CHAPTER 005: Ever Heard Of Knocking?

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I must say, I did not expect Finn's best friend to be this charming.

Finn's always painted her as some awkward nerd.

But this?

This sharp-tongued, darkly dressed woman standing in the middle of the sex shop, casually discussing electrocution and BDSM gear with the sales rep, is not what I signed up for.

And yet… I can't look away.

Her leather pants are sinfully tight.

Her dark boots are heavy against the polished floor.

Her blouse clings to her like a second skin, and those blunt bangs and glasses? They remind me of the dominatrixes in my club. All she's missing is a riding crop and a stern command on those full lips.

I watch as she lifts a violet wand, a device used to deliver electrical sensations such as shocks.

"How dangerous is this?" she asks the sales rep.

"In what sense?"

"Like… would the highest voltage be enough to cause, I don't know… electrocution? Just enough to zap someone's soul out of their body."

I nearly choke fighting a laugh.

"These devices are built to be completely safe," the sales rep says. "They're designed for sensory play, not… actual harm."

Sloane sighs, setting the wand back on the display.

"That's a bummer," she says.

She turns to the sales rep with the most deadpan expression I've ever seen.

"Are you sure there's nothing more deadly around here?"

The sales rep's eyes widen. "Technically… if you think about it," she stammers, "everything is potentially life-threatening, right? I mean… people have died from sneezing too hard."

"So the answer's no?"

I can't do this anymore. The poor girl looks like she's about to call security or faint. I step forward, sliding smoothly into their conversation.

"Pardon my wife," I say, placing my hand at the small of Sloane's back. I feel her stiffen. "She gets… intense sometimes. We'll take it from here."

The sales rep all but runs away.

Sloane is staring at me strangely. It probably has something to do with me mentioning the word 'wife.'

"You know," I say, leaning in close enough to catch her scent, "if you really want Delilah dead, you could just hire an assassin."

"That'd be too obvious. They'll track it right back to me."

I smile. "Right. But if you do it right, they won't."

"Do you have a contact?"

I shake my head. "I don't."

"So you're like a fake gangster?"

"Who says I'm a gangster?"

She eyes the tattoos peeking from my shirt. "You're not?"

I chuckle.

This is going to be fun.

"Tell you what," I say. "I'll let you know as soon as I find an assassin."

"That'd be very much appreciated."

I release her and start browsing the shelves, casually grabbing a pair of handcuffs, a leather paddle, and a silk blindfold.

I hear Sloane following behind me.

"You seem well-versed in all this," she says. "It's as if you know exactly what you're buying."

"It's my line of work."

She pauses. "You sell sex toys?"

"More like… I produce them. And I own a sex club," I say, turning to face her, bracing for her reaction. Most people either get uncomfortably excited or visibly repulsed. Both reactions are tedious.

She just stares at me, face blank.

"You must be loaded," she says.

I didn't expect that at all. "Well…"

"Well, what, Knox?"

"I wouldn't know."

She frowns. "The fact that you're not sure if you're loaded means you actually are. Poor people don't have doubts that they're poor."

"Is that right?"

"Yep. You're definitely loaded."

I smile. "Okay, Sloane. Whatever you say."

I can't remember the last time I enjoyed talking to someone this much. She's… different. Most people get all weird when I mention my line of work, my family included. But she seems normal about it. Like it's just another job—which it is, albeit a lucrative one.

Which is probably why I can't stop myself from asking what's been on my mind for a while. "So… you and Finn. Are you two… a thing?"

Her face goes stiff.

"No."

"Do you sleep together?" I ask.

"Hell no."

"Right."

She looks ready to murder me.

We check out the items at the counter, asking for them to be gift-wrapped.

As we sit waiting, Sloane crosses her arms.

"How are you comfortable with your friend marrying your brother's ex?" she asks.

Hmm. She went right in. "Well," I say. "Delilah's a gold digger. Hunter has the money."

"Ah. Classic."

"Hunter's my friend. I might not like his choices, but as a friend, I respect them."

"Are you really a friend if you can't fight some sense into him?"

"That would only make me the enemy. You won't win a fight against love, Sloane."

She glares at me. "I can definitely try."

I smile, unable to help myself. Her naivety is both endearing and tragic.

"How long have you been trying with Finn?" I ask. "Where has that gotten you?"

Her entire body stiffens. I've hit a nerve.

I should stop. Shouldn't push her.

But there's just something about her.

Something about seeing someone so pure and innocent that makes you want to crack them open. Break them apart.

"The universe is going to align people who are meant to be together," I say, eyes fixed on her. "Whether they're good or bad. Whether it makes sense or not. Best you can do is let people live their lives, Sloane."

Her eyes are blazing.

"You're not a very good friend, Knox," she says.

"Because I tell myself the truth?"

"No. Because you're selfish."

I smirk. "Oh? And where has selflessness gotten you? Have you had a proper date in months? Are you seeing someone right now? Or does your entire life revolve around Finn Hartley and his pathetic obsession with a woman who doesn't give a shit about him?"

Her eyes darken with something violent.

And for a moment, I think she's going to slap me.

God, I almost wish she would.

But instead, she rises to her feet, her eyes burning holes through my soul.

"Fuck you," she spits, turning on her heel and storming toward the exit.

I taste her against the counter, watching her walk away.

Her hips sway a little too much in those tight leather pants. And the way her short hair bounces over her shoulders as she pushes open the door and disappears into the night?

Perfection.

I'm going to have a hard time keeping myself from provoking Sloane throughout this wedding.

I'm also going to have a hard time keeping my eyes—and my hands—off her.

She's trouble.

The kind of trouble I want to drag into my bed and ruin.

Sloane stares out the window throughout our trip home.

Arms crossed. Jaw tight. Silent.

It's honestly impressive how committed she is to ignoring me. Not a single glance in my direction, not even when I deliberately rev the engine just to see if she'll react.

I'll admit, I kind of miss the talkative Sloane.

When I pull into my parents' house, her head jerks up.

I can see her looking at the mansion in surprise, with so many questions written on her face. But whatever she wants to say, she swallows it back.

She unbuckles, gets out of the car, and pulls her bag out of the trunk.

"Let me help you with that," I say.

"No. I have hands. Thank you very much."

O-kay.

I let her have that one, walking beside her as she marches toward the entrance.

I open the front door for her, and when she walks in, her eyes sweep over the grand foyer.

"Is there something I should know about your parents?" she says, finally speaking to me.

"Like what?" I ask, though I know exactly what she means. I've seen this reaction before.

"Like, are they from old money or something?"

"You can ask your best friend. He's upstairs."

She rolls her eyes, turning her attention to the massive staircase stretching up to the second floor. I know what's on her mind. She's wondering how she's going to drag that bag all the way up.

"Just keep the bag down, Sloane," I say, amused. "Someone will take it."

She doesn't argue. She drops it.

"Where are your parents?" she asks.

"Out of the country. They should be back tomorrow or next."

"Great," she mutters. "So we have the house to ourselves?"

"Umm… once you exclude the employees, I guess we do."

"Awesome." She gives me a look. "Please lead me to Finn's room."

I press a hand to my chest mockingly. "Of course, ma'am."

I lead her up the stairs. We walk down the long hallway before stopping in front of Finn's room. I don't even bother knocking, just push the door open.

"Little brother," I announce. "Your bestie is here."

And then we see it.

Finn and Delilah pulling away from each other in a hurry.

They'd been kissing.

Finn goes completely still.

Delilah, on the other hand, barely reacts. She just smooths a hand over her hair.

"Ever heard of knocking?" she asks.

I glance at Sloane. Her face has turned to stone.

"How stupid are you, Finn?" she asks.