

5 Competition

I sat on the bed and stared at the credit card Nicor had given me. I needed that money, but I suddenly began to wonder if I hadn't gotten myself engaged in some kind of shady business. Fine, the fact that Detective Monroe had no idea who Calvel was could have a simple and reasonable explanation. Maybe this Calvel was new or recently transferred. Or maybe he was off duty, working in some other department, and he saw police cars and decided to stop and ask if they needed help... That would sound reasonable, right?

I collapsed on my bed and groaned. Certainly, if I had relied on common sense, I probably should have assumed that there were no such things as policemen recruiting girls to work as waitresses in a high-end club just when they desperately needed a well-paid job. Actually, I should have put Calvel right next to Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny... except that he existed, and now I had real money in my pocket and a credit card with ten thousand dollars on it.

I groaned again and slapped my cheeks. "Nala, get a grip! They don't force you to do anything illegal! You are serving drinks and getting big money from tips. Don't ask questions, and everything will be just fine."

Of course, this must have been a dream job for many diploma-less young women. I was going to work only three nights a week, and I was still going to get a better salary than the ones I received in the convenience store, at the food market, and in the delivery company altogether. I felt as if I had won the lottery. Miss Bad Luck finally had luck on her side...

I couldn't recall if I had ever been excited about going to work. No, such a thing had never happened. Yet, I was more than excited for my second night at Regale Sanguis. Of course, my agitation had nothing to do with my enthusiasm for serving drinks and everything to do with the mysterious owner... and my embarrassing dream with him as the main lead. I knew that it was stupid and that my sudden infatuation was ridiculous, but I couldn't help it. I hoped to see him again tonight.

"Adriana's got a day off, but don't worry, we'll take care of you," Carol, one of the friendlier waitresses, informed me.

She had just finished putting on her shimmering makeup that made her golden-brown complexion look stunning. Her twin sister, Carrie, stood next to her. They looked identical and identically mesmerizing, and if it weren't for the fact that Carrie had her black hair tied up, I would have probably never gotten their names right.

I had just finished putting on my dress when I heard one of the girls running into our dressing room, screaming. Then she stopped in the center of the room and started laughing and jumping for joy. My lips curled into a nervous half-smile. "What's with her?" I asked, glancing at Carol and Carrie.

The twins sighed, crossing their arms over their chests. "That's Merissa." Carol pointed at the still-jumping-and-laughing short-blond-haired girl. Judging by Carol's unenthusiastic tone and Carrie's rolling eyes, I figured neither of them was fond of her. "Merissa has been pestering Nicor for weeks now, and I guess he's finally assigned her to the VIP floor," Carrie explained.

"The VIP floor?" I repeated.

"Yeah, there's a row of private VIP rooms on the upper level. That's where most of the girls want to be assigned," Carol clarified.

"Why...? Because of celebrities? Do famous people come here?" I might have been asking dumb questions, but the VIP section sounded to me like a place for rich assholes.

Carol shrugged. "I think it's about the money. Big tips, you know?"

"Plus, the girls serving upstairs always look so... satisfied when they finish the job. Like they were high or something," Carrie interjected.

My head snapped in her direction. "Do you think that they're giving them drugs... here?" I could barely hear my own words due to my thundering heart.

Carol laughed and shook her head. "No, they don't do that here. This place serves alcohol only. Nicor and the owner are very strict about it."

"So, what are you talking about?" Merissa suddenly decided to join our conversation. She walked over to Carol and shot her a sly grin. "Jealous?"

Carol ground her teeth and stretched her lips into a thin line. "Congratulations, Merissa. You've finally got what you wanted."

Merissa chuckled, nonchalantly covering her plush lips. "Not quite, but I WILL have what I want."

"Which is?" I asked before I could stop myself.

Merissa turned to me and smirked. "I want Ash. I want him on me, inside of me. I want HIM."

I blinked a few times. "Who?"

Carrie sighed. "She meant the owner, Ashtar Malachious. Some of the girls heard that Nicor called the owner Ash a few times."

I frowned and glared at her. Her words turned on a bizarre type of possessiveness within me. I didn't even know why I reacted like this. I didn't even know that guy's name until a second ago, but the fact that she would probably spend the entire night close to him was seriously pissing me off.

"What's up with you? Do you like him?" Merissa snorted. "Hate to break it to you, honey, but a guy like Ash would never be interested in"—she examined my makeup-less face and yet-to-be-brushed hair—"a charity case like you."

"Careful, Merissa," Carol hissed, placing her hand on my shoulder and stepping in front of me.

"Yeah, be very careful," Carrie added. "Nala is Nicor's favorite."

"I am?" My eyes widened as I looked at Carrie, but she ignored me, keeping her cold stare on Merissa.

"They organized an additional recruitment, and she was the only one Nicor picked," Carrie continued. "Some even say that the management settled this recruitment just for her."

Breath caught in my throat, and my lips awkwardly parted, but Carol watchfully clamped her hand over my mouth before I could jeopardize her sister's statement. Then she shifted her attention back to Merissa, glaring at her. "So, watch it. Unlike you, Nala IS special."

I kept my lips sealed as Merissa's eyes narrowed at me. She was seething, but she didn't dare say another word. She just pointed her finger at me, huffed, and walked away.

"What the hell was that?!" I groaned when the irritating blonde was long gone. "Why did you tell her all that weird stuff about me?!"

Carol shrugged and snorted. "Because it's fun to mess with her. Besides, she will think twice before saying anything stupid about you now."

My lips twisted into an angry smile. I knew that Carol and Carrie meant nothing bad. Nonetheless, all my instincts were telling me that what they told Merissa would soon come back to bite me in my curvy ass. I wasn't looking for trouble, but I was almost certain that trouble was going to find me soon.

I found myself staring at the upper floor and that railing, where the mysterious owner—Ash—stood the last time our eyes met. That place remained empty, and that sight filled me with a strange restlessness.

"No matter what Merissa's plans were, the owner rarely comes here," Carol whispered to my ear, startling me.

"W-what? I wasn't... H-how?" My panicked mumble turned her assumptions into certainty.

A smug smile stretched her full lips. "I've been watching you. Every time you pass by this spot, you sigh."

I frowned. "I didn't sigh! I never sigh!"

"You find him attractive, don't you?" Carol ignored my protests and chuckled.

My mouth opened, and I stayed silent for a second before murmuring, "I guess... maybe... a bit."

Her chuckles turned into a snort. "It's not a crime, girl! Although, if he were illegal, many would gladly break the law."

I gave her a thin-lipped smile. "Truthfully, I don't even know what I'm doing. It's just that... when I worked here on my first night, I saw him looking at me," I admitted. "It was intense."

Carol's eyes widened, and so did her grin. "Now I feel as if I didn't lie to Merissa at all, but I shouldn't be surprised."

I laughed nervously. "Why would you say that?"

She placed her hands on my shoulders and looked deeply into my eyes. "Because you are fucking gorgeous! With your green eyes, golden hair, and all that curves, you look like a mystical fairy from fantasy books!"

My laughter deepened, but at the same time, a blush heated my cheeks. The last time someone complimented me was eons ago. I wasn't used to hearing anything pleasant about the way I looked. My mind needed to savor that moment for a minute before it produced a faint reply. "Thank you," and then I added hesitantly, "of course if you meant that fairy thing as a compliment."

Carol giggled. "Of course I did. Anyway, forget about Merissa. You should just..." She trailed off and looked up. I followed her line of sight and gasped. Ash was there again. He was leaning against the railing, just like before. Only this time, he was having a conversation with a tall man with long blond hair. I saw his lips moving as he, most likely, responded to whatever the man next to him said, but his eyes were fixed on me. A sudden surge of heat burst through my body.

"Holy fuck!" Carol squeaked. "He IS staring at you!"

I turned my eyes to her and felt panic rising within me as if the fact that she said it out loud made it twice as real and disturbing. Unhealthy excitement drew my attention back to him, but when I looked up, I froze. Merissa decided to crawl out, she was currently swinging her hips toward Ash and his blond-haired friend. God! I wish I could just go there and punch her! My anger rose with every second she stood next to him, close to him... too close!

"Nala?" Nicor's voice almost made me scream.

I turned toward him and smiled dumbly, as if he hadn't just caught me staring at his boss. "Yes?"

He shoved a tray with two drinks into my hands and grinned mischievously. "Bring those upstairs to Mr. Malachious and his friend."

I stared at him in disbelief. He did it on purpose, didn't he? Irritation flooded me. There were a million things I wanted to tell him at that moment, but I kept it all to myself and nodded, keeping that dumb smile plastered to my face.

Walking upstairs had never been a greater struggle than when I made my way to that fucking balcony. My knees were weak, and the frantic rate of my heart sounded like an early signal of a heart attack. With only three steps left, my gaze drifted to the right side, where Ash stood. Our eyes met, and he extended his hand as if he was reaching for the tray.

"I'll take that." Merissa showed up in front of me, pulling the tray from my hands and giving me a gentle but accurate push.

I held my breath. I was losing my balance. One of my heels bent at an awkward angle. Idiot! I was such an idiot! I tried to catch the railing, but it was too late. I was falling! I was about to break my arms, my legs, or my neck!

I landed sooner than I expected, or rather, my falling stopped as the back of my head crashed against something firm and large. A second later, I felt someone's arm wrap around my waist, helping me stabilize my feet. I glanced back at my savior. Nicor smirked at me. "Well... that was fun."

Fun was the last thing I would call it. My heart was still thundering against my chest. I looked up at Merissa. She stood at the top of the stairs, holding MY tray in her hands. Rage increased within me. It hummed in my veins, making me tremble. Then I felt that I wasn't the only one trembling—the entire club quaked. My eyes shifted to the crystal chandelier right above Merissa's head.

A heartbeat later, the chandelier fell.

Too close

Breath caught in my throat as I watched the steel construction fall where Merissa stood. It might have lasted less than a second, but time slowed down for me as it happened. I felt a sharp burst of wind brushing against my skin just before a hundred glittering crystals crashed against the floor. Horror widened my eyes as I tried to notice Merissa among the pile of dust. Then I found her lying on the floor on the left side of the stairs, almost unharmed.

I exhaled with something close to relief, but then I froze, thinking about another person who stood near her. The dust fell, and I saw Ash standing next to the spot where Merissa was lying. He seemed unfazed,

brushing off the dirt from his suit jacket. God... Even in a situation like this, he looked impeccable and mouthwatering.