

Chapter 200 Cotton Candy Clouds

Alexander

I brought my coffee cup to my lips, sipping mindlessly while continuing to stare forward at the computer screen. The surprise of the cup being empty snapped me out of my state of hyper-focus.

I set the empty mug down on the desk and glanced at the time. It was almost five a.m.

My eyes were dry and my neck was sore. I stood up and closed my eyes, then blinked them a bunch, while turning my neck to one side then the other, and then stretching and cracking my back. I paced over to the picture window and stared out into distance, at the shadowy outline of the forest and the indigo sky above it.

When my eyes relaxed and refocused, I grabbed a bottle of water, chugged it and returned to work.

It was only a few minutes later when I spotted something that made me hit pause.

I zoomed in and leaned forward. And as I studied the image, the hair rose on my arms and the back of my neck, and my heart started pounding.

It was just a little mound of red rocks. In the middle of millions of other little mounds of red rocks.

But... it's so hard to say exactly how I could tell, but this particular pile of rocks looked like it had been moved. Like it had been tampered with and rearranged by intelligent hands, laid in a deliberate pattern that unsuccessfully tried to mimic the true chaos of undisturbed nature.

"Fucking shit," I heard myself muttering over and over. I scrubbed the video forward and back. Slowly then fast. Zoomed in and out and took dozens of screenshots. And got more and more excited every second that I worked.

I was in disbelief. There was still so much drone footage to go through. Was it really possible I'd already found one of the entrances to the vampires' nest? After just four hours of working on this on my own?

I got up and paced the length of my study. I walked all around, circling the room, walking the perimeter of it like I was measuring the walls with my footsteps. Thinking. Thinking.

I tried to mindlink Kayden, but... seemed like he was asleep. I called him on the phone, woke him up and told him to get his ass over here.

We had some planning to do.

Fiona

"You are up early." I gave Nina a hug and a cup of coffee that I'd prepared ahead of her arrival, at her request.

I'd been surprised to wake just after sunrise to a text from her, asking if I was up. Usually, early mornings were the one time of day when my night-owl friend actually seemed to sleep.

She sipped her coffee before answering. "Mm. Thanks Fi, this is good. And yeah, I just couldn't get back to sleep after Kayden woke up to Alex calling him about an hour ago. Man, he jolted out of bed and flew out of the room so fast. It was quite an alarming way to be awakened."

My friend and I sat at the table to drink our coffee together, enjoying the orange light of sunrise pouring in through the window. I held the baby on my lap, bouncing my knee intermittently to keep her entertained.

"Have you been taking a lot of time off work recently, Nina? I've been wondering about this. To be here and available to help us out so much, you must not be doing many, or any, shows recently."

"Yeah, I took a few weeks off."

"You doing okay, money-wise?" Maybe that was a personal question, but Nina and I were like family. And I wanted to make sure that all the babysitting I was asking of her lately wasn't causing any difficulty in her life.

"Yeah, I'm all good. I've been saving for months and have a good chunk set aside. I won't have to go back to work for a while."

"And your employers are okay with you taking the time away?"

Nina clamped her teeth together, making a "yikes" expression. "They're pissed, actually. But..." She shrugged. "They'll have me back in a heartbeat, as soon as I'm willing. My shows bring in a lot of money for the club. I have a lot of fans."

"Fans. That sounds both exciting and like a lot of pressure."

Nina nodded. "Yeah. That's one way of putting it." She stared out the window with a dreamy look on her face.

I got the feeling she had more to say, so I just waited quietly. After she finished the last of her coffee, she finally did continue.

"You know, Fi... Sometimes I just want to run away and leave 'Elektra' far behind. Start a whole new life somewhere where no one knows me."

"Really?" I had no idea she'd been feeling like this.

Nina shook her head, tearing her gaze from the window. She met my eyes and I saw a blush in her cheeks. "Nah. Not really. I don't know. It's just a fantasy, something I daydream about sometimes. You're right, what you said; sometimes the intensity of it all just gets to me. Sometimes I just feel tired. These are only thoughts, Fi. You and lil' b—" She pointed at Lexi with her eyes— "You two are the most important people in the world to me. You are my family. I'd never run out on you."

The smile I gave Nina probably looked sad. Because I was sad to hear her talking like this.

"I thought you liked your work?" I asked. "All those videos you've sent me—I know you have worked hard on your craft. And you are really amazing at it. I mean, it scares the hell out of me to think about you doing the acrobatic stuff, but you're incredibly talented."

"I do like it. I love it, actually. And I'm not doing lap dances anymore. That was the worst thing, and the only way I actually made money, back when I first started dancing for work. But I've got a big stage now and a cool act on the hoop. All that I really do love. But also... I know these places I'm working at can be dangerous. Sometimes I like the thrill of all of it. Sometimes I love the thrill. And the attention. But other times I worry it's gotten a little out of control."

"Is this because of Kayden?"

"What do you mean? What about Kayden?"

"You're not questioning your work just because he was weird about it?"

Nina narrowed her eyes. "What do you mean, weird? Did Alex say something to you? Did Kayden say something to him?"

Oh, dear. Suddenly we were in high school again.

"Okay, Alex said just one thing to me. He said Kayden felt some shock about learning you had what he called 'a full-blown alter ego.'"

"Huh." Nina squinted one eye, thinking hard. I couldn't tell if this was news to her or not. After some contemplation, she shrugged and said, "I don't know. If Kayden has a problem..." She looked away, her voice trailing off. "I don't really know what Kayden and I are doing anyway. I care about him a lot, but yeah, we are very different people."

I had more questions on the Kayden topic, but I didn't bother asking. I could tell from Nina's energy that she would not have any clear answers.

As far as I could tell, Nina's emotions were a swirling haze of multicolored cotton candy clouds. She had no idea how she felt about her part-time lover. Or about her life in general, it seemed. She was just waiting for the skies to settle on their own. Waiting to see where the wind would carry her.