

A romantic couple embracing in a library. The woman has long, wavy, reddish-brown hair and is wearing a light-colored, possibly beige, dress. The man has dark, wavy hair and a light beard, wearing a grey t-shirt. They are both looking down with soft expressions. The background is a blurred bookshelf filled with books.

# *Stuck with my Ex's Brother*

*A forced proximity  
enemies to lovers romance*



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# Chapter One

## Nina

“Oh, thank God you’re here, Sam!” I smile shyly at my boss, Sam Balmain, owner of Harper’s Library, the only one in town. “I’ve been waiting for you. I have a list of everything we’ll need for the fundraiser.”

“Uhh...” Sam pauses at the counter and scratches the back of his head. “There’s something I have to tell you, Nina,” he drawls. “Promise you won’t get mad.”

I narrow my eyes and readjust my glasses to ensure he is fully in focus. “What’s the matter?”

“Can we go to my office?” he asks, already walking ahead of me. “We can talk better there.”

Fearing something is seriously wrong, I follow Sam into the office and sit down. “You’re making me nervous.”

He sighs. “Nina, an emergency just came up for me, and I’ll need to fly out of town to attend to it. I won’t be around to plan the fundraiser with you anymore.”

A startled gasp slips out of my mouth and I stare at Sam. We have been working closely together for four months now, to plan the fundraiser, and it is in two weeks. The event is essential to me, and I thought it was to Sam, too. We are organizing it to raise awareness for autistic children.

“I’m sorry, Nina,” Sam says with genuine remorse. “I was up all night trying to figure this out. I’m sorry but there’s nothing I can do about this.”

Despite my disappointment, I try to assure him that it’s okay. Over the time we have been working together on this, he has put in his best, morally and financially. I’m not going to fault him for something

he cannot control.

“Don’t worry, Sam. I’ll handle it. We only have two weeks left, after all.”

“No.” He shakes his head firmly. “The remaining time is just as important as the months of planning. You need help.”

“There is no one that can help me,” I rely. “And you know I don’t have any friends.”

Sam laughs. “You really should try to be more social, Nina. You can’t hide out in the library all your life.”

“Watch me.”

He throws his head back in laughter for a fleeting moment. “Well, don’t worry, I already called in a favor from a friend. He just flew into town two days ago and needs something to do. He will be able to help while I’m away.”

“Okay.” I actually sigh with relief. “Would this person be willing to put in long hours of planning without breaking down?”

Sam scoffs. “He’s the most resilient person I know.”

“Who is he?”

“Sorry, I’m late.” The outer office door opens, and I hear someone come in.

“Oh, look, he’s here, already” Sam says, rising to his feet.

Sam’s office door opens almost immediately and a man enters.

“Welcome, Asher,” Sam says heartily, “I’ve been expecting for.”

I fix a smile on my face and tilt my head to look up at the person who will fill in for Sam for the next two weeks. Suddenly, the breath ceases in my lungs, and my eyes widen as I see Asher Venus. Suddenly, I’m hot all over, and my heart begins to slam wildly in my ribcage.

Asher Venus is a nightmare in every sense of the word. I know him

because he's my ex-boyfriend's brother. His sleeve tattoo and ear piercings may mark him out as the typical bad boy stereotype, and he really is a terrible person, as far as I know. He's unserious, too playful, arrogant, and boastful.

"Uh-oh," Asher laughs, his cool blue gaze roaming over my body. "If it isn't Nina the Beaver."

"Don't call me that," I snap.

"What?" Sam frowns. "Do you two know—?"

"Sam?" I turn to my boss. "Is this the person you want to stand in for you?"

"Yes." Sam nods. "This is Asher. He's one of my very closest pals. I trust him to do an amazing job."

"I can assure you that I'm better off on my own," I tell Sam. "It's only two weeks. I can do it."

"Nina..." Sam glances from me to Asher, who is still staring at me with a silly smile. "What's going on? Do you two know each other?"

"I've known Nina for years," Asher says easily. "She and Jason used to date."

"Oh." Sam's mouth opens briefly. "Your younger brother, Jason, used to date Nina?"

"Yes." Asher nods gravely.

"But —why's there—" Sam's gaze volleys between us again. "Why does it feel as if there's bad blood? I feel like I can detect some negative vibes."

"There's no bad blood," I start to rush in, but Asher's big mouth trumps mine.

"Nina hates me. She thinks I'm the reason Jason broke up with her."

My cheeks flame with embarrassment, and I glare at Asher, whose

smile only widens.

“What?” Sam gasps. “Nina...”

“That’s not true, Sam, please ignore him.”

“Look...” Asher holds up his tattooed arms and, for a brief second, my attention is drawn to the cord of muscles contracting prettily. “If she doesn’t want me, I can go. I’m only doing this for you, Sam. That’s all. I don’t want any problems.”

“I’m sure Nina is just shocked to see you, that’s all,” Sam says, eyeing me carefully. “She knows how important this project is. It’s bigger than all of us. It’s about the children.”

Now, when Sam puts it like that, how am I supposed to stay stubborn and reject working with Asher? Both men are staring at me expectantly, waiting for me to decide and, suddenly, my head starts to ache.

“When are you leaving town?” I ask Sam.

He glances at his wristwatch. “I’m flying at noon, so I should leave soon. If you and Asher are okay, I can go, now. I’m kind of in a time conundrum here.”

“Okay, Sam, don’t let us keep you.” I stand up and step away from his desk. “You can go.”

He squints at me. “Are you sure? You and Asher will be fine?”

“We’ll be fine.”

Sam turns to Asher and gives him a half-hug. “Thanks for coming through for me, man. I appreciate you.”

“Anytime, pal. Anything for the kids.”

I scoff inwardly. Anything for the kids! As if Asher cares about anyone other than himself!

Sam hugs me briefly as he is hurrying out of the room. “Give me a

call if you need anything, Nina.”

“I will.”

The door of the office snaps shut.

Asher and I are alone.

“Well, you’ve changed...” Asher says, drawing my attention back to him. “You’re prettier.”

I start to walk out of the office, and Asher follows.

“Hey, look—” he grabs my arm, and I jerk away from his touch.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Relax.” His face scrunches in annoyance. “Look, I don’t want to be here anymore than you want me here, okay? But, if we can be a little more civil with each other, we may be able to bear the next weeks. I don’t get why you have to be so touchy all the time.”

“I’m not touchy,” I argue, and then I take a step back to reassess the situation. I’m known for my level-headedness, and I will need it now.

I’m not a generally touchy person, but as far as Asher is concerned, I probably am. He just brings it out in me. But he’s right. We’re only going to work together for two weeks. It’s no big deal. I can do this.

“Okay.” I nod and look into his eyes. “I can be civil.”

“Oh, yeah?” His shapely brows quirk.

“Yeah.”

He holds out his hand for a handshake and I clasp it briefly before dropping it.

“So what do I do?” he asks, looking around. “Sam hasn’t briefed me yet.”

“Oh, that’s fine. Follow me.” I return to the counter in the main library and hop up onto my stool, gesturing for him to take the other



one. He slides right on top without hassle. I grab the pamphlet that Sam and I made, detailing our four-month plan.

“Here.” I hand it to Asher. “We’ve crossed most of our activities out because, as we said, Sam and I have been on this for months.”

“Okay.” He skims the page. “So the rest are the tasks we still have to do?”

“Precisely.”

As Asher settles in to read the pamphlet, I try to occupy myself with work. I’m used to sitting here by myself. It’s strange to have a man’s thigh brushing mine as I work —especially a virile man like Asher. He’s all muscle and sinew. It’s plain uncomfortable.

Two weeks suddenly seems like a really long time.

Asher says I’ve changed, but he has, too. It’s been about eight years since I last saw him, and if I must say so, the changes are... significant. He’s always been tall, but now he’s buff as well. His face is sharper and his blue eyes are more azure than the cornflower-blue hue they used to have.

“Thank you.” Asher slides the pamphlet back to me. “I think I’m up to speed now.”

“Okay. So what would we be doing today?” I test him.

“Overseeing hall decor,” he says, and when I nod, he grins.

“Don’t worry; I’m not slow; we got this.”

“Thank you.” I force myself to return his smile. “Can we chill till about noon?” I ask. “There are some loose ends from yesterday that I need to tie up. I’m sorry if there’s any—”

“Nah, I’ll wait.” He shrugs. “Is there anything you need me to do, elsewhere?”

“No, thanks. I’ll be finished soon.”

“Okay.” He leans back on the shelf, and accidentally knocks off some books.

“Shoot! Those are limited editions.” I fly off my stool to pick them up.

He joins me. “Sorry, it was an accident,” he says.

I reshelve the books and climb back onto my stool. “Try not to touch anything else.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I shut him out and return my attention to work.

## Chapter Two

### Asher

I roll my eyes and honk the horn again before leaning back in my seat. It's a new day, and I should be out doing all the things I want to do in town. Instead, I've been parked in front of Nina's house for the past five minutes.

I'm not a big fan of waiting. In fact, it makes me want to pull my hair out, but I promised Sam that I wouldn't give Nina any trouble, so I'll try to stay civil for two more weeks

Then, I'll never have to see her again.

Don't get me wrong, I don't hate Nina. You have to actually care about someone to do that, and I don't. She used to be Jason's girlfriend and I always teased him about dating someone so eccentric, but that's all. I don't know why she thinks I have a hand in their breakup, which was eight years ago, by the way.

I hear a door swing shut and look out of the side window, to see Nina speed walking toward my car, a remorseful look on her face. Now that she's not frowning or glaring right at me, I see her clearly.

She's...fire. Literally. The sun catches her red hair in a way that sets it alight and creates a halo effect around her head. I've always preferred blondes, but seeing her hair flying behind her as she approaches my car, my mouth falls open at the natural beauty of it.

And when did she become this curvy? She's wearing jeans and a black tee shirt, nothing too serious, but the outfit teases my eyes with her body underneath. I can tell she'd be an absolute delight.

"Asshole." I kick myself as she reaches the passenger seat. This is Nina; I shouldn't be looking at her like this.

"Good morning, Asher." She slips into the seat, smiling apologetically. "I am so sorry I kept you waiting."

I grunt and start the car. We're headed to the malls to pick up some toys for the event, before heading back to the library.

Nina and I do not speak to each other again until we reach the mall. As we're walking in, she turns to me. "I'll head to the toy section."

"I'll meet you there." I go to the plant section to check out what's available, because it's a hobby I want to try for a few weeks. As a tech guy, I spend most of my time working indoors, so I need something stimulating to keep me company while staring at the screen all day.

The mall has a few options, but nothing particularly catches my attention. Jason suggested looking in Home Depot, so maybe I'll check there when I have time. I decide to go to the toy section to help Nina out.

As I'm rounding the aisle, someone bumps into me.

"Oh, I'm—" I notice it's Nina, and my apology gets stuck in my throat because she looks upset. She's about to walk right past me, but I grab her wrist, forcing her to stop.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I ask.

"Let's just go," she says, her head lowered. "We'll come back, later."

"What is wrong?" I put my arms on her shoulder and hold her against the shelves, shielding her with my body. "You didn't buy the toys."

Nina takes a deep breath and forces a smile. "We'll come back. There's a—uhm, there was a man there. He made some offensive comments about redheads. I didn't want to—"

"What?" I frown. "Where is this man?"

"Asher—"

"Come on." I take a hold of her wrist and pull her back down the aisle. I see a man scouting out the toy section. He seems oblivious to us.

“Is that him?”

“Asher, let’s just go.” Her nervous look is all the answer I need, though.

“Excuse me.” I march towards him, finally drawing his attention to us. His gaze slides to Nina before coming back to me.

“You made some offensive comments about my friend,” I square up to him. “Care to repeat what you said?”

“Look, bro...” he raises his arms.

“I’m not your bro,” I growl, staring into his cowardly face. From the corner of my eye, I see Nina approaching us. Her green eyes are glaring daggers at the idiot.

“I’m sorry, Miss,” he says to her. “Please forgive me.”

He’s about to dart away, but I grab him by the collar, pulling him back. “Where are you going, so quickly? She hasn’t accepted your apology, yet.”

“I’m sorry, please. Please.” His gaze widens at my scorpion tattoo and he visibly gulps, his Adam apples bulging funnily.

“Should we take him home to our dungeons?” Nina asks me with a straight face.

“Hmm.” I narrow my eyes. “I think so. We should feed him to the crocodiles.”

“Croc—croc—what?” he croaks, his eyes melting into pure, unadulterated fear. “Please,” he begs Nina. “Please. I’m so sorry.”

“I still think we should take him home to the crocodiles,” I whisper to Nina, and the man begins to shake.

“Please, please, I’ll never make such comments ever again!”

“Let’s give him a second chance.” Nina folds her arms across her chest and juts out her hips. “I’m sure he’ll never insult a redhead like

he did again.”

“I swear I won’t. I promise. To God.”

I let go of him, and he dashes between the aisles and out of sight like a terrified rat.

Nina and I stare at each other briefly before bursting into laughter.

“Do you have a dungeon at home?” I ask.

“Hmm.” She nods. “Full of crocodiles and piranhas for foolish men like him.” She shakes her head. “Thank you so much for that.”

“It’s nothing.” I shrug. “I can’t believe you wanted to leave without getting the toys, just because of him.”

Nina sighs. “I run into men like that all the time and most times I stand up to them, but today, I just wanted to leave.”

“No.” I glance at her. “It’s good to stand up for yourself all the time. I get it though. Sometimes you don’t have the energy, but these men need to be put in their place. And I love your hair by the way. Don’t let him make you feel weird about it.”

Nina giggles. “You love my hair?”

“I do.”

“Thank you.”

Smiling, she joins me in the sensory toys aisle and we select suitable toys to be gift wrapped. After we have finished, we put the toys in the car, and then I head to the library.

“Can you drop the toys off at the library, on your own?” Nina asks. “I’d like to make a quick stop somewhere.”

“Uhm...” The thought of being in the library alone, while Nina runs off somewhere, rubs me the wrong way. I shift uncomfortably in my seat. It’s not like I’ll miss her or anything, but who wants to be alone at the library? Plus, I did promise Sam to always keep an eye on her.

“Where are you running off to?” I glance at her. “We’re supposed to do everything together.”

“I always stop by, to say hi to the kids at the nursery, every Wednesday morning,” she says. “You may not like the scene, so I want you to go ahead. I’ll meet you there afterwards.”

I hesitate for a moment, and then nod. “I’ll come with you.”

“What?” she almost screeches in surprise.

“What is it?”

“You’ll come with me to the nursery?”

“Yes.”

She squints. “It’s a baby nursery with actual crying, pooping babies.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes. And so what?”

Nina laughs. “Okay. Take this next turn, and we’ll be right there.”

When Nina said crying and pooping babies, she hadn’t been exaggerating. I am barely a step into the nursery, when babies’ cries and babble assaults my ears. Nina glances at me, expecting me to react or complain, but I don’t. I know it’s stereotypical to see a man like me and expect that I dislike babies, but the truth is, I love them.

“Nina!” An older woman comes up to us as soon as we walk in. “I was hoping you’d show up.”

“I’ll always show up,” Nina laughs.

“Who’s your friend?”

“This is Asher.” Nina touches my arm. “We won’t be able to stay for too long, because we’re still planning the fundraiser, but how is William? Does he feel better?” They walk toward a cot where a lovely baby is lying asleep.

“He’s so cute.” My heart softens. “What was wrong with him?”

"A few days ago, Diane called to tell me he had a fever," Nina says, lifting baby William out of his cot and holding him against her shoulder.

"He's fine now," Diane says. "I'm so glad."

"Me too." Nina is about to lay William back when Diane smiles at him. "Would Asher like to hold him?"

"No." Nina shakes her head, laughing. "I'm not sure—"

"I'll hold him."

Nina quirks her brows at me. "Are you sure?"

I roll my eyes and hold out my arms to take the baby. He's soft and plump, and I cradle him with my elbows against my chest. Nina folds her arms, staring at me as if I'm labeled Specimen X on a lab table. Diane has drifted away, and I'm rocking William to sleep in my arms.

"Did you think I ate babies?" I ask.

Nina bursts into laughter. "I'm sorry, but yes I might have."

I shake my head playfully. "I don't eat babies, only adults."

Her cheeks turn pink, and I realize she'd taken my words out of context. It's a goofy error on her part, but I capitalize on it just to see her squirm some more.

"I mean, only if the adult asks for it." I wink, and her eyes widen before she promptly glares at me and turns away. I laugh, letting my eyes follow her hasty movements as she walks across the room.



## Chapter Three

### Nina

“Which color palette is good for the hall?” I ask Asher, holding up the colored tiles. There’s white on one end and lilac on the other.

He drops the book he’s reading and walks towards me, his eyes squinting at the tiles in my hands. It’s been one whole week of working with Asher and, to be honest, it’s been nice. We still clash, because he likes to make dry, thoughtless jokes; however most of the time, he’s completely easy to work with and thoroughly brilliant.

He stops in front of me and stares at the tiles for a few seconds.

“Lilac.”

“I think so, too,” I tell him. “Sam thinks white will be more neutral and accepting.”

“Nah.” Asher leans on the windowpane, and the refraction from the sun rays hit his eyes, liquefying then to a blue that causes my breath to stop in my throat.

“Why did you choose lilac?” I ask.

“We have to consider the children,” he says. “The fundraiser is about them, so any decision we make should go towards helping them feel better. Lilac isn’t too bright, so there’s no overstimulation. It’ll evoke a calm, physical feeling.”

He’s right, but I didn’t think he would know all that. That’s the surprising thing about working with Asher. Everything I thought I knew about him was just smoke and mirrors. He’s a different person, and in a better way than I thought.

“Thank you,” I tell him. “We’ll go with lilac, then.”

He pushes off the wall, and his shirt lifts, showing me a peek of a

milky white slab of muscle. Oblivious to the turmoil his body causes me, Asher glances at his wristwatch.

“It’s past one p.m. Aren’t we going to the clinic?”

“Oh yes. I’ll call the matron now.”

As Asher walks back to the counter, I pry my gaze away from him and dial the matron in charge of the clinic’s pediatrics’ department. She will be one of the keynote speakers on the big day, and we’ve been trying to drop an invitation in to her for weeks.

She had already confirmed her presence with Sam and me, but courtesy demands she has a copy of the invitation as well, every speaker receives one. But she’s a busy woman and very hard to reach.

“Hello. This is Tracy at the Office of Mrs. Agnes Gumptra. How may I help you?”

“Hi. It’s Nina, here. Mrs. Gumptra said to call today to arrange the drop off of her official invitation to the fundraiser.”

“Oh, yes. Uhm...we’ll be available at three. Is that a good time for you?”

“Sure. We’ll be there, then. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

I hang up and walk back to the counter. I climb onto the stool beside Asher, who’s still fixed on his book. I find it cute that he only reads storybooks with animated drawings.

“Her assistant said we can come in at three.”

He glances at me. “Okay. That’s fine. We’ll wait.”

“Yeah.” I turn my attention to the laptop before me, pretending to work when all I’m really aware of is his gaze on my face. Do I have something stuck on my chin? Why is he staring at me like that?

“Do you still speak to Jason?”

“What?” I meet his gaze again.

“Jason. My brother.”

I narrow my gaze at him. “Why do you ask me that?”

“I’m just making conversation,” he says, lifting one shoulder. “No ulterior motive, Nina.”

He sets the book on the counter and leans forward. “I don’t talk to Jason that much anymore,” I answer, folding my arms.

“Bad blood?”

“You ‘d know, wouldn’t you?”

Asher squints at me fleetingly. Then, his lips pull up in a sexy smile that causes butterflies in my belly.

“Let’s iron something out, Nina.”

“What?”

“I had no hand in whatever happened between you and my brother,” he says. “I promise.”

“I know,” I let out a short breath at the refreshing honesty in his eyes. It seems as if we are having a real conversation, for the first time. “But it didn’t help that you always called me eccentric.”

Asher’s eyes flash with regret for a few seconds. “I’m sorry about that, too.”

I suddenly feel the urge to lighten the mood.

“I was a little eccentric...”

Asher bursts out into a laugh. “You were. With your short pigtails and oversized pinafores. You were seventeen, for goodness sake.”

I can’t help laughing with him. “You know, sometimes I go through my old pictures and cannot imagine what was going through my head, back then.”

Asher shakes his head. "I prefer your style now."

I scoff. "Don't patronize me." Don't get me wrong, I love my style, but I know the type of women Asher likes, and it's not the ones in jeans and a t-shirt.

"What?" Asher leans back on his chair. "You don't believe me?"

"Not really," I giggle. "I only wear jeans and T-shirts. It's not that stylish."

"That's why I like it," he says. "It's fresh and natural. Nothing too serious, and it looks the bomb on you."

"Well, thank you."

"Let me sneak in another compliment before you get all touchy on me again..." he ventures with a smile.

I roll my eyes, and he says, "I really, really love your hair. It's mesmerizing."

I am surprised. Growing up, I was the butt of many a joke and constant teasing because of my hair, so I hated it. I only started loving and caring for my hair as a teen. Now, to hear Asher—an attractive male—compliment my hair makes me happy.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." He picks up his book and promptly returns to reading.

We arrive at the pediatric matron's office at three. Asher hangs back in reception to wait for me, as I walk towards the counter to speak to the assistant.

"Oh, look at all those tattoos," a woman says to her friend as she walks past me. "He's so scary."

"I wonder why people ink their skin and have so many piercings. He seems like such a danger," her friend replies.

“Hey, good afternoon. Tracy.” I reach the assistant’s desk, but the women’s words are still tugging at me. As upset as I am that they chose to talk down a stranger they have never interacted with, I know I’d be hypocritical to say I didn’t judge Asher by his tattoos before, as well.

“Yes. How may I help you?”

“We needed to drop this off for Mrs. Agnes Gumpta. It’s the official invitation for the fundraiser for autistic children.”

“Okay. I’ll make sure she gets it. Or would you prefer to give it to her yourself? She has a minute to spare and—”

“No,” I answer firmly but politely. “She’s already confirmed her attendance.”

“Okay.”

I leave the counter and trace my way down the hall, catching up with the two women.

“Excuse me,” I say.

They stop laughing and look at me.

“Hello.” the first one who started the conversation about Asher says. “Do I know you?”

“I overheard you talking about my friend with tattoos,” I answer, and their eyes immediately narrow defensively. “I’m not here to fight,” I say hurriedly. “I just want to clear some things up. Tattoos don’t define a person’s character. Check out some of the most dangerous criminals in the world, and you’ll see they’re free of tattoos.”

The women exchange glances. I know they probably think I’m crazy, but I continue.

“He’s a great guy, actually, as are millions of others with tattoos, who also have to bear the weight of people’s judgment just because they choose to draw on their skin. Please, be more kind with your

words going forward.”

I walk away, feeling a little embarrassed for my emotional rant but I also feel much freer. I may not be Asher’s biggest fan, but I simply will not stand for the decimation of his character, especially since I am guilty of doing it myself, before.

I walk into the reception, and Asher rises to his feet.

“What took so long?” he asks as we head toward the exit.

“Just something I had to take care of.”

## Chapter Four

### Asher

“Wow. It’s beautiful,” Nina coos, walking into the hall, where the fundraiser will be held in a few days.

I keep my excitement in, but it’s nice to see the results of all of our efforts finally with our own eyes. The hall exudes sophistication and elegance, and the lilac color theme is breathtaking. There are no seating arrangements as yet, but we’ve been assured that the decorators will handle that tomorrow.

“Do you like it?” Micheal asks, smiling at Nina. He’s the person in charge of decorating the hall.

“Oh, yes, I love it.” Nina hugs him. “It really puts things into perspective for me, because I’ve been dying to see how everything is coming together. When you said we could come to check, I knew I had to get right over here.”

She leaves her arms around Micheal’s back as she talks, which makes me feel uncomfortable. I turn away from them and walk further into the hall, focusing on the lighting and gauging if it’ll work for the event.

“Asher?”

I turn to look at Nina.

“Come and look at this,” she says.

She has taken her arms from Micheal, but I can’t shake off the feelings of jealousy I got from seeing it. Lately, I’ve been working through some weird emotions where Nina is concerned, and I’m starting to think it’s because we’ve been spending so much time together.

I like Nina, but being attracted to her isn’t on my wish list.

“What’s up?” I reach her side.

She’s holding Micheal’s work pad, and she tilts it in my direction. There are some seating arrangements on the screen, and she scrolls through a few. “Which one should we go for?”

I review the slides. “I think this is perfect.” I choose the tables with floral arrangements and little ceramic structures on top.

“Okay.” Nina nods at Micheal. “We will go with this one, number two.” It’s so endearing when she does this, ask for my advice, and she doesn’t even know it. Nina trusts me explicitly and doesn’t hesitate to accept my choices, no matter how mundane the subject.

“Okay.” Micheal nods. “you can be sure that we’ll give you exactly what you want.”

“I trust you to do that.” Nina giggles. “Look at what your team did with this place. And the color theme is amazing.”

Micheal’s eyes flush with pleasure as he watches Nina. “Thank you.”

My phone rings, and I grab it out of my pocket, glad for the reprieve, because it’s becoming increasingly unavoidable that I may knock Micheal’s teeth out for just looking at Nina a little too long.

“I’ll be outside when you’re done,” I tell Nina before walking away to take Sam’s call.

“What’s up, my man?” Sam calls into the phone.

“I’m good. How are you?”

“I’m fine. How are things going?” He asks. “It’s been a while since I checked in with you.”

“It’s going well.” I slip into the driver’s seat of my car. “We’re at the hall and it’s amazing. Nina will send you some pictures after we leave.”

“I’m really glad it’s all coming together. I’ll be back in town in two days; so, hopefully, I can let you off the hook then. Have there been



any problems?"

I know that's what he's asking. After all, he witnessed my confrontation with Nina the other day when I arrived at the office. But things have changed, especially on my end. I'm seeing Nina in a new light, and it's bringing up all sorts of weird feelings, but especially guilt. Because it doesn't matter how many years have passed, Nina used to date my brother.

"Asher?" Sam says. "Are you and Nina having any problems?"

"No," I answer quickly. "We're past all that."

"Awesome. So, see you in two days?"

"Yeah, see you."

I'm just getting off the phone when the passenger door opens and Nina climbs in, bringing a gust of fresh air and peace.

"Ooh, I'm excited." She nudges me. "I'm finally feeling the party. Everything's coming together. All the invitations have been sent out. The food has been taken care of. I'm pumped."

"Hmm." I start the car. "So, back to the library?"

"Yeah."

I drive in silence for a little while, before Nina breaks it. "Is something wrong, Asher?"

"No." I shake my head.

"Okay."

When we reach the library, I kill the engine and turn to her. "Seems as if there's nothing else I need to do around here?"

"Why?" She frowns. "Are you leaving?"

"Yeah."

"Fine." Something flashes across her eyes, and she takes her bags

brusquely and pushes the door open.

I grab her arm and pull her back into her seat. "What's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me?" she almost shrieks. "What's wrong with you? You're acting weird."

"Nina..." I run a hand across my face. "You were the one flirting with Micheal back at the hall, not me."

She narrows her eyes. "Flirting with Michael?"

"Nina, please."

She leans back in her seat. "So...you were jealous?"

I look at Nina, ready to deny everything I feel, but there's something in her eyes that arrests my attention. We stare at each other for a long moment within the confines of the car. Then, as if pulled by a magnet, I reach for her just as she comes to me.

My fingers delve into her glorious mane and I angle her head, before meeting her lips the way I've wanted to do for a while now. Nina melts into my arms, as our lips move softly over each other's. There's no rush; just gentle affection that I can feel in my bones. Her lips are soft and pliant, and I almost give in to the strong urge to pull her into my lap.

I let her go, but I left my fingers remain in her hair, enjoying the feeling of the strands against the pads of my fingers.

"Asher..." Nina shakes her head. "We shouldn't..."

"I know."

Her gaze falls to my lips and a strangled moan escapes her as she delves in for another kiss. This time, it's a lot more passionate, and we cling to each other like lifelines.

"Nina, I like you." The statement spills from my lips before I can control it.

Nina freezes and she dislodges herself from my arms. "Asher, I like you, too, but..."

"I know."

I stay on my side of the vehicle, tasting her on my lips and the phantom softness of her hair on my fingers, but I dare not touch her anymore.

"I have to go." Nina stumbles out of my vehicle, almost falling over as she hurries into the library.

I tear out of the driveway and head home, my head aching from thinking a million thoughts all at once. On one hand, I feel extreme guilt. Not for the kiss, but that I enjoyed it a little too much. If Nina called me back right now, I'd take another. That's how much I enjoyed it. It's not the sexual part of it that excites me; it's the closeness to her, the taste of her lips, and her essence.

But this is Nina we're talking about!

I don't know how I manage to drive home safely. When I get inside, I fling my keys onto the table and drop onto the couch in movement. If I had known this would happen, I'd have rejected Sam's request.

I didn't think Nina was a threat to me in any way. I've been close to many different types of women and never caught a lick of feelings, so I'm certain I'm not feeling this way just because we've been spending time together.

Nina is simply a breath of fresh air. I love spending time with her, and I realized that quickly. We didn't even have to speak. Just being in her presence while I read works her magic.

I reach for my phone and call Jason, because the guilt is crippling. I feel like such a bad big brother, and it's worse because I don't regret it at all.

"Asher," Jason picks up immediately. "Miss me already?"

"Ah, shut it," I smile. "How are things going over there?"

"You know, same old, same old. When are you coming back?"

Although Jason and I live in the city, two streets away from each other, we hardly ever have time to see each other. I came back to town because I needed a break, and it had been years since I was here.

"I don't know, I'm still settling in. Things are different."

"So I heard."

"Guess who I ran into today?"

"Who?"

"Nina."

Jason squeals. "Oh, my goodness. Did you speak to her? Did she ask about me?"

"Why would she ask about you?" I sit up.

"No, I mean, we used to date."

"Used to," I answer. "In the past. About eight years ago."

Jason pauses, and I realize I'm overreacting, so I try to backtrack. "She didn't mention you, Jason."

"Too bad," he sighs. "I saw a picture of her a few months back, and damn, she's so hot. I can't believe I fumbled her. But she had no prospects at the time; you used to tease her, remember?"

I shut my eyes against the torture his memories inspire. "I remember, regretfully. But she's cool now. That's in the past."

"Damn," Jason chuckles. "Maybe I should come back to town, you know? I am on a break."

"You said you wanted to go to Hawaii."

"Yeah, but it looks like there's better prospects in town," he answers. "I'll fly in tomorrow."

I hang up the call and throw my phone to the other end of the

room.

Shoot!

## Chapter Five

### Nina

The hall is bubbling with people and activities, and I cannot be happier than I am now. This is exactly how I envisioned it, and it's perfect. Mrs. Gumptha has just returned to her seat after a powerful speech entitled Beyond The Diagnosis: Thriving With Autism.

Her speech made it clear that she has had a great experience working with many children, and I'm glad we chose her as a speaker. Our event is to build awareness of autism and, so far, we have got that down to a tee.

Sam, who arrived two days ago, is now on the stage, speaking about why parents must be the front runners for championing change for autistic children. Although I'm trying to pay attention, I'm distracted by thoughts of Asher—again.

I've only seen him once, when he walked in a few hours ago, and although I've been trying to catch him, I haven't managed it. We haven't spoken to each other, since that kiss we shared in his car. And given how quickly I ran out of his vehicle Asher did not return to the library. I had planned to speak with him the following day, but Sam flew in early, and I didn't see Asher again.

It hurt that he seems to be able to forget about everything, even after claiming that he likes me and kissing me like that. I want to address that with him. I like Asher, but thoughts of Jason are holding me back. It's been years since I last thought about Jason, but after being with Asher all this time, I can't help but wonder if I'm committing an error, feeling so strongly about the brother of someone I used to date.

Yet...I've been unable to stop thinking about Asher.

“—bring on stage, my right-hand lady, with whom I've been working so closely for the past four months. Nina Hart!”

As the hall erupts in chaos, the spotlight swings into me and, suddenly, I wish the ground would open up and swallow me. Sam knows I'm extremely shy and that I hate public attention, so why is he doing this to me?

I rise slowly to my feet, and my walk to the stage seems never-ending. Sam is standing on the dais, looking splendid in a black suit. He stretches out his hand to help me up onto the stage.

"I'm sure everyone knows Nina," he says into the mic. "She is a silent soldier and has worked far harder than I have to ensure this project runs smoothly. All without any interference."

I stare into the crowd, keeping a smile on my face, despite the war going on inside of me. There are at least seventy people in this hall, and all have their eyes trained on Sam and me. Thankfully, the crowd is a friendly one and it strengthens me to see the smiles on their faces.

"Nina doesn't like crowds, but it'd be unfair to close this event without acknowledging her, and her hard work. She's the backbone and structure of this whole thing, and I want to show my appreciation her for everything openly. Thank you, Nina."

The crowd erupts into another round of applause. Then, I hurry back to my seat, waving and smiling at everyone. I can only once I am back relax in my seat, away from the limelight. Sam, who thrives on the attention, is still on stage.

"There's someone else I should acknowledge," Sam says. "Two weeks before this event, I had to fly out of town for an emergency and, fortunately, a friend of mine had just flown into town for some rest. I reached out to him in a fix, and he immediately picked up the helm and stepped in to work with Nina. That standup man is Asher Venus!"

The crowd erupts in another round of applause, and to my surprise, Asher gets up onto stage.

He looks utterly dreamy in a maroon suit that hugs his tall frame, and I almost swoon in my seat when I remember how wonderful his

lips felt against mine.

"I'd like to say something," Asher says, taking the mic from Sam.

The hall instantly goes silent.

"Uhm, hi, everyone," Asher says with a smile. "Uhm, first, I'd like to thank you all for being here today. None of this would have been possible without people, and we're glad you all decided that you wanted to learn about autism and how to improve the lives of all the beautiful children who live with it."

The crowd claps again, and I join them because that's such a beautiful intro. Who knew Asher was so eloquent? I learn something new about him each day. It's amazing.

"I'd also like to say that we should all learn something from Nina." Finally, he rests his gaze on me, along with the rest of the crowd. Suddenly, I feel like a fish out of water.

"She's selfless, compassionate and completely in tune with the needs of others. In the space of a few weeks, she's taught me that the greatest joy is to be found by giving it to others, because I only saw her at her happiest when she was doing something for others. I hope everything we've learned in this hall stays with us for a long time, so we can live better lives than those we came in here with. Thank you, everyone."

Minutes after Asher steps away from the mic, I'm still reeling from everything he's said about me. The event finally ends, and it's time for socializing and final goodbyes, yet I'm still stuck on Asher.

"Nina!" Someone steps up to me, arms stretched out in a hug. I've never met her before, but her face is wreathed in smiles and she seems genuinely friendly. "You're the star of the show," she says.

"Oh, no, I'm not." I playfully wave her off.

"My name is June, and I want to thank you personally," she says. "I have two kids with autism, and this is the most beautiful event I've



ever witnessed.”

“Oh.” Tears spring to my eyes. This is precisely why we do this. “I’m so happy to hear that.”

“And the gifts,” June says. “So well thought out. My kids will love them. Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome. I’m sure you’re the best mother, and your children are so lucky to have you.”

After June leaves, more people come up to me, to thank me for the event. With each interaction, my joy grows. Sam and I had hoped for an impact like this, but it’s even bigger than we imagined.

“Nina!” Sam is suddenly beside me. He lifts me into the air and twirls me around, making me laugh. “We did it!”

“We did,” I agree. I’m happy for Sam, because this event was financially draining, and he did it without expecting anything in return. “It’s all you, Sam.”

“Oh, come on.” He waves me off. “You know, after that first day, I wasn’t sure you and Asher would work, but look how it turned out.”

“We had to suck it up.” I shrug nonchalantly, as if the mention of Asher’s name does not set butterflies on a rampage in my belly. “We thought about all the kids that would benefit from this event and decided they were worth more than our disagreement.”

“Good idea. Maybe we should—”

“Mr. Balmain!” Someone calls from behind me, and Sam glances back at them.

“Alright, I’ll catch up with you at the library. I’ve got to see to this.”

“Okay.”

I’m about to walk past the stairway, when a door to the left opens and I’m dragged into the room behind it.

I'm about to scream when I see it's Asher.

I freeze, taking in his appearance, on a personal scale now that we're alone. His jacket has been discarded, and he's unbuttoned the first few buttons on his shirt, displaying a muscled chest that teases my senses.

"Nina—" he steps close to me, and pushes me against the wall, caging me with his body. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too."

His fingers sink into my hair, tilting my head up to his face. He kisses me softly, and I melt into his arms again, but only for a moment before I push him away.

"You didn't come back to the library," I say accusingly. "And you didn't contact me, either."

"Because you rejected me," he says. "I didn't want to push too hard."

"I didn't reject you, Asher..." I lower my head. "I felt guilty. Jason."

"You think I didn't?" Asher tilts my face up. "He's my brother."

I want to scream that we should not be doing this then, but I'm far too gone to care. Still, I wait for Asher to take the lead if he wants me.

"Nina, I've thought about every way this won't work," he says. "I never thought I'd feel this way about you, or any woman in fact. But these past few days without you have been torture. I couldn't stop thinking about you."

He walks around as he speaks as if the emotions are too much for him to stand still.

I grab his arm to stop him from pacing the room, and he turns to me with a tortured expression. I see the concern in his blue gaze, and I can't help but rub my fingers across his forehead to clear the worry lines.

"Asher, it's been eight years," I tell him. "I don't feel anything for

Jason anymore. I promise.”

“I know.”

“And I understand the guilt. I felt it, too, but that’s normal. We can talk to Jason, and everything will be fine.”

I wrap my arms around his waist and pull him close to me. Asher relaxes into my arms and claims my lips again. I’m just settling into the kiss, when the door swings open. We jump apart as someone walks in.

To my absolute shock, I see it’s Jason.

“Jason?” His name slips from my lips.

Time stands still as the three of us stare at each other. Jason’s face is frozen with shock, but he finally breaks the silence.

“What’s going on here?”

“Jason.” Asher steps forward. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

“What?” I turn to him with a frown. “That’s such a lame thing to say. We were kissing, Asher.”

“Nina.” Asher turns to me. “I can handle this, I promise.”

“I didn’t even know Jason was in town,” I answer. “Did you know?”

“He flew in last night.”

“You knew he was at this event?” I ask, incredulous.

“No.”

I stare at the brothers, before shaking my head and walking out the door. I don’t know how to feel, but I’m unhappy with the situation. I don’t owe Jason any apology for kissing his brother, but I also don’t want to involve myself with Asher if he can’t speak up for me where Jason is concerned.

I may not be experienced with men, but I know enough about them.

If Asher cannot get over his guilt, then there's no way we can pursue what we have between us. I understand he has a greater responsibility toward Jason than I do, because he's Jason's older brother. But if his affection for me doesn't trump that, then maybe this isn't worth it.

There are still people in the hall, so despite the tightness in my chest, I force a smile onto my face and continue to play the perfect host.

## Chapter Six

### Asher

It's been one week since the event, and I'm miserable.

I haven't seen Nina, ever since she walked out of the hall that evening, and my entire life feels like it is in upheaval. It's as if I'm suffering withdrawal symptoms, and I badly need a fix or I'll die.

Jason was extremely shocked by what he saw, so shocked that he left without a word right after Nina did. I tried to speak to Nina afterwards, but she asked whether I'd spoken to Jason and, when I said no, she refused to speak to me again.

I left the event feeling torn.

For days after, I felt my loyalty tug between Jason and the girl whom I've now come to admit that I've fallen in love with.

Today, I'm choosing Nina.

I cannot imagine spending one more second wasting away, when I can be happy with her. Of course there's fear in my heart that it may be too late for me to make amends and get her back, but I'll be damned if I don't try.

First, I have to speak to Jason, though. I know he's upset since he hasn't tried to reach out since the event, but this is about me, now. I cannot put my happiness in his hands.

As I drive over to Jason's house, which is only a few streets away, I mull over how our conversation will go. The outcome of our discussion has no impact on my wanting to with Nina—because I'd do that regardless—but as Jason is my only brother, I would like to preserve my relationship with him.

I ring his doorbell and a few seconds later the door opens to reveal my brother in sweatpants and a black t-shirt. He eyes me for a second

before stepping away from the door.

“You look like hell,” he says.

“Gee, thanks.” I walk into his apartment and take the single couch.

“What’s up?” Jason sits across from me, his legs pulled onto the center table.

“I have to talk to you about Nina.”

Jason doesn’t respond, and the silence stretches between us like a taut wire. I sit up in my seat, holding my brother’s gaze. “Jason, I know you and Nina had a thing in the past, but—”

“It wasn’t a thing,” Jason interrupts. “We were in a relationship. For nearly two years.”

I take in a deep breath. “I know.”

We stare at each other again, and I give him some time, before I continue.

“It’s been eight years, Jason, and I swear to you that I had no intention of getting together with her. It just happened.”

“How?” Jason asks. “Where did you two meet?”

“Through Balmain. They were organizing a fundraiser, and he wanted me to stand him for a few weeks. You heard the story; you were at the fundraiser.”

“I came in quite late,” Jason says. “I heard you talking about the event on the phone the previous night, and since I was home alone and bored that day, I decided to drop by. But it had already ended.”

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. “I really like her, Jason,” I confess. “I want to be with her.”

Jason shakes his head. “No.”

“What?”

“No, you can’t,” he insists. “I want her. That’s why I came back to town.”

All the breath whooshes out of my lungs and I lean back in my seat. For a moment, I am stunned, until suddenly Jason bursts into laughter.

“I’m kidding, bro.” He crosses over to my couch and pats my shoulder playfully. “I’m just messing with you.”

Relief floods through me, but I remain speechless, even as Jason’s laughter rings in the air.

“If you truly like her, it’s okay,” he says. “As long as the affection is mutual, I’m fine with it. Honestly.”

“Are you sure?” I get to my feet, eager to rush to Nina.

“I’m sure. Go and get your—”

I’m out of the door before Jason can say anymore. As I head to the library, I call Sam, hoping and praying he picks up and tells me he’s not there. I would like to see Nina alone.

“Asher, what’s up?” He picks up on the first ring.

“Hey, um, are you at the library?”

“Yes. Do you need something?”

Ugh. Shoot!

“Wait...” Sam drawls. “If you’re looking for Nina, she’s not here. She has a date today, so she didn’t come in.”

I slam so hard on my brakes, my tires screech on the asphalt, and I’m grateful there’s no one behind me. “What? A date?”

“This is interesting,” Sam chuckles. “Are you—?”

I hang up the call and change my route to go to Nina’s house. I’m hardly give myself time to park in front of her apartment before I spring out of the truck and hurry to the front door.

“Nina!” I bang on it. “Nina!”

The door opens to reveal Nina in a long floral gown that highlights her gentle curves and shows how freaking beautiful she is. Her eyes widen when she sees me.

“Asher?”

“Nina, please, can I come in?”

She folds her arms across her chest. “I have a date. I can’t talk right now.”

“Nina, please.” I grab her arm. “Just a minute.”

She stares at me for a few seconds, before stepping away from the doorway and letting me in. “What do you want, Asher?”

“I want you, Nina.” I hit the nail on the head. “I want you, and I know I’ve been slow to say that, but it’s what I want. You. I’ve been miserable without you, Nina. I swear.”

Nina walks away from me, shaking her head. “Asher, I’m not sure about this. I feel as if you’ll always worry about Jason, and I can’t deal with that.” She turns to me. “I want someone who is sure they want to be with me. I think you should forget about this and—”

“Forget?” I bark. “Forget, Nina? You think I haven’t tried? If it were that easy, I wouldn’t be here, Nina. I can’t forget. I can’t forget about you. I can’t forget how you make me feel.”

“Asher...”

“I’ve tried, Nina.” I walk towards her, stopping only when I am close enough to see the spattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. “I don’t want to run away anymore when I can be with you instead. I’m that sure about you.”

I reach for her, and surprisingly, she lets me take hold of her. My heart softens, and I kiss her forehead.

“I want to spend more time with you, learn all about you, and do



everything with you.”

She pouts. “Are you sure about that, Asher?”

“I’ve never been more sure about anything in all my life.”

A beautiful smile creases her cheeks. “I want you, too,” she says. “And I am ready to do this with you.”

I claim her lips again, and this time, it’s the fiercest kiss we’ve ever shared. Our passion ignites, and I tear my lips away from her mouth and kiss down her neck before nibbling on the soft skin on her shoulders. Nina slips the dress off her shoulders, and my mouth falls open at the sight of her expanse of creamy white skin.

“What about your date?” I ask her. “Can you call him and cancel? And maybe ask him never to call you again?”

Nina laughs so hard that her head falls back.

“What?”

“It was a personal date,” she says. “I wanted to go potting.”

Relief and delight flood through me. I lift her into my arms and make my way into her room. It’s dainty and feminine, but I don’t have time to look around as I lay her on the bed.

“So there’s no one else?” I ask.

“No one but you.”

“Let’s keep it that way.” I kiss her shoulder while gently tugging the dress down the length of her body. She’s wearing lacy white lingerie, and for a moment, I’m transfixed by her beautiful skin and lush curves. I knew she was hiding a killer body beneath the jeans and shirts I loved so much.

A sweet moan escapes Nina’s lips as I unclasp her bra and feast my eyes on her beautiful mounds. Her breasts are sprinkled with freckles and peaked by two pink nipples that beg for my touch. I lower my head slowly and run my tongue across one, teasing it into a rocky

pebble.

Nina moans and arches her back off the bed. I gently push her back down before sucking the sweet bud into my mouth, teasing and pulling at it, until she's writhing like a snake beneath me. I clasp the other nipple between my fingers, gently twisting until her sweet moans fill my ears, intoxicating me.

She's like a sweet delicacy, and although my basest desire is to rush through the meal for quick satisfaction, I want to draw out my treat and savor it for as long as I can.

I pop her nipple out of my mouth and then kiss down her belly, my fingers stroking her skin as I seek out the most intimate part of her.

"Asher." My name slips from her mouth in a whimper, and I almost go crazy with passion.

She's wet with desire, her panties soaked, and I can smell her as I kiss up her shapely calves to her thighs. I spread her legs and hook my fingers around the crutch of her panties, pulling them aside to reveal her wet, pink folds.

I gently kiss her there, and her whimper switches into a scream. "Asher, please."

"Relax, sweetheart, you'll get there," I promise.

Her fingers delve into my hair, and I suck her clit into my mouth, applying a little pressure, enough to have her grabbing the sheets and curling her toes.

I tease her with my tongue, shutting my eyes as her taste bursts into my mouth, sending me into a frenzy. I can't wait to bury myself inside her; until she completely belongs to me, and I to her.

"Asher, please," Nina moans. "I need..."

She may not be able to express her deepest needs, but I know what they are, and I will fulfill them. I sink one finger into her heat and gently bite on her clit, sending her over the edge. She dissolves into a

beautiful mess beneath me and, while she's in the throes of this, I climb over her, working my fly.

Her arms circle my neck, as her eyes slowly drift open, the throes of an ebbing orgasm dancing prettily in her beautiful green orbs.

"Keep looking at me," I murmur, aligning my erection with her wetness.

Her mouth falls open when she feels me inside of her, but her eyes remain on mine. I sink slowly into her warmth, my body vibrating with intense pleasure as she tightens like a vise around me. I push deeper inside her, my head swimming with a pleasure so great. I've never felt this before.

"You feel so good, sweetheart," I groan. "And you look so beautiful."

"Thank you," she moans, her face scrunching with pleasure when I'm finally buried deep.

"Do you feel good?"

"Yes."

"Okay." I adjust my position and begin to move on top of her, slowly arching and pounding until she's unable to control her limbs anymore. She falls apart beneath me, her breasts swinging with every thrust. Her body is flushed with desire, and I cannot simply imagine how one woman could be so perfect.

I feel an orgasm beginning, and I know I have to take her with me for her second time. I reach between our bodies and tease her clit gently, coaxing another orgasm from her.

"Oh, Asher," she cries, shattering into an endless wave of pleasure. I come with her, my limbs melting like jelly underneath an earth-shattering orgasm.

As I regain my composure, I pull a naked Nina in my arms and kiss her forehead. There's a shy smile on her face, and she won't look at me.

“Nina?”

“Hmm?” She opens one eye slowly, and I chuckle.

“This isn’t a joke,” I tell her. “I know what I feel for you, and I’m absolutely sure about you. Okay?”

“Okay.” She nods happily. “I feel the same way, too. Thank God Sam had an emergency that day.”

“I know, right?” I laugh. “And to think I almost walked away.”

“Me too.”

We have a lot to talk about. I’m only in town for a few more weeks, before I go back to the city, but there’s no way I’m leaving Nina behind. Either I return here, or she comes with me. But there’s time...

“Get dressed.” I slap her butt playfully.

“Asher,” she giggles. “Why?”

“Because we’re going potting, just like you wanted.”

“Really?” Her eyes flush with excitement. “It’s been so long since I did it.”

“You have a boyfriend now,” I remind her. “We’ll do everything you’ve always wanted. Now, go get ready.”



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