

CHAPTER 010: The Strippers Are Naked

An hour later, we're at the club.

Finn's hand grips mine as we squeeze past red velvet curtains and into a room soaked in neon and sin.

The music is so loud, I feel it in my ribs. Bass thrumming like a second heartbeat.

"Here," Finn says, tugging me to a booth near the edge of the stage.

We drop onto a red couch, and I glance up just in time to watch a woman flip upside down on a pole, ass in the air, hair skimming the stage. She twirls like gravity doesn't exist, her boobs free and proud and bouncing to the rhythm.

"Oh my god," I blurt. "The strippers are naked."

Finn turns to me, smirking. "You expected them to be clothed? Where's the fun in that?"

I stare.

Everywhere I look, it's a carnival of debauchery. Lingerie and skin. Glitter and curves. Bodies grinding on laps, men tipping bills with trembling fingers. Moans lost in bass. Champagne flutes clinking beside thighs in fishnets. It's chaos. Glorious, naked chaos.

And I don't know why I feel so... alive.

"This is way better than I thought it'd be," I say, eyes still scanning, unable to stop.

Finn stretches his arm along the back of the couch. "Want a lapdance? I'll pay. Just say the word, and I'll call one over for you."

"No, no. Not yet. I want to feed my eyes a little."

"Mhmm. Alright..."

His tone is teasing, but when I turn to look at him, his eyes are elsewhere—locked on a girl across the room who's dancing in slow circles, blowing kisses his way.

I keep looking at the side of his face. His profile tonight is... aggravatingly attractive. The lighting softens his cheekbones and puts this strange glow on his skin.

My thighs press together instinctively, and I hate myself a little for it.

There's something about this place—it smells like lust and liquor and latex. It hums with temptation. It breathes. And I'm breathing with it.

If only Finn would give me the kind of attention he's giving that naked goddess across the room, maybe I'd get lucky tonight.

Ugh. What is wrong with me?

"Want something to drink?" Finn asks suddenly.

"Huh?" I blink. Only now do I notice he's waved down a server in fishnets and a leather harness.

"A drink, yes," I say quickly. "I'll have whatever you're having."

"You sure? I take my bourbon neat."

"Immorality, remember?"

He laughs. "Right. Good thing none of us are driving."

As the server disappears, Finn's eyes move right back to his stripper of choice.

I sigh. Loudly.

And then my phone pings.

It surprises me. No one texts me this late except my mother, my sister, or sometimes work. I glance at the screen, expecting Harper, my supervisor, to be bitching about a deadline or Wes from project management begging to finally take me out on a date.

But it's a new number.

'Look what the cat dragged into the club,' the text says.

My heart flips like a fish on cocaine. 2

'Who is this?' I type, even though I have a good idea what the answer is.

'Your partner in wedding sabotaging.'

Oh, for fuck's sake.

'How did you get my number?'

'Finn. He gave it to me when he begged me to pick you up from the airport.'

I grit my teeth as my eyes flick upward, scanning the club—over the stage, beyond the bar, up to the VIP section. And there he is.

Knox Hartley.

Waving his phone, screen lit like a beacon. A strange man is seated beside him, sipping scotch, attention fixed on his phone's screen.

Knox smiles. Then blows me a kiss.

I want to melt into the floor. 1

Or throw my drink at him.

Preferably both.

Just then, mine and Finn's drinks arrive. I take mine with shaking hands and try to pretend everything's fine.

"Your brother's here, Finn," I mutter, keeping my voice low.

Finn straightens and looks where I'm directing his gaze to.

"Knox?"

"Yeah. Up at the VIP section."

Knox raises his glass in a mock toast.

"I'm not surprised," Finn says flatly. "These are the kind of places you'd find him."

I turn to him, eyebrows raised. "Really? You don't find it strange that we're literally in the same club, and you're judging him for being here?"

"The difference is we don't come here all the time. We drop by once in a while like normal people." 1

"Right."

My phone pings again.

‘Hope you enjoy the distraction.’

Distraction?

I glance up.

And I see her.

A lady striding toward us in black heels and little else. Her eyes are locked on Finn.

She stops right in front of him, smiling like she already owns his soul.

“You’re Finn, right?”

“Umm...” He straightens. “I am.”

“That gentleman over there”—she nods toward Knox—“paid for a lapdance for you.”

My mouth drops.

I look up, and Knox is watching me.

This is a performance.

Just for me.

He wants to break me.

Finn grins. “That’s very generous of him. But I’d prefer if you gave my friend the dance. She’s never had one before.”

My face bursts into flames. "No, no, Finn. Go ahead. It's your present. I know you want it."

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah."

He shrugs, delighted. "Alright then."

And then she's on him.

Literally.

The dancer straddles him like she was born for it, pressing her perfect tits to his face and grinding her hips in slow, cruel circles. Her fingers tangle in his hair. She bends and whispers something into his ear, and he laughs.

I'm a big girl, I chant in my head. I can watch the man I love get a lapdance.

I can handle it.

I can—

No, I can't.

This is totally fine. Come on, Sloane, I tell myself. This is what friendship is about, getting out of your comfort zone. Besides, any negative reaction I give would only excite Knox, who's watching me intently.

He's trying to get to me.

Well, congratulations, asshole. It's working.

The dance gets more intense. Legs wrapping around Finn's torso. His head tipped back in bliss. Her hand grazing—

Nope.

Screw this.

"I have to use the restroom real quick," I say, standing up so fast I nearly spill my drink.

"Alright," Finn mumbles. "I'll be right here. With this beautiful woman."

Of course you will.

I practically run.

The restroom's hallway is surprisingly empty, bathed in a crimson glow like something out of Dante's *Inferno*. I find the door and shove it open.

Then I head to the sink, staring at myself in the mirror.

This is becoming a habit. Running into bathrooms to gather myself.

Pathetic.

But I can't even cry because it's not sadness I feel. It's rage. Embarrassment. Maybe a little jealousy.

I'm breathing hard.


And then I hear the bathroom door slamming shut. Then a click. Someone's just locked it.

I spin.

He's standing there, all six-foot-something of danger and bad ideas.

Knox.

He leans back against the door like he owns it. Dressed in head-to-toe black.

"Hello, Kitten," he says. 



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