guess this isn't the first time we've been here.”

The entire place was painted black—from the floor, to the walls, to the ceiling, and to the stairs. But all the tables and chairs and bar were a bright green, like the sign out front. A DJ booth was in an alcove on the second level, and a huge metal parrot looked like it was going to take flight out of the wall above it, green wings outstretched, yellow head gleaming, black beak open.

I looked at Mac. “TRANCE!” he screeched.

“Yeah, I think we got it now, Mac,” I said.

The lights were dimmed, and the place was deserted, except for a couple of employees—dressed all in black of course—with a parrot head design stitched on their breast pockets.

“So I guess we got these,” Beck pointed to his neck, “last night?”

“Well, I don’t know how else we would have gotten ’em. And Baldy said Rudi told him we’d be here. For what?”

And then, Baldy appeared in front of us in the dim light. He looked us up and down, sizing us up or something, and I tried to stand straighter. He nodded to Mac perched on Beck’s shoulder, and Mac shook his feathered head.

“Come with me,” Baldy said, and walked into the bowels of Trance.

We followed him, and I nearly tripped over a table while gawking at the opulence that was this nightclub.

Beck stared at the bar area, which was raised on a green platform. The bar itself was black and curved and from what I could make out, looked to be hooked like a bird’s beak. Bottles behind the bar sat on shelves that followed the curve, backlit with a green glow. The dance floor spread out from one end, shaped like a parrot head.

“They’re really committed to the theme here, aren’t they?” I whispered to Beck.

He snort-laughed, and Baldy turned and glared at us.

Beck leaned in and spoke in a low voice. “Okay, so what exactly is going on here? We’re just following this guy? To do what?”

“Look,” I whispered back. “Baldy acted like we’re supposed to be here. Go along with it and quit looking so clueless.”

“I’m not clueless. I’m confused, Nate—”

I ignored him. “We need to feel out this Kane guy to make sure that if we tell him about Rudi, he’s not going to tie cement blocks to our feet and feed us to the fishes.”

Beck watched me for a minute, and something slid shut behind his eyes. He straightened and shot me a cool smile. “Go along with it? I’ll show you just how well I can play a part, Blondie.”

My spine tingled. I wanted to tackle him and kiss that smirk off his face. I thought I'd created a monster. I tugged at the hem of my shirt. "You're on, Cat Eyes."

Baldy led us through a maze of hallways until we came to a set of double doors. THE GOLD ROOM was spelled out along the top, and Baldy used a set of keys to open the doors.

My palms began to sweat a little, and I glanced at Beck out of the corner of my eye. He was a cool customer. Jerk.

Baldy opened the doors and ushered us inside, then shut them behind us. The click of the lock was like ice down my spine.

The room was... well... gold. There were gold leather couches and black tables on gold pedestals. The flooring was a black carpet which grossed me out because I didn't want to know what fluids or diseases were nestled in the fibers.

Behind the small bar stood a shirtless Hispanic man, gorgeous with long wavy hair and muscles to all get out, wiping down a gold bar top. He looked up and spotted us, blinked a couple of times and cocked his head. He gave us a small smile, and I waved.

A couple of male patrons sat in a corner booth, drinking something in low ball glasses and talking quietly.

"Kane!" Baldy called. "Rudi's boys are here!"

Being called one of "Rudi's boys" did not give me a good feeling. I glanced nervously again at Beck, but his eyes were on Antonio Banderas behind the bar. Antonio Banderas circa 1995.

"Hey, stud, can we focus here?" I said.

Beck turned to me and glared.

"My pet," a deep voice said, and in a flutter of wings, Mac left his perch on Beck to land on the shoulder of a tall man striding out of another set of double doors. He stood at least six-five and might have been the most gorgeous man I'd ever seen. He looked Greek, with full lips and high cheekbones and gorgeous golden skin.

But there was also an air of power that rolled off of him in waves so strong I swore it would knock me over. Mac preened on his shoulder as the Greek God drew closer, his long strides reaching us in no time.

He stopped in front of where Beck and I stood side by side. He reached up, and I tried not to flinch as he ran his hands through my hair. It actually felt good, and I would have purred like a cat if I wasn't about to throw up from anxiety.

Then he reached over and ran the pad of his thumb along Beck's bottom lip. Beck didn't move, but I did catch a barely perceptible twitch of his jaw. I got the feeling Beck didn't like to be touched without permission.

This man, who I assumed to be Kane, glanced from Beck back to me. "I only got a glimpse of you two last night in the security cameras, but Rudi assured me you were perfect." He hummed under his breath, and the sound traveled down my spine and settled into my balls. "My dark," he pointed to Beck, "and my light," he pointed at me.

And that's when Beck's veneer cracked, and he sucked in a breath.

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## Chapter Four

Beck paced the dressing room. Back and forth. Back and forth.

I sat on the couch, hands clasped in my lap, following his movements, searching for something to say to make him feel better.

But I didn't know what to say because ultimately I didn't know what was wrong.

My eyes trailed to the double set of gold lace-up boots and gold lamé shorts that we were, at that moment, supposed to be changing into.

Beck fisted his hair and faced me. "What are we even doing?"

After Kane proclaimed us to be his "light" and "dark", we'd tried to explain/lie that we'd come to get our bags, hoping Kane knew where they were. But he'd been evasive, said we'd talk after "our shift" and then whisked us back to this dressing room before we could share anything about Rudi's fate.

I sighed. "He said we're working the VIP room. I don't know what that means, but let's just go along with it because maybe we'll get our stuff. I'm going to try to talk to the other staff members and see who Rudi is. And if we do this for Kane, maybe he won't kill us when we tell him about Dead Rudi."

Beck groaned and collapsed onto the couch beside me. He put his head in his hands and when he spoke his voice was muffled by his palms. "What does 'working the VIP room' mean?"

There was a tone to his voice, an uncertain vulnerability that had me reaching out to rub his back.

He leaned into my touch. "I don't know. I assume..." I bit my lip, "serving drinks?"

Beck dropped his hands between his knees and looked into the mirror in front of us, then he turned to me and that door behind his eyes was open. He looked scared and pained. "I didn't like him touching me. I don't want anyone out there touching me."

There was something there, something between his words, but I couldn't pull them apart wide enough to see in the gaps. "I don't... you think we're going to have to... let customers touch us?"

Beck twisted his lips, like he was chewing the inside of his cheek. "I can't do that again, Nate," he whispered.

I bent my knee on the couch and twisted my body so I faced him. Then, I gently gripped the sides of his head.

He blinked slowly. "Long story but my parents were paying for college and cut me off."

I'd heard this story too many times. "Because they found out you were gay?"

He laughed sadly. "No. They didn't care who I dated, girls or boys. But I was dating the *wrong* boy... a boy who wasn't good for me. They gave me an ultimatum, and I picked him." Beck shook his head. "Big mistake, but I was nineteen. I needed money to get through school. He got me a job at his club. I thought... I thought I'd be a waiter, or at worse a go-go boy. It was a place like this but... where clients... could touch you. Place got raided. And I got arrested. Needless to say, I'm no longer with that boy. I'm on probation now. And it's not even about getting caught again. I just... can't go back to doing that." He locked eyes with me. "I can't, Nate."

He was gorgeous with his gold-green eyes. I could imagine he'd been really popular, although I wondered if any of those clients got to see him as truthfully as I saw him now. "We'll figure something out. I swear. No one will touch us."

He didn't let go of my gaze, and his was so full of trust, all I could do was vow in my heart that I'd claw, bite, scratch and maim to keep my promise to him.

His eyes fluttered, his long lashes brushing the tops of his cheeks and then I leaned in, or maybe he leaned, or maybe we both did, but then his mouth was on mine and mine on his. At first it was just a brush of skin with skin, but my lips felt every ridge of his. Then his tongue licked at the seam of my lips and I opened to him, drinking him in, promising wordlessly that we'd make it through this.

He tasted so good, like the coffee with creamer he had earlier and something else that was inherently Beck. I fingered his cheekbones and the corner of his lips as he moved his against mine and then trailed my fingers back, under his ear, feeling a shudder run down his body. I carded my fingers through his hair, gripped and angled his head so I could kiss him deeper. And then his hands were on my waist, tugging me into his lap so my knees straddled his hips.

I could feel his arousal through our jeans, and I wanted closer, closer, and more friction, oh much more friction. I ground my hips into his, and a moan in his throat vibrated my other hand at his neck...

“FIVE MINUTES!” Baldy shouted along with two knocks that rattled the door on its hinges.

We startled out of the kiss and stared at each other, each breathing hard as we became aware of where we were and what we had to do.

I brought my fingers to my mouth and touched my wet, swollen lips. “Holy shit.”

Beck's pupils were blown wide, so I could barely see those beautiful irises. “Yeah.”

I'd kissed a lot of guys. I liked to go to bars and clubs. Hell, I kissed most of my friends. But I'd never, in my whole twenty-five years, had a kiss like that.

Why, oh why, did I have explosive chemistry with a guy while I was stuck in this crazy situation? Figures. Just my luck.

I eased out of Beck's lap and stood before him. His hands were fisted on his thighs, and he looked at me with glazed eyes.

All I could think about was how the hell we were going to stuff our hard bulges in those fucking shorts without it being obscene. Although, they were skin-tight gold lamé shorts. They were meant to be obscene.

I cleared my throat. “We gotta—”

“Yeah, I know.”

I nodded and walked over to our meager clothing for the evening, handing him the boots in his size. We dressed silently, each stealing glances at each other. It was painful, literally and figuratively, to be so aroused and not have the time to do anything about it. To see Beck as he squeezed his toned ass into those shorts, his back muscles flexing.

And then the worst part was we had to cover ourselves in lotion that gave our skin a golden sheen. I had to lotion Beck's back—lotion his back!—all the while my dick strained toward his ass like an arrow and I had to tell it silently that I agreed but there was nothing I could do about it right now.

And when we were dressed, well, as dressed as we were supposed to be which was the least dressed I'd ever been in public (except for that time I

streaked across campus during homecoming freshman year), we stood at the door. Like gladiators waiting to enter the coliseum.

Really gay gladiators.

I reached over and grabbed Beck's hand, giving it a squeeze. "We can do this."

He clenched his jaw before he met my eyes. Then, he nodded. "All right."

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## Chapter Five

My idea to talk to other employees did not prove to be successful. Despite it being only early evening on a Saturday in Vegas, there were a good amount of patrons. Mostly men, but a couple of women, dressed in expensive clothes and dripping with jewels and I wanted to gag. We weren't working the VIP room, or THE GOLD ROOM, yet. Apparently that was for "later".

I'd been a waiter before, so carrying trays of drinks was no big deal. Beck looked experienced at it as well. I had my ass grabbed a couple of times, a finger trailed along my hip, and, while it set my teeth on edge, I could mostly ignore it. I kept my eye on Beck though, and his reaction to the touches was different. He'd tense and move away without drawing attention to his discomfort, and I wondered how the hell we were going to get through this.

I delivered a gin and tonic—which I always thought smelled like a Christmas tree—to two gentlemen who eyed my package, and so I hightailed it away from their table and back to the bar.

Beck leaned on the wall, looking like he wanted to blend in.

I stood next to him. "Hey."

"Hey."

"You doin' okay?"

He shrugged. But it was jerky and stiff and I didn't think he really meant it.

"It's just delivering drinks. No biggie."

Beck didn't look at me. "Then what was his light and dark thing about?"

I ran my hands over my hair. "I don't know. He likes variety?"

Beck eyed me, and I smiled a big cheesy grin. He rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"I guess we should go back in there—"

"Hey," a voice said quietly beside us, and I turned to see the Antonio Banderas bartender motioning to us.

We took a couple of steps closer.

He glanced around and then took two full shot glasses from below the bar. He slid them toward us and leaned in, speaking in a hushed voice. "You boys'll want these."

I eyed the shots. “Uh, I think when I signed... my, uh, job thingy... it said we weren't supposed to drink on the job.”

Antonio Banderas eyed me. “You seriously going to act like you know what the fuck is going on?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Well, if you know what's going on then feel free to enlighten us.”

He only shook his head and nudged the shot glasses closer. “Take the shots, boys. You need to loosen up.”

Beck held up his hand. “Look, we had a bad night last night, and now I swore off drinking anything that isn't sealed in plastic wrap, which I realize limits me to cough medicine, but—”

“Just drink, Beck,” I said and downed the shot in one gulp. It burned like fire and I sputtered.

“Tequila? You couldn't give us some top shelf vodka or something?”

Beck took his shot and swallowed it with barely a wince.

“Seriously?” I said.

“What?” He looked confused.

“Could you at least pretend that shot seared your esophagus?”

He smiled, the same one he'd given me back at the hotel when he was only in his towel. He gripped my hip and leaned in so I could smell the tequila on his breath. “You're cute.”

Okay, so, tequila was a good look on Beck. Noted.

And now I was getting hard again in these fucking shorts. Dammit.

The evening went by in a blur of working the floor and sneaking shots from Antonio Banderas, or Luis, as we later found out. He was still Desperado to me.

He slipped us a couple of sandwiches when he could tell our energy was running low, and we both inhaled them. They didn't do much to dull the tequila buzz, which was probably a good thing.

Around midnight, Baldy—who we learned was Carl—took our trays and led us into THE GOLD ROOM. He instructed us to stand at attention along the wall. He cleared the room of the current clients, and that's when Beck shifted closer to me, the back of his hand brushing my own.

“Think we’re off duty now?” he asked.

But the way Carl looked at us from his military-like position beside the door I thought our official duty had only just begun.

“Rudi,” Carl spat the name and shook his head.

My head snapped to him. “What?”

He shook his head and muttered, “Not sure why Kane puts up with him.”

“I’m sorry.” My mind whirled. “What about Rudi?”

Carl’s dark eyes pierced my skull, and I hoped he wasn’t a human lie detector.

But he didn’t answer, because deep voices carried in from the bar outside. A minute later, Kane walked into THE GOLD ROOM, a man beside him who I could only describe as powerful and dark.

I had thought Kane had an intimidating presence, but that was nothing compared to Dark Man. He was the same height as Kane but broader. His face was unique, which kept me guessing on his ethnicity as I studied his black hair, his wide-set eyes, his full lips and his tan skin.

He was attractive.

And his eyes were on us.

Kane wore a scowl and conversed quietly with Carl.

Dark Man didn’t turn from us, and his eyes scanned our bodies. I resisted placing my hands in front of me to cover what the gold shorts couldn’t.

Beck was a statue beside me. I didn’t even see his chest rising and falling. I hoped his heart hadn’t stopped beating. I drew the line at two dead guys in one day.

Kane cleared his throat as Luis whisked in with a tray of drinks and then walked back out, shooting us a look of sympathy as he closed the doors behind him.

Dread settled into my toes.

Kane and Dark Man sat in a booth and began to talk. I didn’t know how much time passed while Beck and I stood motionless against the wall. I was tired and hungry and drunk, and I reminded myself not to lock my knees for fear I’d pass out. Dark Man shot us looks every once in a while over the rim of his glass, each tinkle of ice like a stab in my spinal cord.

After a while, Kane reached for a remote resting along the top of the booth and the lights dimmed. A thudding bass over club music replaced the previous soft tunes and the beat battered my temples.

Kane motioned to us to stand closer. I took the first step and Beck followed until we were five feet from the table, our shoulders brushing.

“While we wait for the exchange, as promised,” Kane said, “we have found entertainment.” He gestured to us, like we were roast beef on a buffet. “They look perfect together, don’t they? Light and dark.”

Dark Man took a sip of his drink, slowly, then lowered his glass, setting it precisely on a gold-edged napkin in front of him. He licked his lips, his pink tongue swiping his lower lip.

“Hmmm,” he hummed and I started to sweat, hoping it wasn’t a bad hum, until he said, “Perfect.”

But as soon as that word was out of his mouth, I realized I would have rather him found us lacking.

“Which would you rather have first?” Kane asked, and Beck trembled beside me.

I didn’t really think. I just blurted words, anything to save Beck. “If we may, sir. I... we... prepared something. For you.” I cleared my throat and clamped my hand on Beck’s wrist, willing him to keep up the facade just a little longer. We had to distract them, do something that would satisfy whatever they wanted before we could figure out what the hell Rudi had to do with all of this.

And most importantly, get us the hell out of this without being arrested for homicide.

Kane frowned and opened his mouth, surely to protest but Dark Man held up his hand. Then he lowered it and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his suited chest. “Please.”

Kane’s long finger tapped something on the remote and the music changed. A heavy beat still carried the melody but there was a sensuality to it, not unlike something in a dance club or a... a strip club.

That was it.

We could do this.

I closed my eyes, giving in to the tequila buzz I’d been fighting. I pretended Beck and I were alone. I pretended there was no parrot or dead guy or gold

lamé shorts. I pictured us in my apartment back in Chicago, after a fantastic date where we dipped lobster in butter and spooned crème brûlée out of a dish.

I took a step in front of Beck so my back was to the table. And then I moved. I rotated my hips and rolled my shoulders and I danced and worked myself along Beck's body like my life depended on it. Because it probably did.

Beck stood stiff for a moment before giving into the beat. And giving into me.

We danced. Eyes closed, bodies inseparable, we danced like we'd been doing this together for years. Beck's breath rushed hot along my temple, and I nuzzled into the skin below his neck, laving it with my tongue when I could no longer resist capturing the taste of him.

His knee was between my legs, snuggled up under my balls, rubbing, rubbing, and I wanted to strip and climb on top of him on the floor.

I felt at home dancing in a club, but this was different. I always focused on me and my body, ever aware of how I looked and what I was doing.

But not now. Not with Beck. He was all that mattered.

I couldn't hear the music anymore. I couldn't feel the cool air of the room. I couldn't smell the liquor and the faint hint of carpet cleaner.

I only heard Beck's breath in my ear, his heart beating against mine. I only felt his hands and his body and his heat. And I only smelled him. Clean, aroused Beck.

I raised my head and opened my eyes to stare into his, the gold sparking in his irises. We leaned into each other. Two breaths away. One breath away.

A brush of our lips.

And then a voice yelled, "Enough!" And the reality of where we were slammed into me so hard I staggered. Beck gripped my waist and hauled me back against him. Our chests heaved against each other, and, when Beck's arm loosened, I groaned.

His hand slipped into mine, and he squeezed so hard, I thought he'd break the bones in my hand, but I didn't protest. Because I needed to hold onto him as much as he needed to hold onto me.

I stepped back and stood beside him. And we faced our fate.

Dark Man's lips were wet and his cheeks flushed. Kane looked like he was in pain.

I had no sympathy.

Dark Man didn't take his eyes off of us. "Where are the numbers?"

Numbers? Was he talking to us?

Kane shifted in his seat. "He should be here soon."

Dark Man's eyes narrowed, flashing something that resembled anger, and I shifted closer to Beck.

"You said that an hour ago." His eyes didn't waver from us, but I knew he talked to Kane.

"I apologize," Kane said. "Maybe one of the boys can entertain you while we wait longer." He turned to Carl. "Please take them to the dressing room and have them... freshen up. We'll call for them when we're ready."

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## Chapter Six

My knees threatened to give out. I thought we'd gotten out of this club.

Carl motioned us to walk ahead of him as we staggered out of The Gold Room. Maybe Beck and I could take him? Tackle him and make a run for it? But then another bodyguard appeared beside him and I gave up that plan.

A minute later, we were back in the dressing room. Alone.

The lock clicked in place, securing us inside. The sound reverberated around the room.

Beck stood with his back against the door, palms flat on the surface, chest heaving as he looked at me with wide eyes, ruffled hair.

A hard bulge in his shorts.

I fisted my hands, about to ask if we could... take advantage of this moment... the two of us... before we had to do whatever was asked.

My mouth opened and Beck pounced, his body colliding with mine, sending us careening back onto the couch.

He landed on me, and I grunted under his weight, but I didn't need to breathe. Not with his lips on mine, his tongue licking my mouth, giving me breath.

I fisted his hair and angled our heads so we could get deeper, so much deeper, to forget about everyone and everything else and this layover from hell.

Beck's hips churned, and our shorts were so thin, I could feel every thick ridge of his arousal. I moaned at the feeling and slid my hands down his bare, muscled back, grabbing handfuls of his ass and tugging him closer, oh so closer because I wanted him on me, all over me, in me.

Yes, *in* me.

But Beck had other ideas. He broke our kiss and sucked on the skin below my ear as his hands tugged at the laces on my shorts. And then his hand was inside, grasping my shaft and... my eyes rolled back as he tugged and stroked, swiping his thumb over the head to use my precum as a lubricant. Every couple of strokes he dipped down to cup my balls and swiped that patch of sensitive skin right behind them.

“God, Beck,” were the only words I was able to speak in English as his head lowered, his lips and tongue nipping at my neck before he latched onto a nipple.

His hand never broke his rhythm, and my hands fluttered uselessly on his neck and upper back since I'd been rendered paralyzed by the sensations on my dick and the pattern of teeth and tongue Beck made down my torso. His head lowered, and his hot breath coated the head of my cock for one minute. Just one minute to give me warning before my entire shaft was engulfed in wet heat.

I wasn't huge, but I wasn't small either, and Beck took every inch into his mouth. His throat swallowed around the head, and I think I screamed. Or maybe I cried.

He pulled off and gripped the base, locked eyes with me for one scorching moment and then returned to something he clearly loved to do, if his skill was any indication. He rolled my balls on his tongue, all the while keeping a steady rhythm of strokes on my shaft.

When I didn't think I could take it anymore, his mouth was back and this time, he wasn't fucking around. Beck meant business. He hollowed his cheeks and sucked and bobbed, the erotic sounds filling the dressing room and driving me out of my fucking mind.

I couldn't last and I didn't want to. Why delay what we both wanted so much? My balls drew up tight and I think I muttered, “I'm coming,” or, “now,” or, “holy fuck,” and then erupted into his mouth, my back bowing off the couch as I came. Beck's throat worked against the head, swallowing everything until I had to push on his shoulders because the sensation was too much.

He pulled off, breathing hard, hair ravaged where I'd gripped it, mouth open and wet and swollen.

And then, I pounced back.

His shorts were already unlaced, which he must have done somehow like a ninja while he was blowing me. His cock stood out, hard and proud, red and glistening with precum. I shoved him onto his back and sucked him into my mouth.

I wanted to return the favor and make Beck feel as good as he made me feel. I was succeeding, if Beck's moaning and nonsensical words were any indication.

He tasted amazing on my tongue, smooth skin over swollen hardness. And with a few pumps of my wrist and swirls of my tongue, he was done. Overboard. Coming in my mouth and gasping my name. "Nate. Fuck, Nate. Goddamn, Blondie." I shut my eyes and swallowed, loving the nickname he'd given me the most.

I collapsed on top of him, my head on his hip. His fingers carded through my hair, but I could feel them shake slightly in the strands.

I nestled into his skin, something I rarely did. But he smelled so good, and I was so tired.

Maybe... maybe I could sleep. Right now. And then wake up and Beck and I would be back in that hotel room. Together. Under the covers and naked. We'd wake up yawning and laughing about that horrible dream we had about the dead guy in the living room.

"Nate," Beck croaked my name.

I pressed my lips to his hipbone and then faced him, propping my chin on my arm. "Yeah."

He didn't look stressed anymore. Or anxious. He looked tired. Then his lips twitched, just at the corners, and his chest hitched. A small sound escaped his throat. I crawled up his body to get closer to his face, now worried he was one of those weirdos that cried after having an orgasm.

But then, his face cracked, and he threw back his head and roared with laughter, tugging me into his chest so that I giggled into his neck. His mood was contagious, and the outrageousness of the situation had us both gasping for breath as laughter wracked our bodies.

I wiped the tears from my eyes. "I've done some crazy stuff in my life, but nothing like this."

Beck shook his head, rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "This has to be a dream. I keep thinking I'm going to wake up and none of this will have happened."

I wrapped my fingers around his wrist and tugged. He opened up those golden eyes and watched me, the grin fading from his face.

I rubbed the inside of his wrist with my thumb. "Is that what you want?"

He took a deep breath and raised his eyes to the ceiling above us before returning his gaze to me.

"I don't know what's going to happen next. But I can tell you that I'd willingly do this whole night again if it meant I'd get to meet you."

It was on the tip of my tongue to make a joke, but his face was so earnest, his eyes so full of vulnerability that all I could do was lean in to press a kiss to his lips. And speak the truth. "Me too."

His tongue swiped my lips, and I angled my head to deepen the kiss just as a knock sounded at the door.

I pulled back. Beck turned his head to eye the door. I slid off of him and laced up my shorts as he sat on the couch and did the same. When he stood up, he began to walk toward the door, but I grabbed him.

I laced our fingers together. "We'll figure this out together, Beck." He didn't look at me, keeping his eyes on the toes of our boots facing each other. "No matter what he says, we go out there together. We can't separate."

Beck looked resigned and I thought he'd ignore me. But finally he raised his eyes to mine, bit his lip, and nodded.

"We're ready," I called.

The lock unchecked and I raised my eyes, expecting to see Carl's bald, shiny head walking us to our doom but instead Luis barged into the room, shutting the door behind him.

"I gotta get you guys out of here." He rushed around the room, gathering our clothes and thrusting them at us. "Change. Now."

We didn't argue, and sorted the pile of clothes until we found our own. I only had one sock, so I shoved it into my pocket and pushed my bare feet into my shoes.

Luis wrinkled his nose. "It smells like sex in here."

I glared at him, and he broke his frantic mode for one minute to wink at me. Then his face locked into serious mode again. "Okay, here's the deal. You gotta get Rudi here. Kane's been stalling with Asim long enough."

Fucking Rudi. If he wasn't dead, I'd kill him myself.

"But—" Beck started but I cut him off.

"Okay, so what if we can't find Rudi?" I asked.

Luis narrowed his eyes. "Find him. Or at least his arm. Because the numbers Kane needs to give Asim are in that fucking tattoo."

## Chapter Seven

It could have been daylight for all I knew. That's how bright the strip was, even at three in the morning.

People were everywhere, a weird variety of tourists and gamblers and clubbers.

Luis had led us out a back door, telling us to return by dawn, that they'd slipped something in that Asim's drink. He'd be passed out for a couple of hours.

I didn't see how that was a good idea. The dude would be pissed when he woke up.

We held hands as we walked silently, heads down, back to Il Albrego. I had never been much for PDA but this wasn't about that. This was staying connected to the only thing that felt real in the whole world right now.

My sister's wedding seemed in another time or dimension, my flight scheduled for some morning a lifetime away.

I wanted a drink. And a shower. And a burger. But first we had to figure out what to do about Rudi.

"You remember seeing any numbers on that tattoo?" I asked Beck as we rode in the elevator back up to the hotel room.

Beck gave me a suffering look. "I'm sorry. I was focused on the fact that *he had no pulse!*" He ended the sentence on a shout.

I clenched my jaw and exhaled a breath sharply out of my nose, about to yell at him how I didn't deserve to be snapped at, when he stepped up into my space. His hand gripped my waist and his forehead lowered to my shoulder. He slumped against me, and I raised my arms, hugging him back.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I know. It's okay."

"I'm tired."

"Me too."

"And hungry."

“I want another room service burger.”

He chuckled and raised his head. His lids dropped, and he tugged me closer, our heads touching, his lips at my ear. And then he began swaying, ever so slowly to the Muzak playing softly from the elevator speakers. He hummed along with the tune, and I pressed my nose into his temple, breathing him in.

He smelled like tequila. And sweat. A hint of soap. And us.

I wrapped my arms around him tighter, my fingers pressing into his shoulders, wanting to crawl up him, on him, into him.

I wished again this was another time. Another place. Anywhere we'd be free to explore whatever this was.

When the elevator dinged, we pulled apart, the reality of the situation once again settling on our shoulders. I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to ride in an elevator again without thinking of Beck.

Beck pulled the key card out of his pocket and swiped it down the lock at our door. My palms began to sweat as we waited for the little light above the handle to turn from red to green.

The green light lit, the door click unlocked, Beck pushed down the handle, and we were back at the scene of the crime.

Literally.

The place was silent as a tomb. Which, yes, I realize how distasteful that analogy was, but it was true, okay?

There was no screeching parrot or anything. Just a silent hotel room with a dead guy on a mattress.

This was one fucked up layover.

We stood at the head of the mattress, staring down at Rudi. I thought his color looked pretty good for a dead guy. When did rigor mortis set in?

Beck squatted and craned his neck, staring at the god-awful blue tattoo. “I think I see some numbers... Why don't we just take a picture of it?”

I squinted at him. “Oh right, let me just go retrieve my phone from Kane and ask him if I can Instagram a picture of his dead employee's arm.”

Beck huffed. “Sorry, I forgot we don't have our phones.”

“Can we cut his arm off?”

Beck stared up at me from his squat on the floor.

I scrunched my lips, thinking. "Aren't our food trays still in the bedroom? I had a steak knife that came with my burger—"

"Are you kidding me right now?" Beck said, standing.

"What?"

"You can't saw an arm off with a steak knife."

"There's no... blood flow, right? So it won't be messy."

Beck's eyes bugged out of his head. "But there is something called bone, Nate. It's really hard. And requires something stronger than a steak knife."

"Can we just lop off the flesh then?"

Beck blinked at me, then returned to his squatting position again, examining the tattoo.

"So, I take it we're not going with my idea then," I said.

Beck continued to ignore me as he reached out and gingerly prodded at Rudi's bicep, rolling his arm slightly to look at the tattoo wrapped around...

And Rudi moved.

*Moved.*

And then chaos.

Beck yelped and fell-slash-scrambled backwards, away from the moving dead man. He crashed into me standing behind him, and I went down. We were a mass of limbs and body parts on the floor as I screeched and he hollered, both of us trying to get away from the dead man.

*Who was now rising to a sitting position and blinking at us.*

*Blinking at us.*

With eyes that were alive. And a mouth that was moving and a chest that inhaled and exhaled air and surely a heart that was beating too.

And that mouth was saying, "Who are you?"

And Beck and I crouched on the floor, hugging each other, staring at this ghost or thing or whatever it was that was no longer dead and motionless.

Rudi yawned and stretched his arms over his head. "Fuck, what time is it? I slept like the dead."

I saw red.

I lunged at Rudi, who widened his eyes and fell backwards as I attempted to claw my way onto the mattress and strangle him. Beck clamped his arms around my waist, tugging me back.

“You motherfucker!” I yelled at Rudi, who currently cowered at the end of the mattress. “What the hell did you do to us?”

“Calm down, Nate!” Beck growled into my back, tugging as I squirmed to free myself from his grip.

And then I stopped my efforts and whirled on him. “You! You said he had no pulse!”

Beck threw up his hands. “He didn’t! I swear. I mean, I’m no doctor or nurse or whatever, but I’ve felt a pulse before and that,” he pointed a finger at Rudi, “that had no pulse!”

We turned to Rudi who eyed us like we were ax murderers. Did he overhear us talking about sawing off his arm?

He held up his hands, palms out. “Okay, for real, who the fuck are you guys?”

I shook my head. “We have done a lot of shit in the last twelve hours. We got screamed at by a parrot, we met a guy named Kane, we wore gold lamé shorts with boots like the gayest gladiators in the world, and then we had to grind on each other for some guy named Asim.” I took a deep breath as Rudi’s eyes widened; recognition, mixed with something like horror, dawned on his face. “And so we’re gonna need some answers, *Rudi*.” I spat his name at him, and he flinched.

And then he went into hurricane mode.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God,” he mumbled, hopping up from the mattress and running around the hotel room like a chicken with its head cut off. “What time is it? Fuck! How did I sleep this long! Kane is going to kill me. Oh man. Where are my clothes?”

He pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that had been piled in a corner, and eyed Beck and me as we sat on the floor. “Uh, so, I guess it’s been fun, but I gotta go now—”

Beck beat me to it, hopping to his feet and advancing on Rudi. “I don’t think so. I don’t fucking think so. We need to know what the fuck happened last night and most importantly, where is our shit?”

Rudi blinked at him, his whole body radiating confusion so I talked.

And talked and talked.

From the beginning, waking up to a Rudi who seemed dead to the world. How we went to Trance and everything that conspired there and how we came back to get some numbers off of Rudi's arm.

When I finished, Rudi looked like he might laugh. Or cry.

Beck shook his head. "Now that I know I'm not going to be arrested or questioned in a homicide, I don't even give a shit anymore. I don't need my stuff. Wasn't much anyway."

"Beck, I need my ID. I have to get on a plane in," I glanced at my watch, "five hours."

Rudi held up a finger. "Give me a minute." He dialed the hotel room phone and spoke in a low voice. I didn't know what he said or who he called, but a booming voice on the other end led me to believe it was Kane.

When he hung up, he turned to us. "Come with me. Kane said he has your stuff."

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## Chapter Eight

By the time we arrived back at Trance, the sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon, painting the sky in a slash of pinks and oranges.

Beck and I didn't want to enter, but Rudi insisted, so we followed him in.

The club was deserted, much like it had been when we arrived. Rudi led us back to THE GOLD ROOM, where Asim lay on a booth, drugged and snoring away.

Kane and Carl sat in a booth beside him, smoking cigars and drinking like it was perfectly normal to drug a man.

And did they ever sleep?

Kane scowled at Rudi. "Where have you been?"

Rudi chuckled awkwardly and scratched the back of his head. "Uh, funny story..."

"It's not funny at all," I snapped.

Rudi looked shamed.

"Ah, my Light does have some fight in him," Kane murmured, eyes on me. Beck shifted closer, and Kane's eyes flicked to him, catching the movement. His lips twitched into a smile before he returned his gaze to Rudi. "What happened?"

Rudi ran his tongue over his teeth. "Well, uh, first," he pointed at us. "Those are not the guys."

"Excuse me?" I hissed.

"What?" Beck said.

Rudi glanced at us out of the corner of his eye. "Not sure what happened. I need my phone but those guys are not the guys who were supposed to, um, entertain."

"For God's sake." Beck propped his hands on his hips and rolled his eyes to the ceiling.

"How did this happen?" Kane demanded.

Rudi rubbed the back of his head nervously. "I dunno. I can't remember anything..."

Kane's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What do you mean?"

Rudi shrugged. "I took those pills—"

"Which ones?"

"The ones in the baggy, with the red mark on them—"

"For fuck's sake, Rudi, those were the bad batch."

My eyes widened as Rudi glanced at us. His shoulders rose up to his ears. "Ooops."

Beck tilted his head. "I'm sorry. Am I understanding correctly that we also ingested this 'bad batch' of pills? Is that why Nate and I know nothing about the night before?"

Rudi bit his lip. "You guys were hot and I thought we'd have a little fun..."

"So you slipped us drugs?" I asked.

"I just told you I was getting you a special drink," Rudi explained weakly.

"A special drink," I said through gritted teeth, "means top shelf liquor, or an extra cherry or a fancy umbrella. It doesn't mean a dissolved pill, jackass."

"Sorry?"

"Are you asking or are you actually apologizing?" Beck said.

"I'm apologizing?"

Kane interrupted. "I can't listen to this shit anymore." He threw Rudi a key. "Give them their things, and let them go home."

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I sat in the booth at the diner, hugging my bag, petting it and making mewling sounds.

"Can you stop? People are starting to stare," Beck said, tossing a balled up napkin at me.

I tucked my bag between my hip and the wall, gave it one last longing look and then turned to Beck. "Don't be jealous because I am paying more attention to my bag than you."

He sighed, but his lips curled at the ends and he ducked his head, like he didn't want me to know how much he found me amusing.

Rudi paced outside of the diner, talking on the cell phone he'd retrieved from the club. After repossessing our bags and wallets, Rudi told us he'd buy us breakfast as an apology for the mix-up.

He said he'd explain what he could and while part of me didn't care, since it was over, I wanted to know. Because I knew my best friend would ask fifty million questions and wouldn't believe me when I tried to tell him about my layover.

Rudi walked back in and slid into the booth beside me. He sipped his coffee and clasped his hands together on top of the table.

"I thought you were different guys," he said.

"Different guys?" Beck queried.

Rudi sighed. "See, I was supposed to meet these guys at the hotel bar. The one we met at? Except I saw you two. And you were talking, and I thought... I don't know why I thought you were them. I'd never met them before, just hired them through a service. I called just now and turns out I... uh... got the hotel wrong."

I stared at him. "No offense, Rudi, but I don't think you are super bright."

"Nate!" Beck hissed.

Rudi shrugged and picked at his cuticles. "It's cool. I'm not really that smart."

Beck glared at me. Well crap, now I felt bad. "I'm sorry, Rudi. I shouldn't have said that, but—"

"Honestly, you have every right to be mad at me." He winced. "I bet you were kinda freaked out."

*Understatement right there.* Instead of saying that, I nodded.

"And how the hell did you have no pulse?" Beck asked. "I checked."

Rudi waved a hand. "I have low blood pressure normally so I don't know... maybe those drugs dulled it so much it was too weak for you to find it." He frowned. "Damn, I really could have died, huh?"

I wanted to snap that he could have killed us, too. But whatever. He was buying us breakfast. I could forgive.

As we ate, Rudi explained that he often tattooed flight times and license plate numbers onto his body to keep track of Kane's "shipments". He talked

about it conversationally, like this was all normal and everyone's boss used their body as a way to keep track of important things.

He didn't say what was in these shipments and frankly, I didn't want to know. I scarfed down my omelet and hash browns like my life depended on it.

I had a plane to catch in a couple of hours.

A waitress took away our empty plates and refilled our coffee. Rudi threw a wad of bills on the table and stood. "Well, I better get back, because Asim should be waking up soon." He toed the ground. "It was nice to meet you?"

I raised an eyebrow.

His gaze swept from Beck back to me and then he grinned. "I bet you guys were super-hot dancing together."

"Get the fuck out of here, Rudi," Beck growled, but a laugh rode under that growl and I smiled.

Rudi waved and walked out, that bright, ugly tattoo a blue blur on his swinging arm.

My phone vibrated on the table. The battery had died while it languished in my bag at Trance, so I charged it at our table.

I glanced at the display to see a text from my sister.

*Ready for your flight? Or are you having too much fun in Vegas?*

I texted back:

*Ready. Vegas is boring.*

I lowered my hand to drop my phone back on the table, when my eye caught on the camera app.

My finger hovered and I tapped it. It opened to my photo album, and I sucked in a breath.

"Uh, Beck."

His eyes were on the door Rudi exited, and his gaze swung to me. "Yeah?"

"I think... I think we might be able to figure out what actually happened last night."

He straightened in the booth. "What?"

I winced and turned the display toward him. "I took pics."

We huddled over the table, heads together, and I thumbed through my album.

The first picture was a selfie of me, taken holding a large coffee in the airport before I boarded the plane to Vegas, my aviator glasses over my eyes, full-on duck lips. I chuckled and thought Beck would laugh and roll his eyes but when I looked at him, he had a small smile on his face.

Apparently, I amused him.

I took a couple of photos on the plane. One of my vodka bottle because I thought it was cute.

Another of the airplane magazine because the guy on the front was hot. And another of a woman who wore the brightest shirt I'd ever seen in my life and I wanted evidence for my lawsuit when I inevitably went blind.

Beck watched them all, that smile turning into a grin.

Ok, so I definitely amused him.

I took a couple of photos of the Vegas strip once I arrived from the airport. I definitely remembered that.

And then... we got to the part of the night that was fuzzy.

The pictures were fuzzy too, probably because I was drunk and/or drugged out of my mind.

Half of a face, the gold-green eye unmistakable, the corner of his lips pulled up into a mischievous smirk. Another of me, a selfie, with a blue-tattooed arm over my shoulders.

A blurred shot of the sidewalk with Beck's boots, clearly taken at night.

The DJ booth, the parrot beak poking out, the sleek black catching the strobe lights in Trance.

A photo of Beck, the parrot tattoo glowing on his neck, tongue out, hand raised in devil horns.

I snorted a laugh.

"What the hell?" Beck muttered.

Beck and I on the dance floor of Trance. Both shirtless. Our cheeks smushed together, smiling at the camera, foreheads shiny with sweat. The next picture, I had my tongue down his throat. The lights highlighted the differences

in our hair. My blonde strands shown pale and golden and his dark ones glistened.

“Light and dark,” he muttered.

“We look hot together,” I said.

More blurry shots of us dancing, Rudi mooning the camera. A shot of Beck walking down the sidewalk, with Mac's tail trailing down his back.

“Fucking bird,” Beck said.

Back at the hotel. Our lavish room. Rudi running around naked with Mac flying through the air chasing him, Beck on the couch laughing.

Beck squinted at the picture. “This is insane.”

“I wish I remembered that.” I cocked my head. “Looks hilarious.”

And then that was it.

Our night. Only available for replay in the tiny SIM card on my phone.

I leaned back in my booth, paging back through some of them as Beck took a sip of his coffee across from me. I went back to the photo of us together on the dance floor. Happy and smiling beside each other.

I looked to Beck, but his eyes were downcast, his hands cupping his coffee mug. His shoulders hunched slightly, and he took a deep, tired breath.

My smile died, and I leaned forward, my fingers wrapping around his wrist. “Hey, you okay?”

He looked up and smiled, but it was weak. Not the bright Beck smile I'd become addicted to. “Sure. You excited for your sister's wedding?”

“Yeah, I am.” I tugged on his wrist, and he unwrapped his hand from his mug. I laced our fingers together. “What are you going to do now?”

He kept his eyes on our hands and shifted his jaw back and forth. “Probably find a bartender or waiter job here. I mean, it's Vegas, right?”

“Where are you going to live?”

“There are tons of hotels. I'll get a room until I can afford rent.”

My eyes trailed to his black, beat-up duffel bag in the booth beside him, and my heart ached thinking of him in a seedy hotel room. Alone. Every night.

“What'd you want to do?”

The subject change must have startled him because he looked up, brow furrowed. "What?"

"When you were in college, what were you in for?"

A wistful look crossed his face. "Photography."

A thrill raced through me, a ghost of an idea, whispering words. "What kind of photography?"

His gaze traveled over my face and a small smile appeared on his lips. "Portrait photography. Models. People. I love working with what clothes look best on them and makeup and lighting." And then his smile faded. "I'd hoped to work for a magazine or advertising firm or something."

That ghost was no longer a vapor. It was a full-fledged idea that rose out of my throat. "Come home with me," I blurted.

He jerked back, tugging his arm with it, but I didn't let go. I couldn't let him withdraw his hand because I didn't know if he'd ever give it back.

He stared at me. "What did you just say?"

I licked my lips. "Come home with me."

"What are you—"

"I have a spare bedroom in my apartment. You can stay there until you can afford your own place. Just help with utilities. And grocery shop. I hate grocery shopping. And unloading the dishwasher. That's my least favorite chore." I was rambling now, and Beck's face was blank. "I'm a graphic designer. That's what I do. And I have tons of connections. Hell, sometimes I need portrait photographs—"

"Nate, you have no idea if I'm any good—"

"I know you are, Beck. I just know it."

He blinked, his cat eyes bright and glossy. His lower lip trembled and I had him. I knew it. Just...

"No," he shook his head. "No, Nate, that's crazy. You don't know what you're saying. You're just..." he waved a hand around us, "caught up in this, but if I come home with you, you're going to regret it within hours."

"Don't tell me I'm going to regret it." I scowled.

"You *will*." He clenched his jaw and tugged his hand. I tugged back.

I wanted him with me. I knew it more than I knew anything else. I couldn't let him stay here. I couldn't leave him behind.

I leaned closer. "I'll make you a deal. Come with me to my sister's wedding. Just one day. And if I still haven't regretted this." I nodded toward our hands. "Us. Then you have to come with me. Or at least seriously consider it."

"Nate, this is crazy. I don't have the money for a flight, and I'm not showing up to a wedding uninvited—"

I held up my free hand. "First, I have a plus one. My best friend was supposed to come and then he got called into work. Two, I'll buy your plane ticket. If there's a seat available on my flight, it's a sign."

Beck didn't say anything for a moment, studying my face. "You're crazy."

I nodded. "This is true."

"This is crazy."

"Also true."

He looked again at our hands and then stared out the diner window. I studied his profile, his strong jaw and full lips and those eyes. I wanted more time with him.

I was about to plead, get on my knees, anything, when he turned to me. He bit his lip, a smile breaking through the uncertainty.

And then he said one, single, beautiful word. "Okay."

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## Chapter Nine

I jiggled my leg and stared out the floor-to-ceiling windows of the airport at a taxiing plane. I shifted in the hard seat, wincing at my sore muscles. A woman across the aisle from me stared at my neck. I glared and placed my palm over the love bite Beck had left behind last night. Then I thought, fuck it, I was proud of that bite mark. So I lowered my hand and elongated my neck, letting her look her fill. She rolled her eyes and went back to her magazine.

Nosey broad.

It was hot in here, and I was still a little hung-over.

And I thought now that this might have been a bad idea. A really, really bad idea.

This morning, I'd woken up next to Beck. A gloriously naked Beck, with his face tucked into my neck and his leg thrown over my thighs. I'd wanted to stay in bed and repeat the night before.

Instead I'd shifted out from under him, dressed and gathered my things. Wrote him a note. And then I left.

Now my muscles wouldn't relax, every one screaming at me to go back to him. But I couldn't. I just couldn't.

I pulled out my phone and thumbed through the photos. The first smile of the morning creeping across my face.

We'd had to find a suit for Beck last minute. We bought one off the rack at some department store, and he still looked like a million bucks in that thing at my sister's wedding. I took a picture of him while he tied his tie, head bent as he eyed the knot. The next picture was him flipping me the bird, a smirk twisting his full lips.

I'd laughed and lunged at him.

He'd called me a horny bastard.

I had dozens of pictures of my family. My tearful mom. My proud dad. My gorgeous sister. My ridiculously good-looking brand new brother-in-law. My older brother and flower girl niece. But I flipped through those quickly. I'd look at them again later. Right now, I needed to see Beck.

Shots of Beck at the dinner table, his eyes rolling into his head as he ate his steak. “*So tender!*” he kept saying, and I told him he needed to stop, because it sounded creepy. He’d kicked me under the table, I punched his arm, and then we kissed until someone at the table cleared her throat. Grandma was such a cock-blocker.

Us dancing. Me singing karaoke.

And then shots in the elevator. Blurred because that’s when tongues roved and hands grasped. Clothes untucked.

Then one last one. Beck’s head on the pillow, facing me. A smile on his lips, gold-green eyes drooped in exhaustion and post-orgasmic bliss. If I’d turned the camera on myself, I’d have looked the same, I’m sure. Ravaged. Because I’d wanted, accepted, and loved Beck moving above me, over me, inside me.

I exited out of my album and glanced at the time. Twenty minutes until boarding. My leg resumed its jiggling. I didn’t want to watch the people entering the boarding gate. Because it drove me crazy with every second that passed, and I didn’t see his black hair.

I’d left the note because I’d needed it to be his choice. I didn’t want to have to convince him and plead with him. And I would have. If I’d stayed in that hotel room until he woke up, I would have debased myself to get Aaron Becket to board that plane with me to Chicago.

And maybe he wouldn’t have caved, and it would have been awkward and horrible. Or maybe he would have caved, but would have regretted it later, not being able to think through his choice.

So I gave him the chance. I told him if he didn’t want to join me, that was fine. But then I wouldn’t contact him again. I needed a clean break. I didn’t share in the note that the reason was because I thought I was falling in love with Beck.

But I told him the gate and flight and left his ticket that I’d purchased and printed at the hotel on the desk waiting for him. He just had to make his choice.

I’d be here.

And God, I hoped he made the choice to be with me.

A voice over the loudspeaker announced boarding in ten minutes, and I began to sweat, rubbing both hands on the legs of my jeans.

I pulled my sunglasses down over my bloodshot eyes and slumped in my seat, arms crossed over my chest, staring at the ugly diamond geometric pattern on the carpeted floor.

I let my mind wander, and, when I felt like I was going to come out of my skin, I walked over to the small stand that held drinks and snacks and magazines. I perused the racks, thinking the guy on the cover of muscle and fitness had a great body but he was no match for Beck's face.

I grabbed a bottle of water and remembered how sexy Beck looked when he tipped his head back, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed.

Fuck me, I couldn't even read or drink. I walked away without making a purchase, head down, stomping back to my bags.

Some guy was there in a black baseball cap. In my seat. And I couldn't believe what an idiot I was to leave my stuff behind. I walked faster and opened my mouth—

The head raised and two gold-green eyes peered at me from under the black brim.

My knees almost gave out.

I stumbled forward, arms out to embrace my man, but he stood up and held his hand up, palm out. "No."

I caught myself at the last minute and lowered my arms awkwardly at my sides, wobbling slightly on my feet. "What?"

His jaw clenched and he shook his head. "Don't get all, 'Oh Beck, I'm so glad you came' Hallmark moment with me."

My heart dropped right out onto this ugly carpet. "You're not getting on the plane?" My voice was barely a whisper.

His eyes blazed. "You bet your ass, I'm getting on that plane."

I didn't know what to say, because he said he was getting on the plane, but why did he look so angry?

He glanced around him and then stepped closer to me, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper. "I woke up to an empty, cold bed. Do you want to know how that made me feel?"

I scrunched my lips to the side. "I'm guessing... not good?"

“That’s right, not good!” he shouted, then lowered his voice again. “I like morning sex. It’s my favorite. I don’t like to be surprised and cheated out of morning sex because you decided to go and be all chivalrous and pull this bullshit.” He waved a hand in frustration, but I didn’t care about his words anymore. Relief placed my heart back in my chest and warmed my body. Hell, even my headache lessened.

Beck was coming home with me.

He was still ranting about setting fire to my note in the hotel toilet, and I tried to hide a smile.

Because it was really cute, how angry he was that he didn’t get to get off this morning.

He stopped mid-sentence and stared at me. “Are you laughing?”

A giggle burst out and I tried to cover it with a cough. “No.”

His eyes widened. “Oh my God. No, you’re laughing at me. You bastard.”

Now I ignored my prickly Beck and wrapped my arms around him, hauling him against me. I tucked my face into his neck and laughed.

He stayed stiff at first and then his muscles relaxed. His hands rose at his sides and hugged me back.

“I’m sorry,” I said when I stopped laughing.

He took a deep breath. “When I woke up and you weren’t there, I thought you changed your mind.” He paused. “I didn’t like that feeling.”

“So it’s not because you didn’t get to have sex.”

He chuckled. “It’s a little bit of that.”

I leaned back so I could look at him. “I needed you to make this decision on your own. I know I can be... persuasive.”

He smiled and brushed his fingers along my jaw. “Yeah, but I like that about you.”

The voice over the loudspeaker announced it was time to board. We grabbed our bags and handed over our tickets.

“So, your name really is Aaron Becket,” I said.

He smiled at me. “Yeah.”

“You didn’t lie to me, then.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know why.”

We placed our luggage into the overhead bins and sank into our seats. I rested my head back on the headrest and turned to face him. He did the same and laced our fingers together.

“So,” he said, “I guess what happens in Vegas doesn’t always stay in Vegas?”

I laughed. “You’re the best souvenir ever.”

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*MEGAN ERICKSON is a former journalist who switched to fiction when she decided she liked writing her own endings better. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, two kids, and two cats.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

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