

Negotiation

"What was that for?"

"So, she knows I didn't forge it."

"You punched me in the throat. It hurt like a b***h but nothing like the way my balls need an ice pack."

"You cornered me and lifted me off the oor. I was defending myself."

"I want you to kiss it better."

"As if."

He pointed to the front of his neck just below the Adam's apple where a red mark still lingered. "This. Kiss it better."

"Not in a million years."

"Kiss it better or I'm going out there to your father and telling him how you crashed my date last week."

"Go ahead and I'll tell him how when I was sixteen and you were twenty-three you, Odin and Anderson came to the coffee bar where I was working and made me cry by humiliating me in front of the customers in the store for not doing your coffee right even though it was perfect."

"You were a shitty barista, and I paid nine bucks for the coffee you f****d up."

"I didn't f**k it up. You caused a scene to humiliate me."

"Kiss me better or I'm going out there."

"Why?"

"Because I know you'd rather get stung by an ogre and it gives me f****g joy to make you capitulate."

"No."

"Does Daddy know about the time in university when Odin and I snuck into your dorm room and found you fooling around with your roommate? The androgynous looking roommate with a d**k you told your parents was a girl, in your all girls dorm which was really a coed dorm?"

The only reason they hadn't nished their prank was because Odin swore his retinas were burning from seeing her naked and riding reverse cowgirl and Cruz nearly carried him back out of the room. It was one of the last pranks they'd played on her.

She jumped up and quickly pressed her lips to his neck. "There. Done."

"Uh-uh," he shook his head and then lifted her again smirking when her feelings on his manhandling were displayed by her wriggling. "Do it right. Kiss it better."

"You're an asshole."

"No doubt."

She pressed her lips to his neck and closed her eyes as the scent of his cologne wafted into her nostrils. Damn him for being hot despite being a giant butt plug. She counted to three and then pulled her head back looking away from him.

He whispered in her ear, "when you go to sleep tonight, Ladybird, I want you to think of how much you are regretting right now you didn't accept the offer to see my impressive c**k and suck my balls. I hope you have wet dreams, and you wake up right before you come."

"I hope I hit your balls hard enough your sperm count is permanently lowered."

He set her on her feet. "You really are mean."

"And you really are a prick. Thanks for the signature." She took the paper copy of the contract and folded it and shoved it into her pocket of her jeans.

"I have plans tonight. Let's meet tomorrow evening after work."

"Can't." She shook her head. "I was supposed to run errands tomorrow on my lunch but now I'm meeting Marsha. I'll have to run them after work, but I already scheduled things to do after work so it's going to take that much longer to get it all done."

"Tuesday, I have a meeting with a client coming in from Hong Kong and we're meeting for dinner." He rubbed his forehead. "What if we did a lunch date Tuesday? We can get the rest one out of the way like it's normal for us to meet for lunch."

"You have my number now." She waved to his phone. "Send me a text and I'll check my calendar to see what time lunch works best on Tuesday."

"Fine."

She started to walk away from him, but he pulled her back.

"I don't trust you."

"Feeling is very much mutual." He didn't trust her, but she managed to get his signature, and he hadn't even read the one-page document. i***t. She was going to promo the hell out of her book with his perfectly waxed chest on full display. She wondered if she could get a life-sized cutout of him sent to his office on the harbourfront. Even if this book only sold one copy, she was making sure every bookstore from Vancouver to Halifax was given a life-sized cutout of Cruz Hawley in b**m gear.

"I think I want my own contract."

"Bring it to lunch on Tuesday. I'll sign it. We made a deal. Three dates."

"Four. Don't f**k with me."

"I know, I know. It's written in a text. I'll do the four dates."

"Have you really been to a b**m parlor?"

"Yes. There is one which is exclusive on Granville. I've been a couple of times."

"What's your kink?"

"Watching," she made it up.

"That's it?"

"I'm barely ve-four. Do you really think I want some big guy beating me with a whip? No thanks."

"There's more to a s*x club than whips and chains. I'm starting to think you've never been."

She rolled her eyes and pulled up her email and found the one which confirmed her membership, which was required when she did her research. She took delight in the way his eyes widened and then narrowed.

"Jesus, this says you've been a member since you were nineteen!"

"So. I was legal age."

"How old were you when you lost your virginity?"

"f**k off," she pushed his chest as she turned away from him and started walking back to the patio. As they drew closer to the table, she spoke loud enough everyone would think they were arguing over his suggestion she put laxatives in his coffee. "I didn't do anything to your coffee. You're so stupid. I was nowhere near your cup."

"I don't believe you." He followed her.

"You're so stupid if I wanted to die, I'd scale you like the mountain you are and plummet to the level of your IQ."

"Wow. Mature." He pushed his coffee cup aside and took hers from in front of her plate. "I'll use this."

"Go for it, Shrek."

"Enough," her father cut in. "Nobody poisoned your coffee, Cruz and don't give her ideas." He shot his daughter a look. Changing the subject he smiled, "Odin was just telling us Cruz how you developed a new AI feature for the cardiovascular device your company is producing. Your father must be enormously proud."

"He is but not proud enough to stop hounding me to quit my daydream and join his company. He still thinks I'm building gadgets in the basement." He chuckled and shook his head. "My company actually made more last quarter than his. He was livid."

"I think it's remarkable you made your own way in this world."

"Jesus Dad," Odin scoffed. "It's not like he didn't have start up from his family. He was a millionaire a hundred times over when he started his research, and it wasn't like he was applying for government grants."

Presley noted the way Cruz stiffened at the words, and she knew he was pissed but she couldn't stop herself as she looked at her brother, "oh shut up, Odin. You can't wipe your ass without funding from Dad. You haven't worked in two years because you coerced your secretary. Whether with backing or without, at least Cruz has made a successful business for himself. You were given every opportunity possible, and you squandered it with your puny d**k. Now you sit at home every day, playing video games. Stop belittling your henchman's accomplishments simply because he exceeded you in every f****g way possible."

"God, are you looking to f**k my best friend, Presley?"

"Nope. I don't like him any more than I like you, but it doesn't mean I can't respect his success. You're just a sad little man who can't do anything on his own and because your friends are accomplished it makes you feel smaller than you already are."

"f**k you." Odin hissed angrily.

"No thanks. For the record, both of your friends have clearly surpassed you in almost every aspect in life. They left Vancouver and made themselves top of their elds. What is you do again?" She tapped her bottom lip, "oh, right. Nothing. Loser."

"Seriously, Dad. You're going to let her talk to me this way?"

"Enough, Presley. Your brother has been facing challenges."

"Because he can't control his misogyny. I'm surprised he's not running a little incel group. Have you verbally harassed anyone lately? A woman at the gym? The clerk at the grocery store? A barista?"

"Presley, I said enough." Gavin said brusquely.

"Fine but can I say one last thing?" Presley smirked at her brother, "you're the only person at this table who doesn't have a real job, earn a real income, or make at least six gures. You're a trust fund baby but s'all you'll ever be until you grow up and pull your prejudiced head out of your ass."

She stood up from the table and sighed, "I'm sorry, Mom and Dad but I think I'm going to head home now. I have a ton of laundry to get done." She shot a look at Odin, "I'd rather handwash my dirty underwear than look at your face for a minute longer."

"Sweetie don't go." Her mother held her hand. "I won't see you for --"

She cut her mother off with a warning glance, "Mom. Seriously. If I have to stay here another minute, I'm likely going to put my fork through his face."

"You're such a baby." Odin elbowed Anderson who was sitting next to him quietly. "Am I right?"

She looked at Anderson, "tell me something, Anderson. Do you treat Sloane as bad as Odin treats me? No. You don't. In fact, you would probably pound the f**k out of a man who even made her cry. Yet, you come to my family's house and sit back and smirk while Odin berates and belittles me."

"You were giving it back as well, if not better than he was." Anderson defended himself after clearing his throat.

"Kind of sad when the minute I walk into a space where the three of you are seated, my immediate response is tactical defense. I think it speaks to the character and personality of the men at this table. The three of you should be ashamed for the torture you've put me through my entire life."

Cruz stood up looking at a notification on his phone, "I need to go. I'll walk you out."

"Cruz, man, I thought we were going this afternoon?"

"Sorry," he shot Odin a look clearly not meaning what he was saying and evidently pissed about Odin's earlier diss, "my head of tech advancement has messaged with a concern in the lab. I need to go check it out." He reached out and shook her father's hand and then motioned to Presley. "I'll walk you out."