

The Heart System #Chapter 211 - Read The Heart System Chapter 211

Chapter 211: Chapter 211

She rolled her eyes, but there was no real anger in it. Just fond exasperation. She grabbed the shampoo, squirted some into her palm, and started working it into her hair.

"Hey," she said softly, "I knew this kind of thing would happen the second I signed up to be your side piece. I'm not mad."

I kissed her slow and grateful. "You're the best. Not a side piece. Every single one of you. You know that, right?"

She smirked, rinsing suds from her hair. "I know. Now think fast, genius. How are you getting out of here without Ivy seeing you naked in my shower?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Easy. You go out first, tell her you need her to grab something from your bedroom—phone charger, whatever. I'll slip out while she's gone. Then you do the whole 'Hey, look who stopped by to fix the keyboard!' routine."

Delilah nodded, already turning off the water. "Smooth. I love you, Evan Marlowe."

I kissed her one last time, soft and lingering. "I love you too."

REPUTATION SYSTEM (LVL 11)

=====

VILLAIN ██████████ HERO

=====

Betraying your friend:-15

After we both took shower and dried ourself, she wrapped a towel around herself, unlocked the door, and called down the hall in the most casual mom-voice ever:

"Ivy, honey, can you grab my charger from the bedroom? The long white one?"

"Yeah, sure!" came the reply from the living room.

Delilah cracked the bathroom door, shot me a quick wink, then slipped out. I counted to ten, grabbed my clothes, and tiptoed barefoot and dripping through the hall. By the time Ivy's footsteps sounded again, I was already outside, shirt half-buttoned, hair plastered to my head, boots yanked on.

Two minutes later the front door swung open.

"Hey, look who's here!" Delilah called, voice bright as sunshine, now in a loose sweater and leggings. "Evan came by to fix that keyboard after all!"

Ivy appeared behind her, controller in hand, eyebrows raised. "Wow, you're soaked, dude."

"Yeah, it's pouring like hell out there," I said, shaking water from my hair for effect. "Ms. Komb texted me about the spacebar acting up again. Figured I'd swing by."

"You came this fast?" Ivy asked, squinting suspiciously.

I shrugged, casual as hell. "Was literally in the neighborhood."

Ivy groaned dramatically. "Please, for the love of fuck, fix this damn keyboard, Evan. I've got a paper due tomorrow and this thing keeps eating my spaces."

"I will, I will, don't worry," I laughed, stepping inside.

Ivy rolled her eyes and marched ahead toward the living-room desk.

The second her back was turned, I reached out and delivered one quick, silent spank to Delilah's ass. She jumped, bit her lip to stifle a giggle, and shot me a look that said we were so getting away with this.

We both grinned like idiots.

_____)
- Sexual Activity Completed

=====

Partner: Delilah

EXP Gained: +175

Reputation-Bad Bonus: +15

Star Rating: 4.1 ★★★★★

Reason: -



Damn. Damn. Damn. Fucking Delilah with Ivy right there had been unreal, but my cock was officially on strike. It didn't hurt exactly—just a deep, sweet ache, like I'd run a marathon with my dick. I could've sworn I'd dropped a kilo just from how much I'd cum in the last twenty-four hours.

- Evan Marlowe (Lvl 11)

=====

- Age: 21

- Height: 180 cm

- Weight: 74 kg

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- EXP:  362/2970

The Bad Reputation bonus was trickling in, but if I ever went full villain and kept railing Delilah behind Ivy's back, it'd probably skyrocket. Tempting... but no. I didn't want that. Neutral reputation felt a lot cleaner.

I collapsed face-first onto the couch. "I'm dead. Oh my god."

Minne padded in from the kitchen, apron fluttering. "Master, welcome home."

"Hey, beautiful," I mumbled into the cushion. "Any chance you could massage my forehead? It's trying to kill me."

"Of course, Master." She smiled softly and moved to the head of the couch, leaning over me. Her small, warm hands settled on my temples and started working in slow, perfect circles.

I groaned, eyes sliding shut. "You're a fucking angel, Minne."

"Ms. Nolin made me practice on her for hours," she said proudly, thumbs pressing just right along my hairline. "I got really good."

"That you did."

Nala stepped out of the master bedroom, hair loose, still in her work blouse but sleeves rolled up. She looked like the weight of the world had landed on her shoulders. Without a word she flopped onto the opposite couch and exhaled like she'd been holding that breath for hours.

"Hey," I said, cracking one eye open. "You okay?"

"Yeah," she muttered, rubbing her temples. "Just... exhausted. Thought I'd nap, but my brain won't shut up."

"Mole still eating at you?"

"Board's losing their minds. Stock dipped three percent already. Chaos."

Before I could answer, three sharp knocks sounded at the door.

Minne bounced over and opened it. A second later, a girl sauntered in like she owned the place.

She was short—maybe 5'2—tonal mint-green hair cut into a messy wolf cut, roots showing dark. Ripped black crop top that barely contained her perky tits, no bra, nipples poking through the thin fabric. Low-rise cargo pants slung so low the waistband of her lime-green thong peeked out, and the front... fuck. The pants were tight enough that the outline of her pussy was unmistakable, a perfect little cameltoe pressing against the fabric. Every step made the seam ride up just enough to tease.

She caught me staring for half a second and smirked, half-lidded hazel eyes glinting.

"Oh," Nala said, sitting up straighter. "Emma. Hey. You could've texted."

Emma ignored the greeting, gaze sliding from Nala to me, then back. "So this is him?" That lazy, knowing smirk widened. "The guy you won't shut up about."

Nala cleared her throat, cheeks pink. "Emma, Evan. Evan, Emma."

I pushed myself upright, trying to look normal. "Hey. Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," she drawled, voice low and smoky. Her eyes flicked down to my lap for a split second—like she could tell I was half-dead down there—and her smirk grew.

She turned to Minne, who was practically vibrating with excitement. "Still rocking the maid outfit, huh? Cute."

Minne did a little twirl, skirt flaring. "I like it!"

Emma dropped onto the free couch, legs spreading just enough that the cameltoe became obscene. She knew exactly what she was doing.

"Want anything?" Minne asked brightly.

"Nah, I'm good." Emma leaned back, arms draped along the backrest, crop top riding higher. The underboob was criminal.

Nala sat beside her, still flustered. I stood up, suddenly feeling like I was intruding on girl time.

"I should head out," I said, stretching. "Got some... stuff to take care of."

Nala raised an eyebrow. "Stuff?"

"Yeah. Boring shit."

"Alright," she said softly. "Take care, Evan."

"You too."

Welp...

Something told me this wasn't the last time I'd be seeing that particular shade of green.



I was lying on the wide bed in one of the spare guest rooms downstairs, sweatpants shoved to my knees, shirt tossed on the floor, cock resting heavy against my thigh. The room was dim, curtains half-drawn, city lights bleeding through the gap. I'd been scrolling on my phone for the last ten minutes, trying not to overthink the text I'd sent Jasmine.

The door opened quietly.

Jasmine stepped in wearing a thin white ribbed tank that clung to every curve and a pair of tiny black cotton boy-shorts that barely covered the bottom of her ass. No bra. Her nipples were already stiff against the fabric. She shut the door, leaned back against it for a second, and let her eyes drag down my body.

"Oh my god," she said, voice low and amused. "You really want me to edge you for twenty straight minutes?"

"No typo in the text I sent," I answered, tossing the phone onto the duvet beside me. "Timer's ready."

She crossed the room slow, hips rolling, climbed onto the sectional, and straddled my thighs. The heat from her pussy through those thin shorts pressed right against my skin.

"Lie back properly," she ordered, snatching the phone. She tapped the screen, set the countdown, and hit start. "Twenty minutes. You move your hips, I stop. You come early, you lose. You make it to zero... you can paint whatever you want. Deal?"

"Deal."

Her hand wrapped around my cock, warm, confident, already slick with the little bottle of lube she'd palmed. One slow stroke from root to tip, thumb smearing the pre-cum that had already leaked out.

"Jesus," she murmured, feeling how slowly I hardened. "Someone really sucked you dry today. Look at this tired thing. Takes forever to stand up."

"Very long day," I muttered.

She started slow, long, lazy pulls, twisting her wrist at the top, nails grazing the underside just enough to make my breath catch. Every time my hips twitched she squeezed the base hard, killing the climb.

"Stay still, baby," she warned, voice velvet. "I mean it."

Her free hand slid up my stomach, nails dragging, then down to cup my balls, rolling them gently, tugging just enough to make my toes curl. I groaned, head falling back against the cushions.

"Already close?" she teased. "We're not even four minutes in."

She shifted gears, two hands now, one pumping the shaft in steady strokes, the other twisting gently under the head. My cock throbbed, balls drawing up tight. I felt the edge rushing in fast.

She stopped completely, both hands off, and watched my cock jerk angrily in the air.

"Fuck, Jas—"

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She waited until the twitching died down, then started again, slower, almost lazy. I reached for her thighs, sliding my palms up smooth skin, thumbs brushing the crease where leg met hip. She let me. I cupped her tits through the tank, rolled her nipples between my fingers until they were rock-hard and she let out a soft, breathy moan.

"Greedy boy," she whispered, but didn't stop me. "You can touch all you want. Just don't fuck my hand."

She leaned forward, letting her tits drag across my chest, nipples scraping my skin. I pinched harder; she hissed and sped up her strokes in retaliation.

Six minutes in she switched to feather-light strokes, just her fingertips tracing every vein, circling the head until I was leaking constantly. My hips jerked; she slapped my thigh, sharp.

"Behave, or I'll tie you down."

Then she went hard and fast, slick, perfect pressure, twisting both hands in opposite directions. I was right there in seconds.

She let go.

I growled. She laughed, low and filthy, and leaned forward, letting her tits brush my chest while she worked me with one lazy hand again.

"Halfway," she whispered against my ear, breath hot. "Still ten minutes left of pure torture."

She kept it going, fast strokes, slow strokes, just the head, just the shaft, sometimes both hands, sometimes one finger tracing the ridge until I was shaking. Every single time I got close she pulled away completely, waited until my cock started softening from frustration, then built me right back up like it was nothing.

Ten minutes left. My thighs were trembling, pre-cum pooling on my stomach in a sticky mess.

"God, look at you," she purred, dragging a nail up the underside. "Leaking like a broken toy. You're so desperate it's adorable."

Eight minutes left. I was babbling actual nonsense, hands gripping her hips hard enough to leave marks, trying to pull her closer.

"Jas..."

"Mm?"

"I'm... I will... oh, fuck. I wanna cum..."

"Not yet, Evan. Hold it a bit more."

Six minutes left. She changed tactics again, short, rapid strokes right under the crown while her other hand gently squeezed my balls. I lasted maybe twenty seconds.

She stopped.

"Jasmine..."

"Come on, you can do it," she said, grinning, and started again.

Four minutes. She edged me twice more in quick succession, bringing me to the edge so fast my vision blurred, then yanking it away. My whole body was shaking now, abs clenched so tight they burned.

Two minutes. She finally locked both hands around me again, pumping fast and relentless, one twisting under the crown, the other stroking the shaft in perfect sync.

"Close," I rasped, voice wrecked.

"I know," she purred, leaning down until her lips brushed my ear. "Hold it. Twenty minutes exactly. I want you to explode the second that timer hits zero."

One minute. I was dying, every muscle locked, breath coming in ragged gasps.

Thirty seconds. She didn't slow down.

Fifteen seconds.

Ten. Fuck this. What kind of person would enjoy this? I was actually dying here.

She leaned down, licked a stripe up my neck, and whispered right against my ear, "Now."

The timer hit 20:00.

After a few seconds, I came hard, three thick, heavy ropes that shot across my stomach and splashed onto her fist and forearm. The buildup made every pulse brutal, pleasure ripping through me like fire. My hips jerked, cock throbbing in her grip as she milked me through it, squeezing and stroking slow until I was completely spent and gasping for air.

When it finally ended I collapsed back against the couch, chest heaving, limbs heavy as lead. Fuuck.

Jasmine wiped her hand on my thigh, picked up the phone, and grinned down at me.

"Twenty minutes on the dot," she said, voice husky. "Good boy. You earned every drop."

I was still shaking, thighs twitching, brain completely scrambled. I pushed myself up on the couch and sat, slumping forward like dead weight.

Jasmine chuckled, leaned down, and kissed the tip of my oversensitive cock. A high-pitched moan slipped out of me before I could stop it.

She dropped down beside me and stretched her legs across my lap.

Quest Completed

Title: Two's the number

Reward: +120 EXP, 120c

Phew. Two quests in one day. I actually doubted myself, thinking I couldn't handle it, but I did it.

Quest Completed

Title: Hands-On Experience

Reward: +90 EXP, 80c, +1 Strength

And yeah, the rewards for this... damn. Never again, though. This was a fucking torture. But I couldn't lie, cumming felt much more intense. But no. Edging was a no from me.

- Evan Marlowe (Lvl 11)

=====

- Age: 21

- Height: 180 cm

- Weight: 74 kg

=====

- EXP: [████████████████████] 572/2970

I earned a good amount of experience points. Though, what I was looking for was definitely the credits I earned. After buying that Main Quest thing, I was officially broke.

- SHOP

=====

- Aphrodisiac Drink (10c)
- Silk Lingerie Set (25c)
- Sensual Massage Oil (15c)
- Mystery Pleasure Toy (30c)
- Flirt Potion (20c)
- Hypnotic Perfume (40c)
- Time Stop (90c)
- 500 Dollars (50c)
- 1 Ability Point (150c)
- 1 Mastery Point (160c)
- Main Quest Unlock (Bought)

=====

- Credits: 200c

Finally. Two hundred credits would be enough for now. I wasn't planning on buying mastery or ability points right now. But maybe, when I get more in the future, why not?

CURRENT STATS

=====

Strength: 6

Charm : 12

- Manipulative Charm

↳ Honeyed Words ()

↳ Gaslight ()

↳ Emotional Charisma ()

- Seductive Allure

Libido : 10

Pleasure: 20

↳ Sensory Overload ()

↳ Erogenous Insight (Passive) ()

=====

Unused Ability Points: 2

And, yes. Plus one strength. I mean, I'd rather it was Libido or something, but Strength was okay too, I guess. Better than nothing.

"Who is Emma?" Jasmine asked. "You told me she was a friend of Minne and Nala, right?"

"Yeah," I rasped, still half-brain-dead. "She, uh... Nala and Emma were friends. When Minne needed a job, Emma recommended her to Guy. That's how she got hired."

"Worst decision of her life, huh?" Jasmine said, stretching her legs across my lap. Her bare foot started lazily playing with my limp cock again.

"Probably," I muttered. "Poor Minne."

I grabbed my phone, scrolled through some headlines without really reading, then suddenly remembered Charlotte. Shit. I still had to apologize to her properly. Couldn't believe Cora had kidnapped her like that. This crazy chick...

"Man, I'm sleepy," I said, stubbing the cigarette out. "Wanna hit the hay?"

"Some of us need to work, Evan," Jasmine exhaled. "You go ahead."

"Alright." I stood up, her feet lifting so I could move.

"Night, hon."

"Night, trouble."

I walked naked through the quiet penthouse, pushed open the master-bedroom door, same bed where Delilah had greeted me earlier, bent over and dripping, and the memory made my exhausted cock give one last tired twitch.

I collapsed face-first onto the mattress, didn't even pull the covers, and let sleep take me.



Two days had passed since the mole story broke, and we were still nowhere. Nala had pulled every string she had, called in favors, even forced an emergency board meeting, but the leaker was a ghost. Smart bastard.

"Fuck me," I muttered, pushing up from my desk. "Fucking mole."

I grabbed my jacket from the coat rack, fished the cigarettes out of the pocket, and headed for the elevator. Break time for 'normal people,' but Nala had locked herself in her office just in case. The last few days she'd been quiet, shoulders slumped. The whole penthouse felt heavy, no laughter, no teasing, just tension.

The elevator doors slid open and I stepped inside, pressed zero, and waited. Just as the doors began to close, a hand thrust between them. They sprang back, revealing Marcus Hale. He gave me a faint nod as he stepped in.

For reasons I couldn't fully explain, Marcus sat at the very top of my list of people who might be the mule.

"Slow morning," he said.

"Yeah." I leaned against the wall. "Any progress on the mole?"

"Nothing. Starting tomorrow, everyone hands their phone to security at the door. New policy."

"That's smart."

"My idea," he said, shrugging. "Told Guy about it months ago. He laughed in my face."

The elevator started its descent.

"People wouldn't even dare to betray Guy," Marcus said. "But with Nala? Look what happened on the first day, a damn mule."

"She'll overcome this," I said, leaning lacing my fingers together. "I just know it."

"Don't get me wrong, Evan," Marcus went on. "But Nala's just a weird cosplayer to me. Some of my coworkers told me they saw her at a cartoon convention a couple weeks ago."

"Anime convention," I corrected.

"Tomato, tomahto. It's all 2D bullshit," he scoffed. "The only real reason she's sitting in that chair is because her brother is Guy Nolin—not because of this Phoenix Project."

"You trust our new CEO too little," I quipped.

"I trust my gut," Marcus said. "And you know what my gut is telling me, Evan?"

"What?"

"That we're fucked."

The doors slid open, and he stepped out.

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I stepped out into a wash of bright LED panels and polished concrete floors, the air humming faintly with the servers behind the glass security wall. A pair of engineers were camped on the couch near reception, half-asleep over energy drinks.

I pushed through the revolving doors and into the cold, zipping my jacket up to my chin. Snow was falling hard now, the ground already buried in white. A couple of smokers

huddled under the company awning, but I kept walking, boots crunching, down the slippery stairs toward the parking garage.

Thankfully, my car was in the closest spot. After barely five steps I reached it, unlocked the door, and slid into the driver's seat.

"Fuck, I'm freezing."

I started the engine and cranked the heat. Hot air whooshed from the vents as I pulled a cigarette from the pack and lit it. Smoke curled lazily toward the roof while I eased the car out of the parking space and headed for the exit.

Kayla's name suddenly flashed across the dashboard screen. Shit. Her? Why was she calling? I still felt guilty for convincing her to trick Mendy.

I answered with a swipe. "Hello?"

"Evan, hey," she said. "I'll... I'll make this quick, okay?"

"Y-yeah? What's going on?"

"Mendy and I talked," she said. "She forgave me a long time ago. But... there's still something in my chest I can't shake. Like—it's like... ugh, I don't know, Evan."

"You still feel like you owe her," I said. "Yeah. I know that feeling."

"Exactly!" Kayla said. "I'm going over to her place for dinner tonight. I want you there. With me. I feel like if you're by my side, I can... I don't know, share the embarrassment."

"Sure," I said. "I can do that."

"Great. Tonight at eight."

"I'll come pick you up. What's your address again?"

"You have a car?"

"Yup. Don't worry about it. Just tell me where you live."

"I'll send you the location," she said. "And listen, if you show up with some run-down piece of junk, I'm not getting in."

"Yeah, yeah," I laughed. "Anyway, I've got to hang up, Kayla. Take care, okay? And don't blame yourself. I was the one who convinced you to trick Mendy."

"And what a convincing it was..." Kayla muttered. "You really are lethal with those hands of yours. You should be banned from massaging people."

I popped open the chrome ashtray in the center console, flicked the ash in, and stamped the cigarette out on the glass dish inside. "Eh, I get by."

She chuckled. "Right. Talk later."

Dinner with Kayla and Mendy. Could be awkward as hell. Could be fun.

Probably both.

Now I had something else to handle. Earlier I'd called Cora, letting her know I was swinging by to pick her up. She'd sounded excited at first, probably thinking I was taking her out somewhere nice. The excitement died the moment I told her we were heading to Stingy Ladies to find Charlotte and apologize. Charlotte had been terrified because of Cora... and because of me. That sat in my stomach like a stone. I couldn't just ignore it and go home.

The roads were empty, a silent stretch of white under the night sky. Snow kept coming down in slow flakes, adding to the blanket left from last night's storm. The heater in the car was going, but I still felt cold. Maybe it was the exhaustion. Maybe it was guilt. All I wanted at that moment was to be home with a cup of hot chocolate in my penthouse, sitting near the window while snow tapped softly outside.

"Hate this," I muttered.

But I kept driving.

At a red light, I leaned back and shut my eyes for a moment. Instantly, she appeared again in my mind—the woman with the umbrella. No face, just a silhouette in the rain. She had shown up more than once in my dreams lately, and I had no idea who she was. It had to be connected to Dierella or the other gods, but I had nothing to confirm it.

The light turned green and I pressed the gas. A few minutes later, my phone rang, lighting up the dashboard. Kim.

"Yellow," I answered, eyes still on the road.

"Hey, Evan," she said, voice low. "I... needed to talk to someone. And you were the first person I thought of."

"Honored."

"It's about Tom," she said. "He texted me."

"Texted you? What does that bastard want?"

"He wants to get back together. He somehow convinced his mother to approve of me again."

"So you're thinking about—"

"Fuck no." Her tone hardened. "I told him I was happy with you, then blocked him."

"Then everything's good."

"No, it's not." She took a shaky breath. "Tom is moving back into the city. I don't want to see him again. But eventually, I know I will."

"If you do, act like he's invisible, better yet, act like he doesn't even exist," I said. "He didn't care when he kicked you out and left you to live on the street, right?"

"And thanks to you, that didn't happen."

"Thanks to me? Fuck me, Kim, that's not the point. He was fine with throwing you away. If he acted like you didn't exist, then return the favor."

"I will," she said softly. "It's just... whenever something from my old life pops up, I feel like I'll break."

"I'll keep you together piece by piece," I said. "Don't worry."

I heard a tiny laugh. "Great. Now my eyes are tearing up."

"Allergies?"

"Allergies to people whose names start with E and end with N."

"Ouch."

She laughed again. "I won't keep you long. Thank you for listening. Really."

"Anytime. If something comes up, talk to me."

EVENT

=====

Kim's Interest +5

"I will. Bye."

"Bye."

WOMEN - INTERACTIONS

=====

Jasmine: Interest: 40 / 60★★

Kayla: Interest: 5 / 20

Tessa: Interest: 27 / 40★

Kim: Interest: 35 / 40★

Delilah: Interest: 75 / 80★★★

Cora: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Mendy: Interest: 6 / 20

Nala: Interest: 66 / 80★★★

Penelope: Interest: 3 / 20

Minne: Interest: 17 / 20

Ivy: Interest: 2 / 20

=====

Progress:

★☆☆☆☆ - 20 Interest: Milestone reward

★★☆☆☆ - 40 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★☆☆ - 60 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★☆ - 80 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ -100 Interest: Milestone reward

=====

Select a woman to track progress.

Tom. I didn't like him from the first second we met. Hearing he was back in town was a headache waiting to happen. Still, Kim shutting him down immediately felt good. She was loyal. Tom was still trash.

Another red light. I stopped, then called Cora. A few seconds later she picked up.

"E-Evan? Are you here?"

"Yeah. Step outside. I'll be there in twenty seconds."

"Alright."

"Bye."

I turned left when the light changed and drove down the narrow snowy street. Cora stood on the sidewalk in front of her house, wearing an oversized pink hoodie and black pants. Her hair was messy, eyes sleepy and puffy from either crying or lack of rest.

I pulled up and she climbed into the passenger seat. She stayed quiet for a moment, hands worrying at the hem of her hoodie.

"I'm sorry, Evan," she finally said. "I shouldn't have done that to Charlotte."

"It's fine. I'm not even mad," I answered, taking another turn. "I should have told you to go easier."

"Easier? But... she isn't dead."

"You know what I mean."

Cora sighed and stared out the window. She looked smaller than usual, all the bite and attitude gone. She had gone too far with Charlotte—the threats, the pain, the fear she drilled into that poor girl. I knew what Cora was capable of when she got angry.

"You think she'll forgive me?" she whispered.

"I don't know. But we owe her the chance to hear us out."

Cora nodded, and her voice dropped to a quiet tremble.

"I didn't mean for her to break like that. I just... wanted her to understand she couldn't talk about you like that."

"And now she'll never forget it," I said. "Which is why we make things right."

Cora swallowed hard and stared ahead as snow drifted across the headlights.

I pressed the accelerator a bit more and tried to focus on the road instead of the awkward silence in the car.

"Esme seemed... strangely used to you," I said. "I mean, she didn't even blink when she found out you kidnapped Charlotte and tied her up in your bathroom."

"She took a bath while Charlotte was tied up," Cora replied flatly.

"Man..." I sighed, stopping at a red light. "You two have... some problems."

"That's what my father used to say..."

Her voice changed—quiet, hurt, and suddenly I realized what I had just stepped on. Her father wasn't just strict. He was a monster who used to beat both Cora and Esme. And here I was, telling her she had problems, as if I didn't literally encourage her to torture Charlotte into talking. I knew something like this could happen. I just pretended it wouldn't. Maybe part of me wanted this result, deep down, even if I wouldn't admit that out loud.

I was the awful one here. Not her.

I reached over and put my hand on her shoulder. "Cora," I said quietly. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. I'm nothing like your father."

She gave a tiny smile and looked out the window. "Thanks."

"Look at me."

She slowly turned. I held her gaze, and for a moment she looked incredibly small. Just a girl trying to survive in a world that had done nothing but hurt her.

"You're doing your best," I told her. "And I realized I don't appreciate you enough. I'm sorry."

Her cheeks warmed with color. "Heh... thank you, E-Evan."

The light turned green and I drove forward. Traffic was tighter here because the streets were narrower, and cars coming from several directions were clogging up the lanes. Still, at least I had a car. If not for the system, I'd still be riding a freezing bus somewhere, heading to a gas station job and hoping my fingers didn't fall off.

Instead, I had this.

- Quest Available

=====

- Title: Sucky sucky

- Task: Have Cora suck you in the car.

- Reward: 90c

=====

- Accept Quest? [Yes] [No]

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A quest for a blowjob... right after saying heartfelt things to her. Yeah, absolutely not. That would be crossing a line even I wasn't comfortable with at the moment. Maybe tomorrow, if the quest stuck around. She'd say yes if I asked—no doubt—but jumping her now would make me look like a complete idiot after the apology.

"That time we met at the gas station," I said. "What were you doing there? It's far from your house, right?"

"I was supposed to pick up Esme from her friend," Cora said. "But I got the address wrong."

"Oh. Right."

"I'm... glad I got the place wrong," she said with a faint laugh. "That's when I met you."

"Hey, I'm glad too," I replied with a grin. "You really are something special, Cora."

"T-thanks. You are too."

"You're making me blush," I joked, stopping at another red light.

"Hehehe..."

Seeing her smile like that eased something in me. She deserved happiness after the life she'd lived. I couldn't even imagine what the house was like back then when her father was still around. The bruises, the screaming, the nights spent hoping he'd pass out early. No wonder both sisters turned out the way they did. I could understand her situation because I had a friend like Cora too in high school. Some parents just didn't deserve anything.

After a moment, I spoke again. "Can I ask you something personal?"

She shifted slightly. "S-sure?"

"Your father... did he drink?"

She nodded. "All the time."

"How was he?" I asked carefully. "I know he was a bad man but... I mean..."

"You want an example?"

I nodded.

"He'd send me to buy beer. When the clerk refused because I wasn't old enough, my father would beat me when I got home. Then he'd send me again. And again. Until the clerk finally took pity and sold it to me."

I stared forward and exhaled. "That's... goddamn."

"But I'm happy now." She smiled—small, but real. "With Esme. Living together. Not relying on anyone."

"Depending on someone isn't always a bad thing," I said. "At some point, everyone needs someone."

"I will no—"

"I'll be there when you do," I said firmly. "Just like how I counted on you to make Charlotte talk. Alright?"

Her cheeks warmed again. "Oh... t-thank you, Evan."

"Always."

I lit another smoke and took a slow drag, keeping one hand on the wheel.

"Want me to crack a window?" I asked.

Cora shook her head, eyes on her lap. "No. It's okay."

Snow still coated everything outside—leftovers from last night's storm, the whole city buried in white. We hit another red light. I tapped my fingers against the wheel.

"That storm was insane," I said.

"Esme and I hid under a blanket till three," Cora replied. "We thought the roof was going to fly off."

"Right? Sounded like something was trying to peel the building open."

The light shifted and I continued driving. A few turns later, I pulled right and parked. Stingy Ladies was just ahead—sign glowing, front door open, but quiet since it wasn't night yet.

We got out and headed in. The inside was dim, only a few lights on, everything clean and silent except for the muffled hum of some machine running behind the bar. We walked straight toward it.

Charlotte stood with her back to us, short dyed-red hair tied up loosely as she wiped down the top shelf. I cleared my throat.

She turned. Her eyes widened when she saw me—then widened even more when she saw Cora behind me.

"Oh, hell no—"

"No." I raised a hand. "We're not here for trouble. We came to apologize, Charlotte."

Cora stepped forward, head lowered. "I'm sorry I... kidnapped you. It was bad. I'm sorry."

Charlotte stared at her like she'd just confessed to being a demon. "You almost bit my tit off, you lunatic! You're lucky it didn't leave a mark!"

"Look," I said. "We really are sorry. But thanks to you, Guy is off our backs. Off yours too."

"Oh?" Charlotte set the cloth down. "Then why can't I reach Emilia? She hasn't answered my calls in days. She didn't come to work. Guy knew those videos were on her phone."

My stomach tightened. "What do you mean you can't reach her?"

Charlotte leaned forward on the bar, fingers tightening around the edge. "She won't pick up my calls. And I'm scared to go to her place. What if they're waiting for me next?"

"Emilia..." I muttered. "Shit. Guy wouldn't go that far."

Charlotte gave me a look sharp enough to cut glass. "Think again. You want forgiveness? Bring my friend back safely. That's the only shot you get."

NEW MAIN QUEST

=====

Title: Safe & Sound

Task: Make sure Emilia is safe.

Reward: 750c

Shit. Of course Guy would go after the only person who still had the videos. Emilia. I should've seen that angle coming. First Mendy nearly tried killing herself because of me, and now this? Would Guy really go after Emilia and... murder her? This was bad. Really bad.

Calling the cops crossed my mind, but what good would it do if half the bastards working in uniform owed Guy favors?

"Have you called the cops?" I asked Charlotte.

"Twice," she said. "They said her place was empty. But I'm sure Guy has people in the force. Maybe he... I don't know..."

If Guy had connections, and pretty sure he did, Emilia might be in deeper trouble than I thought. She was smart, sure, but Guy was smarter and nastier. I needed to find her. Screw the Main Quest. For my sanity alone, I had to make sure Emilia was alive and safe. This whole thing was spiraling into a disaster.

"Alright." I nodded. "Thank you, Charlotte. I'll make sure Emilia's safe."

She shrugged. "I don't trust you at all, but knock yourself out."

"Yeah." I turned to Cora. "Come on. I'll drop you home."

She gave a small nod. "Mm."

We walked out of Stingy Ladies and headed to the car. Neither of us talked. I slid behind the wheel, turned on the AC, and leaned back, rubbing my face with both hands. Fuck. Where was Emilia? I should've warned her. Or threatened Guy right from the start—told him if he touched her, I'd leak everything. Too late now.

Anotta. She was the only person who might have strings to pull. I'd call her, tell her Guy might be going off the rails, and hope she could reach him. Maybe I could still scare him into backing off... assuming he hadn't already done the worst.

"What are you going to do?" Cora asked, fastening her seatbelt.

"I'll think of something," I said. "I have to."

"You want my h-help?" she offered with a tiny smile.

"No." I shook my head. "This is something I need to handle myself. You've already done more than enough."

"Okay... but if you need me, I'm only a call away."

I started the engine. "Thank you, Cora."

I backed the car out of the parking spot and eased onto the road. My hand went to the dashboard, popping it open to get to the phone system. I scrolled through the contacts, found Anotta's number, and hit call. Four rings. Then a voice.

"Mr. Marlowe," a man answered.

"Yeah. I need to speak with Ms. Anotov. It's life or death. Can you get her?"

Beside me, Cora leaned in. "Anotta?" she whispered. "The Anotta?"

"Hmm," I answered quietly.

"Wait," the man said.

I heard movement on the other end—footsteps on a staircase, then knuckles knocking, a door opening, and more walking. Silence followed.

Then her voice.

"Marlowe," she said, calm as ever. "Hello."

"Hey," I turned into traffic, trying to keep my voice steady. "I need to talk to you, Ms. Anotov."

"Oh? You can be very polite when you want something."

"Emilia is missing. She's the one who gave me the videos. I think Guy went after her. He has police in his pocket."

"And what would you want from me?"

"Reach him. Tell him if he hurts her, I'll drop everything to the public. All of it."

"That isn't possible," she answered. "Guy is out of the country. Dubai. No line to him."

My jaw locked. "Shit."

"Do you know where this Emilia lives?" she asked.

"Yes, but Charlotte thinks he has men watching the place."

"I suggest checking the place. Then decide what to do."

"You can't leave me hanging like this," I said. "We're talking about a real person. Borrow one of your people, have them scout the building."

"If she dies, that's on you," she replied. "You need to own what you've done. Grow up, Evan Henrik Marlowe."

The line went dead.

My fist slammed the steering wheel. The horn blared, and a pedestrian outside shot me the finger before stepping up onto the curb. I didn't blame him. Rage burned through me. Of course she wouldn't help. She wasn't an ally. She never had been. She only moved when there was profit, or leverage, or a window she could use. Idiot—should've known better.

"Hey," Cora said gently. "Let's check her place."

"What?" My voice rose. "And walk right into an ambush? If Charlotte's right, Guy could have men waiting. Ready to snatch her—or me."

"Then we deal with them," Cora said, little grin playing at the corner of her lips. "Easy."

"No. Absolutely not." I shook my head. "I'll figure something else out."

"I didn't like tha... that woman either," Cora muttered. "But she had a point about one thing. Taking responsibility."

Chapter 215: Chapter 215

I didn't want to hear it. But it hit anyway. Hard. Was this my fault? Had I put Emilia at risk? She helped me... albeit involuntarily. She trusted me. And now she could be lying in a ditch because of it. God... every part of this was spiraling. Guy never stopped haunting my life.

I swung the car around and merged onto the main road, mind running at full speed. I set the GPS to that bowling place across from her apartment building. Couldn't remember the exact address, but the sign outside the alley was burned into my mind.

I parked at the curb and turned to Cora.

"I need to drop you here," I said. "I'm going to check her apartment."

"Alone?" Her eyes widened. "No. Let me come."

"I know someone tougher than both of us. Name's Tuck. I'll call him in. Just go home, okay?"

She hesitated, then nodded. "Y-yes." She opened the door. "Be safe."

"I will. And... sorry for dropping you like this."

"It's okay. I like walking."

"Thanks. Really."

She shut the door, and I watched her head down the street until she vanished behind a passing bus. Then I gripped the wheel again.

Time to move. Emilia might still be alive. And if she was... I wasn't losing another person to Guy.



I pulled up to the curb and yanked the handbrake. Tuck, sitting in the passenger seat, scanned the street through the window. Not a soul around. No cars cruising by, no dog walking around sniffing trash. Just a few guys in work uniforms on break outside the bowling place, smoking and chatting like the world wasn't falling apart.

"That the place?" Tuck asked.

"Yeah."

"Good." He slid a pistol from under his hoodie and checked the chamber. "Let's go then."

"You're carrying?"

"Hell yeah," he said, then dropped a slur at the end like it was part of his grammar. "I don't even take a shower without something on me."

"Christ."

I stepped out and shut the door behind me. He did the same, slipping the gun back under his long jacket so nobody would see it.

"So you hooked up with Nala, huh?" he said as I joined him on the sidewalk. "Lucky guy."

"Yep. Lucky."

I kept my lie going. I couldn't exactly tell him I'd taken down Guy Nolin and put Nala's sister in his chair. So I'd said we were dating and that this was her car. He didn't ask questions, which was fine. I didn't want to answer any.

"So why are we here?" he asked.

"Well..." I rubbed the back of my neck. "Complicated."

That was the thing about Tuck—he didn't care. The moment I'd told him I needed him for something rough, he just said, "Aight, come pick me up." No questions, no hesitation. He always said that the street in him was gone. That he'd grown past all that and left it behind. I never believed that. It was still in him, just sleeping deeper.

We reached the apartment building. The door was locked this time. The last time I came here, the wind kept it from closing fully, letting me sneak in. No such luck now.

I pressed every buzzer like a psychopath and waited. Someone buzzed us in, no questions asked. Tuck pushed the door open.

"Alright," I said. "We're in."

We climbed the stairs, going two steps at a time, until we reached Emilia's door. I lifted my hand to knock.

Tuck grabbed my wrist and yanked it down.

"What the hell?" I whispered.

He looked at me like I'd tried to drink bleach. "You gonna knock? We might as well stand here and tell a knock knock joke too. What if someone's in there waiting with a gun?"

"So what then?"

"Cover me. I'll pick it."

"Fine. Be quick."

He dropped to a squat, rested his pistol beside him, and pulled out a small leather pouch. From it he took two thin metal tools. One slid into the lock as a tension bar, the other worked the pins. I stood behind him, checking the stairwell every two seconds like paranoia was my full-time job.

This was bad. We were breaking into a missing woman's home while possibly being hunted by the people who took her. If someone was inside, we'd be walking into the lion's mouth. And Tuck wasn't a professional assassin or anything. He was just... Tuck. Which somehow made him more reliable, but also more terrifying.

"Look," I muttered under my breath. "If we get shot, I'm sorry."

"If we don't," he said calmly, twisting the tension bar and working the pick with steady wrists, "you're buying me a pizza."

"A slice?"

"Whole thing. What am I, a kid?"

"You're committing a crime. At that rate you should pay me hush money."

"Kiss my ass," he chuckled, tossing another slur my way without even looking up.

I watched him work. His movements were quick and confident, no hesitation. The lock wasn't fancy—old metal, rarely maintained. He probed for the pin stacks, lifting them one by one until they clicked into place.

"These locks are ancient," Tuck said. "A nun's private parts got more resistance than this."

"Jesus. Private parts? You mean her vagina?"

"You can't use those in the same sentence. Sinner."

"Says the guy who commits a sin right now."

A small click sounded. The knob turned.

Tuck picked up his gun, stood, and gave me a nod.

The door had given up.

Time to find out if Emilia was dead, missing, held hostage—or something even worse.

Tuck didn't bother turning the knob. He just hauled back and kicked the door open, gun out before I could blink. I damn near jumped out of my skin, heart punching my ribcage, ready to see a body or some guy waiting with a shotgun behind the frame.

Instead... nothing.

Empty.

No couch, no TV, not even a cheap rug. The place looked like it had been wiped clean in a single afternoon. Tuck and I shared a stare, then we stepped inside, slow and cautious. The only thing left in the living room were the curtains... and even those looked newly washed, like someone tried to erase fingerprints off the threads.

"Well," I muttered. "Wasn't expecting that."

"Check the rest."

We shut the door behind us, footsteps padding quietly through the hollow space. I could hear my own breathing loud in the silence. The place felt dead—not the usual quiet, but a kind that suggested no one had lived here for days.

The corridor led to the bedroom. I remembered it too well—the bed I'd hidden behind, watching that sick scene unfold. Now it was stripped bare. No mattress, no nightstand, no clothes on hooks. Just dust outlines where furniture used to be.

Tuck swept in first, clearing corners like he'd been doing it forever. Then we moved to the bathroom.

Same story. Empty. No toothbrush, no towel, no soap dish. Like someone rented a truck, loaded everything they could grab, and vanished.

"Where is she?" I muttered. "Damn it..."

"Who's this girl to you again?" Tuck asked.

"You know how I told you Nala took Guy Nolin's spot?" I said, keeping my voice steady. "Well, Guy didn't like that at all. And he threatened her by hurting someone close to her. Emilia."

"Uh-huh."

The lie was flimsy as wet tape, but he didn't care enough to poke holes in it. Lucky for me, Tuck wasn't a guy who needed every detail. He was a 'you point, I handle' type.

I leaned my shoulder against the wall, tired, and instead of finding a hidden switch like in the movies, I got white paint on my jacket.

I turned and checked my shoulder.

Wet paint.

"What the hell...?"

These walls used to be light grey. Now pure white. Fresh. The scent hit me—acrylic. Someone had painted the whole place recently.

"That paint?" Tuck asked. "The hell?"

"This place was redone," I said. "Still drying."

He lifted his gun to the ceiling and pointed. "Hold up. Look."

"Huh?"

I raised my eyes... and there it was. A tiny smear near the light bulb. Dark. Rust toned. Dried up.

Blood.

Cold spread through my chest. My hands went numb. Emilia... was this where she...

"Shit..." I whispered. "That's blood."

"Hang on," Tuck said. "I'm calling Greg."

"Greg the Gaper?"

"Yeah. He a cop now."

Of course he was. Greg, the guy with the curse of being too gifted downstairs, according to neighborhood legend... that's why they called him Greg the Gaper. Used to

swing by the gas station the days Tuck worked, chatting, buying smokes, telling dumb stories. Last I heard he had a stable life now—wife, kids, steady paycheck.

"And we call him because?"

"Trust me," Tuck said. "Come on. We leave this place now."

"Alright..."

I looked at the white walls one last time. Fresh paint. Blood in the corner. Furniture gone.

Whatever happened here... someone wanted to erase it.

Someone didn't think we would come looking.

Chapter 216: Chapter 216

We left the house in a hurry, the door pulled close but not fully shut behind us, and headed downstairs. The moment we stepped into the cold air, Tuck took out his phone and stepped aside to make a call. I went straight to the car, started the engine, blasted the AC, and leaned back, cursing under my breath.

"Things just got real, huh?"

A couple minutes later, Tuck opened the passenger door and slid in, letting the cool air wash over him. He sank into the seat, one hand adjusting the jacket that now hid the gun tucked at his belt.

"Man, what did you drag me into?" he muttered. "This is wild. Like... wild, wild, man."

"I know." I rubbed my face. "You got a hold of Greg? What did he say?"

"He's coming."

"We can't pull in the cops, Tuck," I said. "Guy has people in the force."

"This isn't official. Relax. Greg is tight. You can trust me."

"Hope you're right."

Then came the waiting. I stared out through the windshield as people strolled into the bowling alley, snow drifting down in lazy flakes. A few kids came from school, throwing snow at each other on the sidewalk. It could've been a peaceful winter scene, if I hadn't been sitting there wondering if Emilia was in danger because of me—wondering if Guy was already one step ahead.

After a while, Tuck blew out a breath and shifted in his seat. He looked tense too, hands never far from where his gun sat hidden.

"By the way," he said, eyes still scanning the area, "the station called me earlier, like a few weeks ago. Looks like Richard really screwed himself."

"He did," I said. "Stealing his ex's underwear, stalking her, then attacking her in broad daylight? He crossed every line he could."

"He's waiting on trial," Tuck said. "You think he'll do time?"

I shrugged. "I hope so. For Mendy's sake. She's been through enough."

"But you stepped in," he said, nudging my shoulder with a grin. "Playing hero."

"Yeah, sure," I said with a smirk.

He chuckled and then went back to watching the building across the lot. His eyes followed everyone entering Emilia's apartment, but only a few school kids had gone inside. Otherwise, nothing.

I still needed to go check on Mendy tonight, too. Kayla and her would be waiting. But none of that could happen until I found Emilia. Guy was still messing with my life even after I thought I was done with him. This idiot, I swear...

"Tell me about this Nala," Tuck said. "She solid?"

"Yeah. We clicked. Ran into her at a coffee shop."

"Lucky bastard. This her car?" He patted the dashboard. "It's a beauty."

"Right? It even has a decent dashboard."

"And heated seats." He stretched, sighing. "My ass is in paradise."

I snorted. "Remember your old car? Someone ripped your radio out."

"Don't remind me," he said, shaking his head. "Fuck that car. The radio was already broken before it was stolen."

We laughed softly, then fell quiet again. Greg was on his way, but it felt like forever. In reality, only six minutes had passed. Still, every one of them crawled. Waiting was the worst part.

A few moments later, a black sedan rolled up to the curb and stopped. The door opened, and out stepped the only man it could be. Greg the Gaper. He was towering,

easily six foot eight, with broad shoulders and dark skin. His hair was short with waves that looked like he still cared for them despite his job and age. Forty-three, two kids, and his ring didn't sit on his finger. Instead, he wore it on a chain around his neck. I never understood the reasoning behind that. Maybe some habit or old promise.

"He's in casual clothes," I muttered. "Thought he'd show up in uniform."

"Told me he was on his off day," Tuck replied. "Come on."

We stepped out and moved toward him. Greg was checking his phone, probably making sure he had the right spot, when Tuck clapped him on the shoulder. Greg turned, grinned, and pulled him in for a quick hug.

"My man," Tuck said. "My man, my man."

"Big T," Greg answered, shifting the backpack on his shoulder. Then he looked at me. "Evan, right?"

"That's me." We shook hands.

"Hey, man."

"Hey."

He only knew me from a few short conversations at Tuck's job. Nothing personal, just enough to know each other's names.

"So what's this important thing?" Greg asked.

"Weird as hell," Tuck said, motioning for him to follow. "Come on, we'll show you."

"Okay, lead the way."

We headed inside the building. Once again, we buzzed all the doorbells, and someone tired or careless let us in. We hurried up the stairwell and stopped outside Emilia's door, left slightly open just as we'd arranged. Tuck's hand was already on the grip of the pistol in his waistband. Greg noticed immediately and raised a brow.

"Yo," he said. "Since when do I visit you and you're packing heat?"

"You'll see," Tuck muttered. "Just... be ready."

He pushed the door open, and we stepped inside the hollow apartment. Not a chair. Not a plate. Not even pictures left behind. Everything had been removed cleanly, almost surgically. I closed the door with a soft click behind us.

Tuck pointed upward. A faint splash of dark red near the ceiling paint, like someone had tried to wash it but didn't do a professional job.

"You see that?" Tuck asked. "Blood, right?"

Greg narrowed his eyes, leaned closer, then nodded. "Looks like it. And you two are definitely trespassing."

"This was a friend's place," I said. "We came to check on her. Found the entire place empty. No warning. No message. Just wiped out."

Greg turned to face us. "Who'd try to hurt her?"

"She's got enemies," I answered before Tuck could open his mouth.

If I mentioned Guy Nolin by name, Greg would walk right out or report it the official way. We needed him to stay. To help. So the truth could wait.

"Man, what am I doing here?" Greg sighed. "You two should report this to the station."

"It needs to be off the books," I said. "At least for now. If the wrong people know..."

Greg rubbed the back of his head. The man looked genuinely torn. His conscience battled with his badge.

"I can't," he muttered. "I'm not just some street rat anymore. I've got rules."

"Come on," Tuck said, punching him lightly on the shoulder. "You owe me. And you know it."

Greg stared at him, dead serious this time.

"T, this isn't some bar fight. If this turns into something official, I'm screwed."

"Then help us before it does."

Greg blew out a long breath, closed his eyes for a second, and then nodded.

"Alright. Tomorrow night. Ten. I'll bring some stuff to check for hidden blood and whatever else they tried to clean. That's the best I can do."

"That works for me," Tuck said, glancing at me.

I nodded. "Thanks, Greg."

"Yeah, yeah," Greg muttered, shaking his head. "Let's get out. If something actually happened here, we shouldn't be hovering around."

He wasn't wrong. We headed out quietly, careful not to draw attention on the way down.

Tomorrow at ten. Finally, a lead. Someone had scrubbed the place, took everything, and tried to make sure no one could trace what happened. Now all we could do was wait and prepare for whatever we would uncover next.



I pulled up to the curb outside Kayla's building and killed the engine. A couple minutes later she stepped out of the lobby and, fuck, she looked unreal. Long, deep-blue dress that hugged every curve, neckline low enough to tease but still classy, slit up one leg flashing thigh with every step. Heels, hair down in soft waves, the whole package. She was carrying a bottle of red that definitely wasn't cheap.

She scanned the street, clearly not expecting a matte-black G-Wagon. I gave the horn a quick tap. Her head snapped toward me, eyes widening when she realized it was my car. She smiled, half amused, half impressed, and walked over.

I hopped out, rounded the hood, and opened the passenger door for her.

"Wow," she said, sliding in. "Actual gentleman."

"Only on special occasions," I shot back, shutting the door.

Heads turned as I walked back to the driver side. Couldn't blame them. We looked like we were headed to a gala, not a make-up dinner.

Kayla ran her fingers over the leather seats once I was behind the wheel. "Okay, seriously. I thought you got fired from the spa."

"I did."

"Then what the hell is this?"

"Maybe I've been secretly loaded this whole time," I said, easing us into traffic.

"Yeah, right. You used to work night shift at a gas station."

"Tips were excellent."

She rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "Uh-uh. Tips. Definitely."

Chapter 217: Chapter 217

Just as a smile started to form, I remembered Emilia. What if she really was hurt? From what I could figure, someone had attacked her in the apartment, and after... whatever happened, they cleaned the place and removed the furniture to get rid of evidence. Things were bad. Really bad.

Kayla noticed my face change and looked at me, but I just forced a smile and pulled out of the parking spot, merging into traffic. Tomorrow at ten, we'd know what was actually going on. I just hoped the worst hadn't happened.

"Thanks for doing this," she said after a beat. "I'd be a nervous wreck going alone."

"Happy to be your emotional support human."

"We're going to her place, right?" I confirmed.

"Yeah. I offered to take her out, but she said she hasn't left the apartment much since... everything."

"Can't blame her."

Kayla stared out the window for a second. "Thank fuck you were there that night, Evan. If I'd known Richard was that kind of monster..."

"Hey, I worked with the guy. Nobody saw it coming. Not you, not me."

She exhaled hard. "Still. No more one-night stands for me."

I cleared my throat dramatically. "Ouch."

"That wasn't a one-night stand, you idiot," she said, punching my arm. "You gave me a massage and things escalated. That's different."

"You regret it?"

She set the wine bottle carefully between her heels. "You suck."

"Funny. You did too. Literally."

She hit me again, same spot, and I laughed, rubbing my shoulder. She tried to look pissed, but the corner of her mouth betrayed her.

"Ouch. You, uh—you dressed like we're going to a Michelin-star restaurant," I said, glancing at the dress again. "I'm in jeans and a T-shirt."

"I wanted to look like I actually gave a shit," she said softly. "Like I wasn't just showing up in sweats to say sorry. I needed her to see I was taking it seriously."

I nodded. "She'll see that."

Kayla looked over at me, something softer in her eyes now. "Drive, chauffeur."

I turned left and leaned back, eyes on the road but my mind stuck in that empty apartment. Furniture gone. Blood scrubbed. Guy moved fast. Too fast. If I'd pushed harder, threatened louder, would Emilia still be breathing? The guilt was chewing me raw.

I almost rear-ended the car in front when the light flipped red. Slammed the brakes too hard; Kayla jerked forward, the wine bottle rolling off the seat with a soft clunk.

"Sorry," I said, rubbing a hand over my face. "Busy day."

"I can tell." Kayla shifted in her seat and nudged the bottle away with her boot. "So how'd you end up with a car like this?"

"Stole it."

She rolled her eyes. "Evan."

I let out a breath. "Fine. I'm seeing someone. Nala Nolin. You might know her."

"Nala..." She tilted her head, thinking. "Nope."

"Guy Nolin's sister."

"Still nothing."

"Well, she's the new CEO of TechForge."

Kayla blinked. "Oh. Okay—yeah, I know TechForge." She turned toward me fully now. "Wait. You're dating a CEO?"

"Yep. It's her car."

She let that sit for a moment, then her eyebrows lowered a little. She opened her mouth, closed it again, tapped her fingers on her knee. The light changed to green and the cars behind us started honking, so I eased forward. Snow crunched under the tires, the whole road crawling.

"When you massaged me..." she said, barely above a normal tone, "were you already with her?"

I glanced over. She was staring out the window now, jaw tight. "What's that matter?"

"I just don't want to step into some disaster. Not after... well, Mendy." she said. "So just be straight with me."

"No. And we have an open relationship."

"Open?" She squinted at me. "So you're a... cuck?"

"What? No." My hands tightened on the wheel. "I don't share Nala with anyone. That's not happening."

"So you get to go around with other girls, but she can't?"

"I mean... yeah."

"So it's like a half-open thing?"

"I guess. Whatever. It works for us."

She let out a puff of air, shaking her head slowly. "How does a gas-station clerk talk a CEO into something like that?"

I shrugged. "I'm charming."

She snorted. "Fuck off."

- Quest Available

=====

- Title: Stories

- Task: Tell Kayla you took Nala's
virginity before hopping off the car.

- Reward: 100c

=====

- Accept Quest? [Yes] [No]

What? Nala wasn't some trophy I got to brag about. I pushed the thought aside; that kind of mindset was completely against my morals anyway. But... Kayla seemed to have her own ideas about it, I guess.

"So," Kayla said, softer now, "how was your first night with her?"

"That's private."

"You fucked me on a massage table, Evan," she reminded me, deadpan.

I chuckled. "Fair. But Nala's not some story I brag about. I'm not gonna sit here and flex like a douchebag."

EVENT

=====

Kayla's Interest +10

She looked at me for a long second, something warm flickering in her eyes.

REPUTATION SYSTEM

=====

VILLAIN  HERO

=====

Not being a douche: +10

"Wow," she said quietly. "You actually have morals. That's... annoyingly attractive."

"Hey, I try to be a decent human sometimes."

"Decent? Meeh. Human? No way."

WOMEN - INTERACTIONS

=====

Jasmine: Interest: 40 / 60★★

Kayla: Interest: 15 / 20

Tessa: Interest: 27 / 40★

Kim: Interest: 35 / 40★

Delilah: Interest: 75 / 80★★★

Cora: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Mendy: Interest: 6 / 20

Nala: Interest: 66 / 80★★★

Penelope: Interest: 3 / 20

Minne: Interest: 17 / 20

Ivy: Interest: 2 / 20

=====

Progress:

★☆☆☆☆ - 20 Interest: Milestone reward

★★☆☆☆ - 40 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★☆☆ - 60 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★☆ - 80 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ - 100 Interest: Milestone reward

=====

Select a woman to track progress.

I chuckled as I eased the car forward for another red light. Red. It reminded me of that damn blood on the ceiling. Even in a small happy moment like this, my brain still found a way to drag me back. It was eating me alive. I wasn't sure I could wait until tomorrow. Part of me wanted to call Greg right now and cancel this dinner altogether.

Kayla, sitting there with her hands tucked under her coat sleeves, saw the shift. One moment I was smiling, the next I was staring at a traffic light like it owed me an apology.

"Is everything okay?" Kayla asked.

"Yeah, I'm just..." I rubbed the back of my head. "You know. Tired, I guess."

"Tired, huh? Same." She leaned back. "Tired of overthinking everything. This whole Richard thing messed me up."

"Yeah." I nodded. "Wish I could just pack my shit and go on a vacation somewhere."

"Somewhere hot or cold?"

"Somewhere calm."

The light turned green but the car in front of us didn't move. The roads were icy, the tires on that car were summer ones, you could tell immediately. I checked the mirror, changed lanes, and got around them, but by the time I did, the damn light turned red again.

Kayla and I both looked left.

A woman was behind the wheel of the stuck car. Sharp glasses. Short black hair. Really attractive body. Early thirties maybe. Huge chest, tight blouse under her coat, the type of woman men fantasize about at their desks. But her face was serious. The kind that never smiled unless someone died.

"Poor woman," Kayla said. "I actually know her."

"Oh?"

"Hannah," Kayla said. "Well, my neighbor knows her and showed me a picture."

"Why were they showing you a photo?"

"Because Hannah rear-ended her." Kayla shrugged. "Guess she's not good with cars."

"Yeah. She didn't change her tires." I said. "Those things are not made for snow."

"You know too much about cars for a man who never owned one."

"Hey, I know a lot about bicycles too, but I've never driven one."

"That is one of the weirdest things I've ever heard," Kayla said. "Also, how do you not know how to ride a bicycle?"

The light turned green. I eased forward. "I can drive four-tired ones."

"What, your dad never held the seat of your bike and helped you ride it? Then let you go even when you said not to, and then you realize you can ride by yourself?"

"Nope."

Kayla nodded slowly. "Wow. Best dad ever."

"Hey, my dad tried his best."

"Right."

"We had this kid in second grade, Ali," I said. "Some brat found out Ali was wearing fake shoes. Replicas. They joked about him for weeks."

"And?"

"And my shoes were also fake," I said. "Those stupid roller-skate shoes were popular. You pressed a button and the wheels came out."

"Oh god, I remember those." Kayla laughed. "Worst design ever."

"Well, I told my father I was scared kids would find out mine were fake too." I said. "So he worked double shift for a week and bought me the original ones. I still remember the stupid smile on his face when he handed me the box."

Kayla softened. "Were you that poor that he had to work double shift?"

"No. Mine were replicas with Jeremy Mureson's wet signature on them. Those were expensive as hell. The original ones were insane."

"So he had to buy the signed ones because kids would notice if the signature disappeared," Kayla said.

"Pretty much."

"Okay. But did he ever play with you when you were little? Like, actually spend time with you?"

"Eh..." I thought for a moment. "Nope."

"So instead of teaching you things or playing with you, he threw money at whatever problem you had."

"Happiness kinda comes with money," I said. "Now that I'm grown, I never sit there thinking, 'Oh no, poor me, I never learned bikes.'"

"You never know the true value of something you never had," Kayla said. "Those moments with your family—"

"Jesus, Kayla. My dad didn't teach me bikes. Boo. Throw stones at him. That's all."

"Fine, no more arguing. But your dad sounds like he wasn't a good one."

"I didn't know I booked an appointment with you, Ms. Psychologist."

"I just love family drama. Did your dad have mistresses?"

"No."

"Shucks."

"Yours?"

"Yep."

"Shucks."

We chuckled faintly and the conversation died down. I turned another corner, slowing for the next red light. The car hummed quietly. The heater clicked. My mind drifted just enough for the dashboard to suddenly light up with Penelope's name.

Great timing.

Chapter 218: Chapter 218

I didn't want Kayla hearing anything Penelope might say, so I disconnected the phone from the car, grabbed it, held it against my shoulder and ear, and merged into the next lane.

"Pen?" I said.

"Hey, I heard you're also coming for dinner," she said. Her voice was loud and careless, like she didn't even check where she was calling from. "Can you come pick me up?"

"Sure. Where do you live?"

"Close to Mendy's," she answered. "I'll send you the location. Thanks."

"Yep."

"I won't show you my tits in the car if you're hoping for that," she added, then hung up.

I blinked. Jesus. I exhaled a laugh, one of those tired ones. Good thing I disconnected the speakers. The last thing I needed was Kayla hearing that. Penelope was... something else. Brutally honest. Sharp-tongued. Didn't care whose toes she stepped on. Hell, the first thing she did when we met was size me up and decide she kinda hated me. But at least she was real. Chaotic real, with no filter.

The light turned green. I steered forward, reconnected the phone to the dashboard with one hand, shoved it into my pocket, and tried to pretend nothing happened.

Kayla kept looking forward, her fingers tapping gently on her knees. She seemed relaxed, thankfully unaware.

"Who was it?" she asked without looking at me.

"Penelope. Mendy's friend." I said. "Wants me to come pick her up. You didn't tell me she'd join us."

Kayla made a face, somewhere between surprise and annoyance. "I didn't know either. Damn... she's actually scary, Evan."

"Scary? How so?"

"I don't mean her giant fake tits," she said, waving her hand. "I mean her personality. When I tried to visit Mendy after she... tried to—kill herself... she snapped at me. Hard. Mendy's mom had to stop her."

"You were lucky, honestly," I said.

She rubbed her arms and leaned back into her seat. "But you managed to meet Mendy anyway. And Penelope. That's how you stopped Richard that time, right?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me... how was Mendy? Before all of this. While Richard was still in her life." Kayla's voice dropped. She stared out the window, her breath fogging the glass. "I'm assuming she's doing better now."

"She was miserable," I said. "Paranoid. She said her panties were stolen, and neither Penelope nor I believed her. We thought she'd finally snapped. But she hadn't. Richard was targeting her."

Kayla's jaw tightened. "Fuck."

The car filled with a heavy, sinking silence. She looked down at her hands. Her thumbs rubbed together anxiously.

"I can't help but feel like this is all my fault," she said quietly.

"Hey," I interrupted. "This is all my fault. I was the one who convinced you. Not you."

She didn't look convinced. She swallowed hard.

"But it's all in the past now," I added. "We have to think about the future."

"And what does the future hold for us?" Kayla asked. She tried to smile, but her eyes were tired.

"A dinner," I said.

Her smile finally cracked into something genuine. "Wow. You really know how to comfort a woman."

I shrugged. "I try."

I touched the message Penelope sent me on the dashboard and marked it. The damn screen took a second to load, and while I glanced at it, I nearly missed the left turn. I swerved the car sharply and managed to slip into the lane at the last second.

"Alright, fast and idiot, calm down," Kayla said. "You're going to ruin this beauty of a car."

"Yeah, sorry."

Kayla shook her head and leaned back, annoyed but amused. Another red light hit us. This snow was turning the whole city into a slow-moving hell. Every light felt longer than the last. Fine. I might as well check the reputation thing while we were stuck. Since hiding the spicy details about Nala's first time gave me a boost, maybe something else changed.

So... Villain was the worst rank. Seven in total. Villain, Enemy, Bad, Neutral, Good, Big-Hearted, Hero. Each gave passives except Neutral.

REPUTATION SYSTEM (LVL 11)

VILLAIN ██████████ ██████████ HERO

=====

Current Reputation: Good

- More EXP gain when making your partner climax.

That was it? Honestly, the Bad tier gave better passives. Whatever. Being a Hero probably required stupid sacrifices anyway. I was also sure that when I eventually fucked Delilah behind Ivy's back without her knowing, I'd fall straight toward Villain and ruin this whole thing.

"She lives close by?" Kayla asked, pulling me back to reality.

"Hmm? Who?"

"Penelope," she said. "Is she close by?"

"Oh. Yeah. Just five minutes out of the way."

The UI faded and the light turned green. I eased the car forward. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kayla part her legs slightly so the wine bottle wouldn't roll again. Her dress pulled just a little and... Jesus. Smooth. Warm-looking. Inviting. Hard to believe I had sex with her on that massage table. And her ass... it was huge. Bigger than Nala's. Either she hit the gym eight days a week or she was genetically blessed. Or... maybe both?

She turned her head toward me and I immediately stared ahead like the most innocent man on Earth. Of course that distraction made me miss the next damn turn.

"Oh," Kayla said, checking the dashboard. "You missed a turn."

"Yeah, sorry. I thought it was the second one."

I exhaled, straightened up, and focused harder.

A few boring minutes later, I reached the destination. I found a spot, parked, and waited. Kayla stretched her arms above her head, then leaned back. A shiver ran through her. I turned the AC from four to five, letting more warm air push through the vents.

Her shoulders relaxed almost instantly. She glanced at the dashboard and began playing with the buttons. Checking the time. Changing the brightness. Swiping through menus she didn't need.

"I'm bored," she said, turning her head to the right and staring out the window.

"Yep," I said. "Sorry we had to take a detour. And that I, uh... well, missed a turn."

"Worst ride ever. I'll give you one star."

"Har-har."

This part of the city was calmer than where I lived. The buildings were shorter, maybe five or six floors at most. No neon hell screaming from every corner, just a couple warm yellow storefront signs and the occasional flicker of an old streetlamp. Snow piled on top of parked cars, turning them into white lumps. The whole place felt slower, quieter, older.

Just as I reached for my cigarette pack, I spotted Penelope in the left mirror. She stood on the sidewalk with her arms folded tight against the cold. She wore a thin t-shirt and tight pants. No jacket. No coat. Nothing. And somehow she didn't look bothered by the weather at all. Her chest was impossible to ignore. Those fake tits drew eyes from every direction, men and women both.

"There she is," I said. "She's wearing pretty normal clothes too. I think you really overdid it, Kayla."

"Ugh. Let's just go."

I honked lightly. Penelope's head snapped toward us. She jogged over and opened the back door. As soon as she sat down, she hissed from the cold, then immediately relaxed when the warm air hit her.

The rearview mirror lined up perfectly with her chest. Maybe it was coincidence. Or maybe it was exactly what I wanted to be seeing.

"Hey," I said. "You should've worn a jacket or something."

"I forgot it," Penelope said. "Mm. Hey, Kayla."

"H-hey," Kayla replied with a strained smile. "What's up?"

"Good. Keeping my anus closed for strangers. Unlike you."

Kayla's smile died. My soul left my body for a second.

"Okay," I said as I shifted to reverse and backed out. "Let's not do that. Calm down. We're going to eat a peaceful dinner. For Mendy."

Kayla dropped her elbow to her knee and rubbed her forehead like she was trying to massage the stress out. Honestly, same. I expected some attitude, but not... that level. Penelope wasn't pulling punches. She was swinging bricks.

I merged into the street and turned left. Kayla wedged the wine bottle between her feet and stared out the window with her arms crossed. Penelope, meanwhile, existed in my mirror like a constant distracting hazard.

"You couldn't at least make a reservation somewhere?" Penelope asked.

"I asked Mendy," Kayla said. "She refused. She wanted dinner at home."

"The most important thing is being together," I said. I glanced at the mirror again. "That'll make Mendy happy. She needs some new people in her life."

"Why? So they can betray her again?" Penelope asked.

Emilia flashed through my head again. Fuck. Please be alive. Please.

"I didn't betray her," Kayla said, turning around in her seat. "I didn't even know the girl. Richard tricked us both."

"Sure."

No, no, no. This was getting stupid fast. I couldn't even think straight with the noise in my head and the noise in the backseat.

"Why won't you believe me?" Kayla asked. "Jesus, Penelope. Just... ugh."

"You're lucky Mendy's mother stopped me when I saw you at her house," Penelope said. "Because I swear to God I would have knocked you out."

"I didn't even..."

"Fucking enough," I snapped. My voice came out harsher than I intended. "Both of you, shut the fuck up. We are doing this for Mendy. I didn't pick you up just to listen to you two bitch at each other. Now shut it."

Silence dropped like a brick.

Penelope turned her head to the window. Kayla blinked twice, wide-eyed, like she had never heard me raise my voice before.

My heart sank.

"I'm... ah, just, fuck, sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have yelled."

The UI flashed.

Minus two points from both.

Perfect. Just perfect.

Jasmine: Interest: 40 / 60★★

Kayla: Interest: 13 / 60★

Tessa: Interest: 27 / 40★

Kim: Interest: 35 / 40★

Delilah: Interest: 75 / 80★★★

Cora: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Mendy: Interest: 6 / 20

Nala: Interest: 66 / 80★★★

Penelope: Interest: 1 / 20

Minne: Interest: 17 / 20

Ivy: Interest: 2 / 20

=====

Progress:

★☆☆☆☆ - 20 Interest: Milestone reward

★★☆☆☆ - 40 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★☆☆ - 60 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★☆ - 80 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ -100 Interest: Milestone reward

=====

Select a woman to track progress.

I was just on edge because of Emilia. My nerves were shot. And now I had let my anger out on both of them. Great job, Evan. This was supposed to be a dinner for Mendy, a night to show her she wasn't alone.

"No, you're right," Kayla said. Her expression softened back into normal. "We shouldn't be bickering. We're here for Mendy."

"Mm," Penelope mumbled.

I kept driving with a knot in my chest. Couldn't take back what I'd said, but I regretted it. I wasn't wrong about them acting like brats, but still... yelling hadn't helped.

"Let's just have a nice and calm ride," I said.

"Yeah," Penelope answered. "Let's."

♥□♥□♥□

I parked on the side of the quiet suburban street and pulled the handbrake. Penelope practically launched herself out of the car. Kayla stayed seated, holding the wine bottle between her hands, staring at the snow-covered roads. Mendy's place was right ahead, the warm yellow lights glowing through the curtains. A few old lampposts lit the area. It was peaceful, almost too peaceful for everything going on in my head.

Kayla was about to get out when I touched her shoulder. She turned to me, raising an eyebrow.

"I meant it," I said. "I'm sorry, Kayla. I shouldn't have yelled like that."

"Don't worry," she said. "It's not the first time someone yelled at me." She gave a small smile and stepped out.

I followed and locked the car. Penelope was already at Mendy's door, knocking. By the time we reached her, the door swung open and Mendy greeted us with the biggest smile I'd seen on her in months. She wore a plain t-shirt and soft pants. Kayla really was the only one dressed like she was going to a gala.

"Oh wow," Mendy said to her. "You look stunning."

"Y-yeah," Kayla said. "I think Evan was right. I overdressed a little. Um, here. I brought wine."

"Thank you," Mendy said as she took it. She stepped aside so we could enter. "Come in. It's freezing out there."

"New Year's coming," I said. "Weather's getting worse."

We stepped into the warm corridor. I let the heat wash over me before removing my jacket and hanging it on the rack. Penelope had already thrown herself onto the living room couch. Kayla, Mendy, and I stayed in the hallway for a moment.

"She's not in the mood, huh?" Kayla asked, nodding toward Penelope.

"No," Mendy said. "She was against you coming. I told her everything would be fine, but she didn't listen. She said she came only in case things go south. Whatever that means."

"Let's just try to have some fun," I said.

"Oh, we will," Mendy grinned. "I got us this weird game where you have to contort your body and put your hands and feet on different colors."

"Wait, what is it?" I asked.

"You'll see," she said. "I want to watch you bend yourself into a knot after you eat my special dinner."

"You three planned this just to see me suffer, didn't you?" I said. "Incredible."

Kayla laughed softly and nodded toward the living room. "Come on. Let's sit."

"Hmm," I said, shrugging and heading inside.

We all moved into the living room. The place wasn't big, but it was warm in the way small homes usually are. Two couches facing each other, small coffee table in the middle with a half-burnt candle and some old magazines stacked under it. Kayla and I sat on the longer couch, while Penelope flopped onto the other one beside Mendy like she owned the place. Her legs crossed immediately, her eyes half-lidded in that judgmental way she had.

The air felt awkward. Not awful, just... stiff. No one knew where to start.

Something smelled damn good though. Warm, meaty, buttery. My stomach reacted before I did.

"So," I said, breaking the silence. "What's for dinner? Something smells really good."

Mendy perked up. "My special burger. My mother loves it when I make that. I know it's not really a dinner food but... hey, you never know before you try."

"I like handmade burgers," I said.

"Same," she said, smiling.

Penelope let out a long breath through her nose, then rubbed her stomach. "So, shall we eat or what?"

Mendy clapped her hands once. "Of course."

We all stood. Chairs scraped against the floor as we shifted over to the dining area. The table was small, only four seats, but it looked cozy enough. A little plant sat in the middle, the kind that had definitely died two weeks ago and was still pretending to be alive.

This wasn't the same dinner table I'd seen before. Damn. She must've changed it after the fight I had with Richard in here, either it got broken, or she just didn't want the reminder anymore.

"I can help you if you want," Kayla offered.

Mendy stepped toward the kitchen and gestured at us. "Nah, I got it, thank you, Kayla. I'll bring everything. No need to help. Just relax. Give me ten minutes."

Ten minutes. That meant I could sneak a smoke.

"Mind if I smoke in the back garden?" I asked.

"Go ahead," Mendy said. "The door's right there, the glass one."

I nodded and stood up. The sliding glass door creaked a bit as I pulled it open. Cold air rushed inside, hitting me harder than I expected. I stepped out and shut the door behind me.

Snowflakes drifted lazily down. The backyard was small, fenced in, a little messy but comforting in its own way. An old chair leaned against the wall. The porch light buzzed weakly.

I pulled out my cigarette packet, tapped one out, put it between my lips, and lit it.

The smoke hit my throat and chest instantly. Warm. Familiar. Calming.

"God," I muttered, staring at the snow. "Please be alive, Emilia..."

I didn't know if I was talking to her, or to whatever was listening. Maybe both.

The ember glowed bright in the dark, and the cold air nipped at my face, but inside my head there was only one thing:

That blood on the ceiling.

And the hope that I wasn't too late.

The door behind me slid open. I turned my head, half-expecting Kayla, but it was Penelope. She stepped outside, pulled the glass door shut behind her, and walked over to stand beside me. Her arms folded, her breath fogging up in the cold air.

I lifted my cigarette pack toward her, offering one without a word. She shook her head immediately.

"I've always been a straightforward girl," Penelope said. "I say whatever pops into my mind."

"I realized that," I said quietly, taking another drag.

"You and Kayla," she said. "Are you guys a thing?"

"No." I answered instantly. "Kayla is a friend. That's it."

"Because if you are," she said, "you should tell Mendy. I told you before. She won't shut up about you. She talks about you nonstop. I don't want her heart getting broken again."

"I know," I said. "And I don't intend to break her heart, Pen. I'm not Richard. I'm not some dickhead looking for entertainment. You don't have to worry."

"I hope so."

She leaned her back against the wall next to me, her arms still crossed, and looked out into the small backyard. Snowflakes drifted down under the dim porch light. For a moment, the two of us just existed there, breathing the same cold air, listening to the faint noises inside the house.

"Mendy," I said. "She had a boyfriend before Richard?"

"A few."

"Why'd they break up with her?" I asked.

Penelope clicked her tongue and thought for a bit. "Mendy is... naive. Too passive. Too kind. She doesn't push back when someone treats her like shit. I guess the guys she dated wanted something else. Or wanted only one thing."

I nodded slowly. That lined up with everything I had seen so far.

"Do you think I'd be the right person for her?" I asked.

Penelope looked at me with her unreadable stare, then shrugged. "No idea."

I glanced through the glass door. Mendy and Kayla were in the kitchen, laughing at something as Mendy shaped the burger patties. Kayla was pulling condiments out of the fridge, handing them over like she'd been living here for years. They looked... good. Normal. Like people who hadn't lived through all the bullshit they lived through.

Seeing Mendy smile like that made something tighten in my chest. Guilt, probably. Or regret. Maybe both.

I took another drag, exhaled slowly, and Penelope dragged one of the small outdoor chairs under her and sat down. The chair scraped loudly on the concrete.

No matter how respectful I was trying to be, my damn eyes kept drifting. It was impossible not to notice. Her tight shirt. No bra. Those massive fake tits sitting like two planets under fabric that was absolutely not meant to contain them. Or maybe that was the point.

I cleared my throat. Screw it.

"I'm going to ask," I said. "Why the fake tits?"

Penelope looked genuinely surprised for a second, then sighed and shrugged lightly. "I like big tits. Don't you?"

"I mean... yeah?"

"Then you have your answer."

She didn't elaborate, and I wasn't going to pry. I nodded, took another drag, and looked back at the snow-covered yard.

"You really don't like Kayla, huh?"

"She says it was because of you she tricked Mendy," Penelope said. "But I don't believe her."

"It was because of me," I said, glancing at her from the corner of my eye. "She didn't do anything wrong."

"Didn't do anything wrong?" Penelope scoffed. "She fucked Richard, Evan."

"And it's not her fault," I said. "She didn't know. I'm the one who convinced her. If I hadn't listened to Richard, hadn't believed him... Mendy might've—" I stopped myself, jaw tightening. "God. Fuck me."

"What's done is done, I guess." Penelope shrugged. "You two are to blame."

"I know," I muttered. "And I'll make it up to her. I promise."

Penelope studied me for a moment. "Do you love Mendy? Do you have feelings for her?"

Love? That was... a heavy word. Did I love her? I cared about her. I felt responsible for her. Protective. But love? That was something else entirely.

"I care about her."

"As a friend?" she asked. "Or as something else?"

"Friend," I said. "I don't think I love her like that, Pen."

"Mm." She nodded slowly. "At least you're honest. Not bullshitting me. I can respect that."

"Hmm."

EVENT

=====

Penelope's Interest +4

Chapter 220: Chapter 220

Penelope turned her head toward the inside of the house, then pushed herself off the wall and stretched. Her arms lifted above her head, hands linked, and her shirt rode up just enough to show the flat line of her stomach. Her waist narrowed, her back arched slightly. The fabric over her chest pulled tight, outlining the heavy weight of her fake tits.

Even through the cold air, her nipples pressed clear as day against the thin cotton, round and sharp and distracting.

I swallowed. My body reacted before my brain caught up. Christ. She didn't even have to try.

"Come on, dinner is ready, I think," she said.

"Mm," I murmured. "Lead the way."

"So you can check out my ass?" she asked as she slid the glass door open. "My ass is not fake, mind you."

I rubbed my face. "I... it's just— Jesus, Pen. Go inside."

She giggled quietly, pleased with herself, and stepped in. I followed through the warm air and bright lights of the living room.

She was right. The table was set. Four plates, each holding a thick, handmade burger. Mendy had toasted the buns to a light golden brown. The patties were fat and juicy, cheese melted over them in a smooth blanket. Fresh lettuce, pickles, caramelized onions, a smear of sauce dripping slightly down the side. The steam rising off them hit my nose as soon as I stepped inside.

"Wow," I said, rubbing my hands together. "Looks awesome."

"It is," Mendy said, smiling wide as she wiped her hands on a towel. "Hope it tastes awesome too."

It smelled like the kind of meal that could make you forget the cold outside. Forget Emilia for a second. Forget all the shit waiting for me after tonight.

And honestly... I needed that.

(_____)

WOMEN - INTERACTIONS

=====

Jasmine: Interest: 40 / 60★★

Kayla: Interest: 13 / 60★

Tessa: Interest: 27 / 40★

Kim: Interest: 35 / 40★

Delilah: Interest: 75 / 80★★★

Cora: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Mendy: Interest: 6 /20

Nala: Interest: 66 /80★★★

Penelope: Interest: 5 /20

Minne: Interest: 17 /20

Ivy: Interest: 2/20

=====

Progress:

★☆☆☆☆ - 20 Interest: Milestone reward

★★☆☆☆ - 40 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★☆☆ - 60 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★☆ - 80 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ -100 Interest: Milestone reward

=====

Select a woman to track progress.

♥□♥□♥□

I leaned back into my chair and exhaled. Man, that burger was something else. And the chips she fried? Perfect. It tasted like the healthiest fast-food in existence, but it wasn't even fast-food. It was just fire. Straight fire. My stomach was warm, my mood lifted, and for the first time in days, things actually felt steady.

"Mendy," I said as I nodded at her. "You know your stuff. Seriously."

"Glad you liked it," she said, giving this shy little smile. "Penelope, Kayla. How was it? Please say it was good even if you didn't like it."

"Good?" Kayla said, eyes widening. "We need to invent a new word for this type of good. Wow, Mendy."

"Fucking perfect," Penelope added, leaning back and touching her stomach. "Phew. You rock, girl."

"How about some wine?" Mendy asked. "You guys go sit in the living room. I'll get—"

"I can get it," Penelope said as she stood. "You already did enough."

Mendy smiled, nodded in thanks, and we all got up. Walking into the living room felt like trying to move after Thanksgiving. We dropped onto the couches like a pile of boulders. My body definitely gained weight tonight. But honestly, it was worth every single calorie.

Mendy and Kayla took the couch across from me. I sat in the single one. Mendy looked happy. Like, glowing happy. Her face was relaxed, eyes bright, shoulders loose. She was enjoying herself, genuinely.

Kayla... was the opposite. Her smile didn't reach her eyes. Her fingers were fiddling with the edge of the pillow. And every time she glanced at Mendy, guilt crawled across her face like a shadow. Her eyes even looked a little watery. Shit. Seeing her like that made my own chest feel heavier, because the truth was simple. Everything she got caught up in was because of me. I dragged her into Richard's bullshit.

"Mendy," I said quietly as I took a deep breath. "I'm glad you forgave us. And gave us another chance. We're, uh... well, I'm sure you're sick of hearing this, but we're truly sorry."

"Oh, stop that," she said, waving her hand. "You two already did more than enough."

"Evan did," Kayla said softly. "Stopping Richard and everything. But I haven't."

"You—"

Kayla shook her head. Her voice cracked a little. "I just can't help but feel guilty, Mendy. And part of me wished you wouldn't forgive me so easily and stayed angry at me. I don't know why, but that's how I feel."

The room went quiet for a second. Penelope was in the kitchen getting wine, so it was just the three of us and the low hum of the heater.

Mendy leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees.

"You feel that way because you care," she said. "That's literally it."

Kayla kept her eyes down.

"And because we were tricked," Mendy added. "All three of us. Richard lied to me. He lied to you. He lied to Evan. He messed with all of us. So don't treat yourself like you were the only one who did something wrong. You weren't."

Kayla sniffed once, trying to hide it.

"I forgave you because I know you didn't hurt me on purpose," Mendy said. "I forgave Evan for the same reason. And I forgave myself too. Because none of us were in control of that situation."

Kayla swallowed, trying to keep her composure.

"So don't sit there and punish yourself," Mendy said, smiling softly. "That's not fair to any of us."

Kayla wiped under her eye. "Thank you. Really."

Mendy clapped her hands once, brightening up. "Now come on. Enough heavy feelings. Don't kill the vibe here. We're drinking our wine, then we're playing games, and I want to see all of you twist and fall on the floor trying to reach colors like idiots."

I let out a breath, smiling a little. Yeah. This was good. This was exactly what the night was supposed to be.

Penelope returned a moment later with four wine glasses, two in each hand. She handed Mendy and me ours first, setting them down with a soft clink on the small coffee table. The living room lights were warm and low, giving everything this calm, golden glow that felt perfect after a heavy meal. The snow outside the window kept falling in slow, quiet sheets. The city lights far away made the flakes look like drifting sparks.

Penelope went back to the kitchen, then came back with the other two glasses, giving Kayla hers. Kayla thanked her, her voice soft and polite. Penelope nodded once as if accepting a payment, not a thanks, and then she moved to sit next to Mendy on the couch.

"Pen," I called. "Hey, can we talk for a sec? In private."

All three girls turned their heads toward me at once. Kayla froze with her fingers on her glass. Mendy blinked curiously. Penelope stopped just as she was about to sit down.

"Uh... sure," she said slowly. "Okay."

I got up from the couch and she followed me out into the corridor. The moment we were alone, she crossed her arms, resting her weight on one hip.

"I am not going to let you lick my tits again," she said flatly.

"What? No, no, Jesus," I said. "That is not why I called you here."

She raised one brow. "Alright then. What?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, trying not to sound like a guidance counselor.

"Look, I am asking you to please be kind to Kayla tonight," I said. "She is trying her best. And she is scared shitless of you. All I am asking is for you to give her a chance. Just one. The same way you are giving me a chance right now."

Penelope didn't answer for a few seconds. She just stared at me with this flat, skeptical look, like she was trying to figure out if I was being sincere or playing her. She sighed, looked away, then clicked her tongue.

"Fine," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "I will see what I can do. No promises."

"That is more than enough," I said. "Thank you."

She shrugged, uncrossed her arms, and turned back toward the living room.

We walked in together like nothing happened. Kayla looked away from us quickly, pretending she was interested in the window. Mendy smiled politely, not asking questions. We both sat down and then tried to act normal.

I lifted the glass to my lips and took a sip. Smooth, a little fruity, not too strong. Pretty damn good.

I looked at Mendy. "So, what kind of game are we playing, by the way?"

"Twister," she said with a little laugh, as if she already imagined us suffering.

Kayla and I looked at each other like two idiots caught in the headlights.

"I've never played it before, though," I said.

"Yeah, same," Kayla agreed. "Only seen it in movies."

"It is the easiest game ever," Mendy said. "Trust me. It is just silly fun. Good for breaking awkward silence too."

"Which we kind of had a lot of tonight," Penelope muttered, though not in a mean way this time.

Mendy bumped her shoulder with hers. "Oh, come on. We are having fun now, aren't we?"

"Yeah," Penelope said, rubbing her palms on her thighs. "Yeah, guess we are."